

The Social Policy Snare

Keeping Women Out of University

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L'auteure, une mère monoparentale raconte l'impact sur sa vie des amendements à la loi « Nova Scotia Employment Support and Income Assistance » ratifiée en 2000 qui ont coupé ses allocations alors qu'elle était étudiante à l'Université. L'auteure assure que les prêts aux étudiants ne couvrent pas les besoins des mères et de leurs enfants et que les amendements à ces lois dénie à des personnes qui seraient les plus aptes à se sortir de leur pauvreté et à accéder à une éducation, les moyens qui éventuellement leur permettraient de s'auto-financer

My daughter is playing; she is seating her dolls around the kitchen table. She is pretending they are eating breakfast and that she is their mother. With the innocent bliss of a three-year-old, she mimics me. I am moved knowing that I am her biggest influence, that I have such a part to play in her destiny, but I am troubled.

She does not know that we use the food bank and that our clothing is not new. She does not see that we live in a cramped apartment with musty carpets and that we do not own a car. Unlike me, she has not yet learned the shame and hopelessness that can accompany being raised on social assistance, and I am determined that she never will.

Soon I will enter my fourth year of university, where I hope to complete an honours degree in sociology. I

dream of becoming a social justice lawyer and providing my daughter with everything I never had. Yet, at 22 years of age my aspirations continue to be threatened. I am currently facing a discriminatory policy, which states that I cannot attend university and have access to social assistance benefits at the same time.

Prior to April 1998, single parents who needed social assistance could receive benefits to cover living expenses as well as access student loans to cover educational expenses. But, on April 1 1998 the government of Nova Scotia implemented changes to the social assistance and employment support policy (*Social Assistance and Employment Support Policy Manual*). The new policy which was again ratified on November 1, 2000 as part of the new, *Employment Support And Income Assistance Act* now states: "A person attending a post-secondary education program of more than two years shall not receive assistance unless the person is funded to attend by the Employability Assistance for Persons with Disabilities Program" (67(1)).¹

I was informed of this decision in the summer of 2002. As a newly unemployed single parent I applied for social assistance benefits. I told the caseworker I was planning to return to university for my second year of studies. She informed me that as a student I would have access to

student loans and, therefore, I was ineligible for social assistance. The logic behind the legislation seems to be that since student loans provide for living expenses and childcare, students do not need social assistance. But student loans do not provide enough money for single parents to live on.

While students who do not have children can share housing costs with roommates, a single parent must single-handedly pay all rent and utilities for a family-sized dwelling. Single parents must also pay for all of her child's expenses including childcare, food, clothing, and medicine. A single person can usually walk to most places, while a woman with a child cannot avoid transportation costs. For example, I could not attend class without bringing my daughter to and from daycare. Since there is no public transportation I am often obliged to use taxis. These costs are calculated in a student aide assessment, but since there is a ceiling on the amount that can be allocated to each student, these costs are not actually fully covered.

The budget for my second year of university illustrates what a student with one child might expect to spend and receive for her eight-month study period, assuming that she receives the maximum allocation from Student Assistance and the National Child Benefit.

I had a \$3,000 deficit that did not include the cost of food, clothing, medicine, or other basic necessities. *The Employment Support and Income Assistance Act*, ironically subtitled “An Act to Encourage the Attainment of Independence and Self-sufficiency through Employment Support and Income Assistance,” thus works to effectively deny the very people who are most likely to overcome poverty access to education that will provide them opportunities for long-term self-sufficiency.

The Family Mosaic Project recognizes the importance of education for young women who are single parents. The project asserts that the incidence and depth of poverty are increasing in Nova Scotia and that 92 per cent of single parents between 20-24 years of age live below the poverty line (9). It also demonstrates that women who have less education tend to be marginally employed and employment layoffs and health issues are a trend in marginal jobs. Thus, women who are employed in marginal trades are likely to return to using social assistance over a period of time (25). But, the report also shows that those who had access to education have a better chance of being able to support their families and, in fact, that education is the key to reducing intergenerational poverty (24).

It would be logical to assume then that if single parents are permitted to receive social assistance benefits for the four years they are in university, it is likely they will never need social assistance again. Yet, less than two years after the report was published, the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services decided to discriminate against single parents.

In February of my second year I found myself with only eleven dollars to live on. I knew that I did not qualify for social assistance but I hoped that the Department of Community Services would make an exception, given my desperation. Together with an advocate from the

Antigonish Women’s Resource Center, I explained my situation to a caseworker. He explained that in light of the recent policy changes that there was absolutely nothing he could do for me.

