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The first words that pop up on entrepreneur Marissa McTasney's website are part resumé, part rallying cry. In pink letters.

I am a mom

I am a wife

I am brilliant

I am strong

*I can build sh*t*

McTasney, 36, has two children and runs her company from her home north of Whitby. This mother can build stuff alright, and so can her female customers. And we're not talking about sandcastles. After the birth of her second child six years ago, McTasney quit her IBM job and went back to school to learn the skilled trades. She renovated her house. She also spotted a void. Women in construction were stuck with men's safety gear that didn't fit. So she launched a business that makes women's workboots, toolbelts, and hard hats and now sells through Mark's Work Wearhouse and ships all over North America.



The mompreneur movement is still going strong, but some argue we should broaden our view of the kinds of businesses women can run after having children.

Andrew Francis Wallace/TORONTO STAR

As founder of Moxie Trades, McTasney almost always deals with men across boardroom table or on construction sites. But as a mother and a business owner, she embraces the phrase "mompreneur" because loosely translated it means "we make humans and we can run a company."

She knows many women will shudder at this. They will find it demeaning, patronizing, or irrelevant. And they probably didn't appreciate her first product either — a pink work boot.

"But the whole point is to be who you are," she says. "I can wear the pink or the black boots." (She sells both.)

Fifteen years after two entrepreneurial mothers from Scarsdale, N.Y., coined and trademarked the term "mompreneur," the numbers of moms launching businesses is swelling faster than a pregnant belly.

They sell organic baby food, nursing bras and toys. But they also run book stores and travel networks, offer legal and accounting services and make erotic films.

Female entrepreneurs are a force to be reckoned with, holding a stake in 47 per cent of small and medium-sized businesses in Canada, controlling 17 per cent, and accounting for more than a third of all self-employed workers.

According to RBC Group, they are one of the fastest growing groups, contributing more than \$18 billion a year to the Canadian economy. About half are mothers.

So with that kind of record, do entrepreneurs with children still need a category of their own?

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Only if it's a useful marketing and networking tool that doesn't marginalize them, says Barbara Orser, faculty member at the [University of Ottawa's Telfer School of Management](#), and Deloitte professor in the management of growth enterprises.

She says the term "mompreneur" risks evoking an outdated portrait of women dabbling in a micro home-based business as a lifestyle

choice and a substitute for child care, when that is not the reality.

“Fine if it helps in business-to-business networking. But if it contributes to that antiquated stereotype, then it’s had its day.”

There are many supports to help women launch businesses these days, but Orser says the bigger challenge is providing the supports and services to help them expand and boost profits.

The notion of stereotypes reared its head in another way last month on Twitter, when U.S. technology writer Jolie O’Dell tweeted: “Women: stop making startups about fashion, shopping, & babies. At least for the next few years. You’re embarrassing me.”

The notion of a pink collar ghetto sparked prickly debate between those outraged that women and baby products be seen as less serious than smart-phone Apps or men’s sporting gear, and others who thought she had a point.

Entrepreneur Jennifer Greenberg is among those who believe it’s important for women to keep forging into non-traditional realms, even though it would have been a whole lot easier on her family life if she had launched a startup in the mom and baby sphere.

Instead, the mother of four has spent the past five years roaming oil and gas fields of northern British Columbia, providing mobile first-aid units through her company Phoenix First Aid.

Greenberg, 39, who has a degree in biochemistry and paramedic training, expects to have 10 units operating by the end of the year.

It’s important that women keep “plowing into male-dominated territory and saying ‘we can do it too, here we are,’” she said in an interview from her Dawson Creek, B.C. home.

Social media marketing and the growth in mompreneur trade shows and awards have showcased businesses offering products and services to moms and babies.

But there is no reliable breakdown that indicates how many women entrepreneurs cater exclusively to that market.

Mompreneur is useful because it “very quickly crystallizes the idea that this is a person who has a business and a family,” says Frances Wright, publisher of Calgary-based *Mompreneur* magazine and themompreneur.com.

“But the majority are not in baby products.”

She hears mostly from women in IT services like web development or social media marketing, health products, communications or who offer professional services like legal, accounting or coaching. Many also become self-employed in direct sales, few of which are associated with child or maternity products.

But she is also quick to cite success stories like Sandra Wilson’s home-based [Robeez](#) baby shoes, which turned into an international empire; B.C. mom Elaine Comeau’s Easy Daysies magnetic schedules for kids, which sparked a bidding war on CBC’s startup show *Dragon’s Den*; and Mabel’s Labels, a multi-million dollar company created by GTA moms.

The whole discussion is a lightning rod among businesswomen, says Reva Seth, a lawyer who worked in corporate public relations and launched her own consulting business after her first child was born five years ago.

Seth, 35, has interviewed more than 100 working mothers while researching a forthcoming book on career success after motherhood. “Inevitably the question of the term mompreneur comes up,” she says. Opinions are divided between those who embrace it as a marketing and networking moniker, those who consider it demeaning when it’s still an uphill battle to find financing and be taken seriously, and others who say it’s only intended for women selling mom and baby products.

Melissa Arnott of [The BabyTime Shows](#) doesn’t identify herself as a mompreneur, even though motherhood prompted her to launch her business seven years ago. Like most savvy entrepreneurs, the mother of two built it by spotting a niche, making a business plan and putting in long hours. Her twice-a-year shows have grown from 60 to 250 exhibitors, with attendance of 36,000.

But Arnott, 40, says she’s benefitted from the mutual support between women in similar circumstances. So in that sense, the category may have helped create marketing and social media clout.

“All of a sudden I think we are taken seriously.”

Helping women connect, support and mentor each other was one of the main reasons Ellen Parlapiano and Patricia Cobe came up with the word in their 1996 book *Mompreneurs: A Mother’s Practical Step-by-Step Guide to Work-at-Home Success*.

"We used it to empower women, not to demean them," says Parlapiano, 53, who runs momprenneursonline.com from her home in Scarsdale. "We've spent a long time telling women think of yourselves as serious businesswomen. We've never told them to play Lego in the home office."

But she says it's possible that women entrepreneurs have evolved enough that the category is no longer necessary.

Robyn Green-Ruskin is one example of how women entrepreneurs can defy categories. A decade ago she started [Movies for Mommies](#), which runs matinees exclusively for mothers toting young babies, on the ground floor of the mompreneur movement.

But guess what? She wasn't one. She was 30, single, a film grad who had lost her job in event marketing and happened to notice a mom at the movies trying to quiet her infant. Now she has franchisees and 15 locations across the country.

Green-Ruskin, who operates from her Thornhill home, now has two kids. She has no problem being identified as a businesswoman who happens to be a mom.

"I approached my business differently after having kids. You know what, women have babies. But we do many other things, too. I think it's more important to just make peace with who you are."