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# As Economy Slips, New Mothers Cut Short Their Maternity Leave

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By DANA MATTIOLI

Elizabeth DeLong had hoped to take a year off after having her daughter, Grace, last August. But just a month later, Washington Mutual was seized by federal regulators, making her husband's position with the bank precarious.

The 29-year-old, who had arranged for a lengthy unpaid leave, realized she needed to return to work as quickly as possible, rather than spend time with her child. "I felt angry," she says.

As millions of Americans lose their jobs, others are reluctantly rejoining the work force: new mothers. Women who had hoped to take off a few months -- or, in some cases, a few years - to raise their children are heading back to work sooner than they had expected.



Melissa Bergen

The Bergen family

Of course, for many working mothers, taking more than a few weeks or months off work after the birth of a child isn't an option. About 60% of women with children under the age of six are in the paid work force, according to U.S. government figures.

But evidence is mounting that more are joining their ranks. Mom Corps, a staffing company geared toward mothers looking for flexible work arrangements, has noticed an increase in the number of hours its members are looking to work. In the past, a typical work arrangement was between 20 and 25 hours a week, says Mom Corps Chief Executive Allison O'Kelly. Now, most applicants are looking to work 30- to 40-hour weeks. And since last year, traffic on the company's Web site has increased 79%, and the company's résumé-writing service is twice as busy, says Ms. O'Kelly.

In a recent online poll of members of CafeMom.com, a social-networking site for mothers, 16% of 14,416 respondents said

they are now finding work because of the economy.

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For Ms. DeLong, returning to her position as a low-paying civil trial wouldn't keep the family afloat, especially since she used to work part time. So she began a job search and found one at a different law firm in November. Her husband left the bank and found a new job days after she started. But Ms. DeLong's confidence in the economy was rattled, so rather than quitting her new job and relying on her husband's income, she decided to stay.

She now works between 50 and 70 hours a week instead of the part-time schedule she used to have. "At the end of the day the kids have less time with us," says Ms. DeLong. "It just isn't what we planned."

For some, hopes for full-time motherhood have been put on hold. Melissa Bergen returned to work 18 months after her daughter was born, despite plans to stay home until all of her children were school age. Ms. Bergen and her husband have a 7-year-old son, 4-year-old twin girls and a 2-year-old daughter. In 2008, her husband's real-estate agent job brought in just 25% of his 2007 income. The Bergens nearly defaulted on their mortgage and had to apply for food stamps and Medi-Cal, California's Medicaid program. "It was very difficult for us to ask for help, but we needed to do what would keep our children safe and healthy," says Ms. Bergen.

In June, after a two-month search, she landed a job as a mental-health therapist. The family finances are still rocky, but are back on the right path, she says. Still, Ms. Bergen says she misses being able to watch her youngest daughter develop as closely as she did with her older children.

For other mothers, part-time, flexible schedules that were easy to manage in better times have become a liability to the family budget. Min Co, a 36-year-old software engineer in Jersey City, N.J., arranged a part-time schedule with her employer last year after giving birth to her daughter. In February, she asked to return to full-time hours, as the fate of her husband's IT position for a New York financial firm became unclear. Luckily, she says, the firm agreed.

Dr. Shoshana Bennett, a clinical psychologist specializing in expecting and new mothers, says they were looking forward to the protracted "babymoon" with their newborns, but "the financial strain has put such unexpected pressure on them." The stress has worsened some cases of depression and postpartum anxiety, she says.

Some new fathers are shouldering more of the parenting load. Dawn Zelanko, 34, returned to work as a receptionist at a law firm in Encino, Calif., when her daughter was 14 weeks old; she had planned to stay home for a year. Ms. Zelanko's husband, an industrial worker employed through a temp agency, had worked steadily for years. But by early 2008, work had dried up. Ms. Zelanko was at work the first time her daughter said "mama." "I was devastated that I missed it," she says.

The moment was captured, however, by Dawn's husband, Phillip. Mr. Zelanko, 38, admits that at first he had mixed emotions about being Madison's primary caretaker. But now, he says, he has enjoyed watching his daughter grow, even if it can be challenging at times. And though Ms. Zelanko would like to be there too, her financial contribution isn't optional.

"Right now, for my family," she says, "this is what I need to do."

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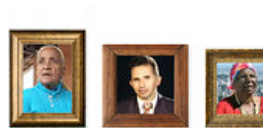
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