

A struggle for all the studying moms

June 12. 1 PM. We meet in a café to write the text on parental work. Our goal is to rework a presentation that Mélissa made during the panel on women's work, held at UQAM on March 8th. Baby Edgar, 3 months, accompanies us. It's too hot. He has not slept since 6:00 am, it is 34 degrees outside. He is so tired and overwhelmed by the heat that he constantly groans. We feel him: one coming from Saguenay and the other from Bas Saint-Laurent, the heat, it gets on our nerves. No way to get him to sleep in his stroller. Hold on. We'll move it to the other side of the table, so it is going to be easier to swing. Failure. Yet we were almost there! Resigned, holding the baby in one arm and the computer keyboard with the other hand, we're trying to find the main thread of this text, to stay focus through the screams, the pacifier falls, that we then have to rinse, before putting it back in his mouth. Genevieve offers her breast, the baby is not interested. Genevieve replaces her bra. Oops, we left the bottle at home! We're hoping not to need it. At worst, there is a Jean-Coutu nearby, we'll go buy one. Is it still worth spending money or shall we go home? What were we talking about already? Huh yes. Parental work through our experience.

I think it is important to look at my career as a social worker, since the jobs in that field are mostly occupied by women. I have been working for over 15 years now and have had to deal with really difficult working conditions. In shelters, the tasks are mainly related to care work: cleaning, preparing meals, bathing, changing incontinence pants, etc. All this for a salary that often approximates the minimum prescribed by law, without sick leave, with evening and weekend shifts. Once I had to leave work for a week, at my own expense, because my child was sick. Also, in this kind of services under the

public-private partnership, there are generally not many “back up” employees. So when a colleague gets sick, you are asked to replace them, even if you have just worked 5 or 6 days in a row. I have always felt a lot of pressure from my employers to comply with their requirements in terms of availability, which is really not easy when you have a child in shared custody. I constantly had to fight for a decent schedule, in keeping with my parenting role.

Besides, let’s talk about the famous shared custody. I have already been told that I am not a true single mom, because every other week, I was in “child break”. I would like to emphasize that shared custody does not mean shared responsibilities. When something goes wrong with school, the mother is called first. It was also me who handled the invisible work of reports evenings, Christmas concerts, medical appointments, etc. So even when my child is not at home, I remain his mother and I have things to manage. It’s hard to get rid of the perfect and devoted mother’s straitjacket. But little by little, I made small personal revolutions. I allowed myself to miss report evenings, Christmas concerts and delegated some appointments.

I started my undergrad studies in Social Work in September 2013. At that time, I was working full-time as a social worker. So I decided to go to school part-time. During my first university semester, I got ill. A little cold. Yet this little cold was hard to heal and my physical health really deteriorated. I went to the walk-in clinic several times, but I was told that it would go away, that I had to drink water and rest. I spent all my sick leave at first, and then, my accumulated overtime. Finally, a little before Christmas, I made an appointment with my doctor, because I was really at the end of my rope. She diagnosed me with pneumonia and on top of that, I was obviously having a burnout. So I went on sick leave. During the first few days, my doctor threatened to put me back to the hospital, because I was unable to rest. I had

so many things to manage: unemployment, insurance, etc. Then, throughout my sick leave, I have been really “lucky” because my insurance agent has called me every week to find out how I was doing. He asked me on a scale of 1 to 10 how I was feeling, and then asked me when I thought I would go back to work. It is truly frustrating to realize that, despite the fact that one takes care of others, in the end one’s not even allowed a moment’s rest to get back on one’s feet. After four months, I went back to work. Obviously, a few weeks later, everything started again, because basically nothing had changed; I still had the same difficulties with my employer about my work schedule. I resigned shortly after my return.

I decided to start full-time studies. I wanted to take a break from my life as a full-time worker and invest solely in school. I thought that my life as a student would be really more relaxed. I also thought I could do it by tightening my belt a bit and by adopting a “simpler” lifestyle. But how to make it simpler when one is precarious? I was quickly disillusioned. I got almost nothing from Loans and Bursaries, because I had had too much income during the previous year. With a full-time courseload, I was unable to work enough to support my family. Then with evening classes and lots of group work, my life as a student ended up being not relaxing at all. At the end of that year, I almost dropped out, crumbling under bills and debts, but above all morally exhausted. Fortunately, I was hired at the Comité de soutien aux parents étudiants de l’UQAM (UQAM Student Parents Support Committee), which allowed me to have a little financial relief (while combining two other jobs “on the side” to catch up on my bills).

Even though that year was calmer, I still had a gray cloud hanging over me. I saw unpaid internships coming and I was wondering how I was going to cope with it financially. I once again thought of giving up. Fortunately, I have a good network of social and family support (strongly feminine, let’s face it). My sister and sister-in-law offered me to live in the

basement of their house in Longueuil with my son. I said yes, I did not have so many other options. I feel really grateful to them for hosting me, but it was not always easy. We have had some conflicts and I was afraid that the relationship between us would suffer from it. It is no easy matter to reconcile different lifestyles and share intimacy, with four people living in a small house. In addition, my son and I were uprooted from our social network thus we felt isolated a few times. I cannot help but think that if I would have had paid internships, I could have kept my apartment and we would not have been forced to live through all that stress and upset. Moreover, this solution (moving with a family member) is a false good solution in itself, since it is an individual one that comes under my privilege of having a family network that supports me.

Despite my hardships, I am conscious of being a privileged person. I am white, I was born in Canada, I am a cisgender person, I already have a diploma and work experience, I have a good social and family network. Although there is no typical portrait of student parents, people asking for help at CSPE-UQAM are almost exclusively women (I leave it to yourself to draw your own conclusions), often immigrants and/or single parents. The experience of certain student parents is a true warrior journey: over-indebtedness, non-access to daycare services, evening classes, unpaid internships, lack of time to invest in their studies, difficulties related to immigration, violence of all kinds, etc. The situation is particularly intense for female students in education who must support a full-time study pace and complete four unpaid internships during their education.

4 PM: Three hours later, after we've moved to Geneviève's hoping to put the baby to sleep and to improve the text's language level, we're completely exhausted. Yet we realize that the thread we have been searching for hours was right there in front of us. We do not need to quote sociologists to

make our point (even if it is not the desire to do so that is lacking, we're student parents and we like theory too!). Our paths, far from being isolated cases, illustrate very well our point: by their free and unlimited character especially, the parental and academic works are intimately linked to one another. Their logic of exploitation plays against women. It is to leave behind none of these moms that it is necessary to generalize the fight for paid internships without confining it to certain programs or levels of studies. We only have to improve the text here and there, between two bottles or sessions of duties. Satisfied with this, we're returning to our respective lives, those of soccer mom of a teenager and a mom of an infant, who try the best they can to be activists through all that.

Mélissa Renaud in collaboration with **Geneviève Vaillancourt**