

**BusinessWeek**

**Bloomberg  
Businessweek**

The Madam and The Maid: Building Blocks for Work/Life Balance

*This article was originally published in "Working Parents" on February 26, 2007*

Saroja works as a babysitter in my apartment building in Mysore, India. She is six months pregnant, and a couple of weeks ago, while traveling through the countryside to visit her mother-in-law, the bus she was on overturned.

Saroja's leg was badly injured, but even though she was in great pain, Saroja still came to work. She left her home extra early because it would take her more time to walk the 12-kilometer distance from her hut to our building. Saroja cannot afford the four rupee (about eight cents) bus fare, because taking the bus to and from work will mean that one member of her joint family must go without tea for a month. If she takes time off work, her employer will likely dock her pay, but more than that, she worries about the bind her "Madam" will be in if Saroja does not come to look after her two children, and how her Madam will be able to do her job.

There are scores of women like Saroja in India and elsewhere in the world, and each time I complain about being a working mother and having to rush around to strike a balance between my job and my home, it takes but a minute or two of remembering these people to bring me back to earth with a bang. These women are the foundations upon which I rest; without them, I would not be able to balance my work with my life.

When I lived in New Jersey, my nanny, Pili would ring my doorbell at 7.30 a.m. every day, when her young children were still having breakfast. She left them and came to work because I needed her to watch my children so I could do my work in order to then get back to my children. In all honesty, she always made that seem far more important than the fact that her children went to school from a parentless home and came home to the same, and that the salary I paid her was barely adequate for her family's life-blood.

Christine's husband sails the world on a cargo ship and has no visa to visit her in Geneva, Switzerland, where she lives with their son, Jerome. Even if he did, the airfare alone

would probably swallow up his annual earnings, so Christine – who in addition to babysitting, also cleans houses on the weekends -- manages four year-old Jerome by herself. She drops him at a crèche before going to work in the morning and in the afternoons, a cousin of hers rushes Jerome from the crèche to a babysitter, where he remains until Christine finishes looking after other people's children and can take care of him. Jerome has only seen his father once in his life.

In India, Saroja's paltry 1,200 rupee (around \$26) monthly salary goes a long way toward sustaining her family, and there is no way she will be able to take time off or even stop working before or after her child is born. Because her mother is also working, she will have to rely upon the kindness of her neighbors, older women who are physically unable to work anymore, to look after that child for her. Once he or she grows up a bit – well, who knows. Probably the child will join the scores that just trail around the slums.

Social and economic inequalities exist everywhere, that's obvious, and at the end of the day, everyone is doing a job and everything is relative. But as white collar workers, it's important, I believe, to take a couple of minutes to think about those others, who in the process of helping us achieve work/life balance, are sacrificing theirs. – *Savita Iyer*