

The rise of the 'married single mom'



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Can a married woman ever really call herself a single mom? The Obamas seem to think maybe so. President Obama defended [First Lady Michelle Obama's recent slip-up](#), in which she called herself a "busy single mother" in a TV interview.

"I tend to cut my wife or anybody some slack when it comes to just a slip of the tongue," [the President told Today's Savannah Guthrie](#). "But there's no doubt that there've been times where Michelle probably felt like a single mom. ... When I was running for the U.S. Senate, when I was running for president, there were times where I wouldn't see her for a week, and she was still working and having to look after the girls."

Mrs. Obama caught some flak for her choice of words. It's not like FLOTUS has to worry about bundling up a sick kid to run to the pharmacy, or doing laundry while bathing a child who's thrown up all over his room — White House staff must be pretty handy in a classic "single parenting" pinch. And some actual single parents feel like it's downright insulting for married moms to think they know what it's like in their solo shoes.

But the first lady is not the only one who feels like a "married single mom." Many moms whose husbands work in time-consuming or high-travel jobs often make the comparison, although maybe just inside their own heads.

For Stephanie Kirksey, a business strategist and Richmond, Va. mom to Ella, 2 and Juliette 3, being a "married single mom" is all she's ever known. Her husband, a commercial pilot, is typically gone five nights a week, often including weekends and holidays.

Kirksey doesn't get those small breaks to recharge the way other married mothers do while their spouse takes out the trash or does bedtime. As a result, she says her "patience bank" is often "bankrupt" by the time her husband returns from a trip. Just when the family is finally getting into a groove by the fourth day of each trip, she describes, daddy comes home — and he can either be extra firm or overly liberal with the kids to make up for lost time, which ends up confusing and frustrating everyone.

The number of women who self-identify as married single moms because their spouses work long hours or travel is increasing, according to [The Mom Complex](#), an advertising and communications consulting firm that targets moms. With the economy still struggling, parents have to take whatever jobs they can to provide for their families, even if it means long hours or frequent travel. The phenomenon traverses socio-economic lines, said Mom Complex founder Katherine Wintsch, from wives of truck drivers and construction workers to spouses of CEOs, athletes and doctors. What they have in common, according to a small survey conducted last week by The Mom Complex, is they often feel overwhelmed and lonely juggling the roles of "mommy" and "daddy" on a daily basis.

Those feelings no doubt sound familiar to single parents. But families with work-absentee husbands also face their own set of unique challenges when dad reappears and tries to blend back into the flow of things.



Courtesy Wendy Day

Military moms definitely know what it's like to feel like a single parent during deployment, says Wendy Day, pictured here with her husband Kevin and their children.

For the past two years, Carrie Mize's husband, Joe, has been traveling weekly from their home in Indianapolis to Baltimore for his job with a construction group, leaving every Monday at 6 a.m. and returning Friday evenings. He recently started working one weekend a month away from home as well, leaving Mize with their three children, the youngest of whom is 8 months.

"When Joe first started traveling, weekends were more difficult," Mize says. "It was like a party when he came home. He was making up for lost time and feeling guilty for not being home more. We quickly learned that this wasn't healthy for anyone."

school events — and their own families' little emergencies.

Doctors may not have to travel often, but are frequently called away on emergencies and miss family gatherings,

Erica Soong, Boston mom to Xavier, 4 and Zachary, 18 months, describes how her husband, a surgeon, can work for seven days straight. "This means, I have to handle all things related to the kids by myself," Soong says. "In fact, I have brought both kids to the ER for stitches by myself!"

Of course, military moms have been there, done that, earned their "married single mom" stripes. During deployments, they are the solo parents, with no weekend or "off-day" reprieves.

Erin Zook-Schoenfeld, who lives on a Texas military base with her son, 7, and her daughter, 5, has experienced being a "married single mom" from both a surgeon's wife's perspective and then, as the wife of a doctor deployed to Afghanistan.

"I had to become completely self-sufficient," **Zook-Schoenfeld says of her husband's time in Afghanistan.** "I took over all the financial responsibilities of our home. If something was broken, I learned how to fix it. There was no one else to back me up if there was an emergency."

Wendy Day, mother of four children ranging in ages from 5 to 16 whose husband serves in the Michigan National Guard, says she's felt like a single mom for both of her husband's deployments, first to Baghdad for 15 months, and then to Kuwait for a year. Day recalls how especially tough Christmas was for the family without dad, and how hard it was to get through the daily business of parenting on top of her fears that her husband could be hurt or killed.

Still, some parents feel strongly that, with all due respect to the Obamas, **there's no such thing** as a "married single mom." Honorée Corder, an executive coach and author of **"The Successful Single Mom" series**, was an actual, unmarried single mother for six years, raising her daughter on her own from age 2 until 8. Now married, she says there's no comparison.

"I certainly sympathize with women who have husbands who work 20 hours a day," Corder says. "But at the end of the day, in those clutch moments, I'm sorry, being a single mom feels different emotionally." Even if your husband is across the country or around the world, Corder explains, you know that he's out there missing you and that he wants to come home. And that makes all the difference. ■