



Rotman School of Management
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO



 **gender** AND THE
economy



A ROTMOM JOURNEY

My candid story

Lechin Lu
GATE MBA Student Fellow

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A candid story of my ROTMOM journey

It was the beginning of summer 2017. The daycare teacher told me that my daughter was ready to start potty training. A few days earlier, I received an admission package to a 3-year MBA program for working professionals from the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management. The week ended with an even more dramatic turn -- a positive pregnancy test. It was the double shot of news I wanted. My goal was to earn an MBA during maternity leave so I could accelerate my career when I returned to work. While processing all of this, I joked with my partner, "I have now become a ROT-MOM."

It was then that my thoughts turned to: *Now what? How am I going to manage work, the MBA, pregnancy, and parenting at the same time?* A few articles I found talked about moms succeeding in business school, but they seemed more like superwomen stories than real stories: they gave birth, deftly balanced work and life, graduated with excellent grades and landed high profile jobs. Yet, I could find little information about parental policies and resources at the University of Toronto. When I visited the University's Family Resource Center, I was told that most of the support available wasn't designed for working professionals.



I soon found that I was not the only parent in my program. Considering the average enrolment age is 30, it is perhaps not surprising that many aspiring MBAs are also aspiring parents; but almost all are dads. It wasn't until half a year into the program that I finally connected with another mom. This discrepancy made me wonder how the prospect of pregnancy and motherhood could deter women from pursuing an MBA and from advancing in organizational and business leadership?

Disclaimer: This report was prepared by Lechin Lu as a part of her 2018-2019 Institute for Gender and the Economy (GATE) MBA Student Fellowship. The opinions expressed in this report are her own and do not necessarily reflect the views of GATE or the University of Toronto.

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Is work-life balance the answer?

'Work life balance' has been a dominant theme in the discussions of conflicts that professional working mothers experience (Collins, 2019; Adame, Capliure, & Miquel, 2016; Hobson, 2014). However, scholars have begun questioning the value of using this metaphor (Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport 2006; Halpern & Murphy, 2005; Kunin, 2012). In turn this has led to a call to expand research on the relationship between family and career development (Poelmans, Greenhaus, & Las Heras, 2013).



After talking to other ROTMOMs, I am convinced that the notion of work-life balance does more harm than good to professional women who also desire to be a mother.

“Once I was invited to share how I balance work and life at an event. Ironically, I don’t think work-life balance is a thing.” Karen

“I feel better (when) I finally came to terms with the idea that it is OK to be off balance sometimes.” Susan

What is wrong with work-life balance?

First, work-life balance implies that you could be either in or off balance. It is a win or lose game. Plus, the superwoman-type success stories set an unrealistically high standard for winning. If you are pulling your hair out to meet school or work deadlines while struggling to care for your baby 24-hours a day, regardless of actual performance, you will likely feel lost. The sense of failure is what weighs mothers down, causing stress and damaging self-confidence.



“I got very far in the interview process, but I didn’t get the job. I was very disappointed by myself because I’ve been preparing for this (opportunity) since the beginning of the program. I felt depressed for a while. I don’t know if mommy brain is really a thing, probably not. If you ask me to solve the problem on paper, likely I would do it the same way as before. Being only a few months postpartum, I was so tired. I almost burnt down my house by mistake. I didn’t feel like myself. I lost my confidence. In the case interview, when they challenged my analysis, I easily doubted myself.” Susan

Second, balance is never static and once you’ve achieved it, you may lose it. Staying in balance requires constant effort, therefore the expectation of being in balance all the time as a superwoman causes burnout.

“I gave birth the day after a final exam. Next course started a week later. I relied on class videos to catch up. I held the baby in my arm and nursed when I watched class videos. My son woke up often. So, I had to pause the video, soothe him back to sleep, and restarted from where I left off. It was hard but I did well in that course. I was motivated. When the second course started seamlessly, I realized this was not a sprint. It was a marathon, but I was exhausted.” Donna

Third and worst of all, this metaphor implies a zero-sum battle by putting work and life on two opposite ends of the scale (Halpern, & Murphy, 2005). In other words, to gain in one you have to lose in the other. This mentality reinforces constraints that women face (Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport, 2006) and perpetuates the biased assumption that one could not be a good parent and a good professional at the same time. Not wanting to be seen as "less committed," "less professional," or "less capable", many women choose to cover up motherhood as much as possible. I actually tried to cover up my pregnancy in a variety of ways, including putting ginger ale in wine glasses just to fit into the spirit of networking. This worked until I could no longer hide my growing belly under my blazer. Some ROTMOMs were told explicitly that they weren’t expected to be able to graduate. Worse, four of the eleven mothers I interviewed encountered some form of discrimination and parental rights violation at work, resulting in demotions or contract terminations.

“I didn’t tell anyone I was on maternity leave, definitely not in interviews, not even with my career coach and fellow students except those who saw me pregnant. I invested so much in this MBA. I would not take any chance if it could become a disadvantage for me.” Mary

How should we reframe the ROTMOM challenge?

Instead of two opposite arms to balance, I think the relationship between career and life is like our two feet on the ground. Together, they take us where we want to go. It is a dynamic process. To move forward, you must shift your weight from side to side and move one leg at a time.

Pregnancy, nursing and caring for young children requires so much time and energy that mothers are likely to slow down or pause their career.

For many ROTMOMS, returning to school for an MBA is like putting their professional leg on a skateboard. By gaining new business knowledge, leadership skills and professional networks, they want to keep the momentum going and potentially pivot to a new career path when they are restricted on their “motherhood” leg.



Yet, you can imagine that this is not an easy ride, nor is it without costs. Mothers need to be able to fully engage in the MBA community and take advantage of the academic, career and professional development opportunities. These needs, when unmet, cause students to feel frustrated and stressed about their decision to attend an MBA program. In my interviews, I found ROTMOMS had limited opportunities for participation in social networking and extra-curriculum events due to a lack of time, the costs of child care and the fear that they couldn’t “fit in as a mom.”

Title of Your Story: Getting into Rotman / From excitement to confusion in 2 weeks.

STEP 01: Sketch Out a Sequence of Scenes Communicating Your Experience

<p>1 Got an email call to an interview</p> <p>2 I'm so happy</p> <p>You're invited to the interview.</p> <p>TIPS: • Get as creative as you want, but stick figures are great too! • Add dialogue, specific actions and quotes.</p>	<p>3 You're Regrant!!!!</p> <p>WTF!</p>	<p>4 You Got it!</p> <p>Got an offer!</p> <p>Now I'm sooooo confused.</p>	<p>Let's do it. How bad could be?</p> <p>2 years later.....</p> <p>Tired!</p>
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“I felt shamed. I was so busy keeping my head above water I missed a lot of opportunities. I felt I wasted my investment.” Daria

I estimate that between 5%-10% of current female Rotman MBA students are mothers with young children, which is significantly lower than the national percentage. To reach the goal of gender parity in business leadership, Rotman must find ways to empower and enable more mothers to move from potential to achievement. To this end, we need to reframe “parent support” from “child care” to “talent development”.

Five Ideas to Improve the ROTMOM Experience

Create a children’s room where they can play and rest with their caregivers while waiting for parents

To focus on study, ROTMOMs need to fulfill motherhood responsibilities with efficiency. That’s why mothers tend not to use the nursing room since it takes at least 10 minutes just to get access to the room. Instead, interviewees pumped wherever and whenever was most convenient, including in cars, the shower room, the atrium, the study rooms or during meetings.

“Don’t get me wrong. When I say my child is my priority, I don’t mean I would not give 100% to my work. People have a hard time understanding how it could be possible. What I mean is, if my child needed milk but I had no time to pump outside of meetings, I would pump in front of you.” Daria



Pictured: University of Toronto’s Robarts Library has a family study room where students could study while taking care of their children. However, the room is currently not accessible to caregivers.

To avoid missing classes or events, many mothers said they took their newborn babies to school along with another caregiver, often the other parent or grandparent, so they could nurse on schedule during breaks. Sometimes the baby and caregiver only stayed a couple of hours, but in some situations, such as during intensive courses, they would need to stay on campus for much of the day. Currently, there is no place for them to go.

If there is a children's waiting room in the building, little children could stay there with their caregiver, i.e., the other parent, grandparent, or a nanny. Students could then concentrate on school work, feeling assured that their children are safe, fed, diapered and entertained.

Use technology to aid learning when ROTMOM's can't be physically present

ROTMOMs want to accelerate in their careers during the MBA program, so they work as hard as possible to avoid any delay in graduation. However, there are many reasons they can't be physically present in school, such as a bed rest prescription during pregnancy or postpartum care. Livestreaming lectures and tutorials for mothers who can't be physically present will help them keep up with the program schedule. Developing a protocol to allow a take-home exam when a mother needs to write the test a few weeks postpartum would also make the process less physically demanding.

Organize career development activities for parents

The annual family fun event is great for families to get together but not enough to close the gap between parenthood and professional development.



Pictured: I took my daughter to the Behavioural Approaches to Diversity (BAD) Conference at Rotman in 2018.

We need career talks on topics such as networking during maternity leave and job searching while pregnant. We also need professional networking events designed to connect parents with each other and with industry partners who value professionals with family responsibilities.

Create a "MOM-DAY" design sprint to encourage dialogue about *parenthood x career* among students

A "MOM-DAY" design sprint would drive people to understand the experiences of being a working mother through role-play, reflective discussions and creative problem-solving. A design sprint would also leverage business design talent in the Rotman community to design, test, and implement new or re-imagined approaches to incorporate parenthood and career aspirations.

Lead the fight against the motherhood penalty in the workplace

Rotman is a leading business research institute. Drawing on the strength of its massive network of faculty members and industry partners, Rotman could lead the fight against the motherhood penalty which is an important factor that hinders the progress of gender equity in employment and business leadership.

Conclusion

We hope to see more Rotman events to encourage discussions on the relationship between family-friendly policy and corporate competitiveness, human capital strategy, and sharing of best practices from Canada and around the world.

Ultimately, as a driving force for business leadership education, Rotman's own practice would influence future business leaders' values and perceptions of family support policy and hence what we do at Rotman can set a new standard for the broader business world.

Let Rotman be where it changes.

Endnotes

1. Interviewees' names in this article are changed to protect the privacy of these individuals.
2. A heartfelt thank you to all the Rotmoms who kindly took the time to share their stories. Their openness to share their experiences was invaluable to the success of this project. Their determination and resilience have inspired and encouraged me to overcome difficult time during the project especially when I juggled course work, childcare and project deliverables.
3. A special thank you to my loving partner George and our wonderful daughters, Lian and Amelia. Thank you for supporting me through ups and downs along the journey. Without you, this project would never have come to be.

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