“But what if I dropped out of school today?” I asked, “Then would I qualify?”

“Yes,” he responded. “You would. But as long as you are attending

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university we are not allowed to do anything for you.”

At that moment I realized I was trapped by the whims of social policy. Yet I stubbornly held on to the conviction that I had the right to my education and I managed to get through the rest of the year with the help of hard-earned bursaries and assistance from some charitable organizations.

During the summer break, however, I expected to receive social assistance. After all, student loans are only meant to cover expenses during the school term. When I asked my caseworker why I could not access benefits during the summer he informed me that as a student I qualified for government work grants and therefore would not need social assistance. Do policy makers actually believe that a single parent who has just spent eight months balancing university course work and children by herself, can immediately set herself to applying for grants, and that she would indeed receive a grant that

could cover the costs for herself and her child? At the end of my second year, I was an unskilled worker, so even if I worked full-time I could not afford to pay for childcare. A year of parenting while in university, anxiously scrambling for sources of income and feeling hopeless about ever reaching my goals, drove me into a major depression. I received letters from two separate doctors stating that I was not fit to work. Yet when I presented these letters to the Community Services Office I was denied once again. They told me that the only way I could access benefits was if I could prove that I would not return to university in the fall. A letter from the registrar stating that I was not currently a student did not qualify as proof. I had to prove that I had actually *quit* school. I then had to plead to the registrar’s office to remove me from their records. I was literally forced to drop out of school in order to survive.

I was furious. Under Canada’s *Constitution Act* of 1982 I have an equal right to opportunities. A university education should be considered one of these opportunities. I called the Human Rights Commission and complained about having to drop out of school. The person that I spoke with told me that I didn’t have a case because I was arguing against legislated policy. I explained to them that if I returned to school in September that I could be charged with fraud. The only advice that he could give me was to reapply anyway.

That August I applied to be readmitted. I had to write a letter to the university stating why I had “changed my mind” about quitting school and I had to send in a new application including the customary application fee. I returned to the ongoing game of “which bursary do I qualify for now.” For those single mothers who can achieve high grades, bursaries and scholarships can provide more money than working a part-time job. If I had worked part-time during the school year most of my wages would

Budget of Single Parent Student In Nova Scotia		
	Income	Expenses
Student Loan	9,210	
Tuition and Fees		5,500
Canada Study Grant	1,300	
Books		300
Canada Child Tax benefit	2,048	
Rent (With Utilities)		5,560
GST Rebate	500	
Child Care	3,920	
Taxes	400	
Totals	13,058	15,680
		-2,622

have gone to childcare. I would not have had time to have a relationship with my daughter and I would have been too tired to do well in my studies. Instead I studied hard so that I could apply for bursaries. In my second year I received over \$2,000. But I was under constant stress to maintain above-average marks without any certainty of receiving a bursary as there are only a limited number available.

Frustrated by a number of attempts to raise awareness about this unjust policy, I wrote a letter to the Minister of Community Services, the Hon. David Morse, and asked him what the government planned to do to help single parents in university. He responded in writing stating that the government of Nova Scotia was helping by adding a supplement to the Canada Child Tax Benefit. He also mentioned that the province supports subsidized housing and childcare. I wrote Mr. Morse again to inform him of the housing crisis in Antigonish, and to tell him that there were not enough subsidized childcare spaces to go around. He did not respond this time.

I grew tired of explaining to the social assistance office that I was indeed poor. Few people acknowledged my complaint as valid. As a student I needed to be well-dressed, confident, and articulate. But these assets made me appear *undeserving* when I men-

tioned that I needed help. At the student food bank I was only given enough food for one person, and at the town food bank I was lectured for not using the student food bank. I spent so much time adjusting to and arguing against peoples' attitudes that I began to lose a sense of myself.

My fourth major battle with depression came at the end of my third year. I could not find a job and it was summer vacation. I did not bother with social assistance because I knew that they would deny me. I decided that the best way to survive would be to go to school full-time over the summer. But after spending a month on a distance education course I was denied a student loan because of a minor technicality. According to Student Assistance, I was not a summer student for a long enough period to be considered for a full time student loan, and a part-time loan would only cover tuition and books. I spent weeks on the phone, begging FOR an exception to no avail. Eventually, I had to ask the university to refund part of my tuition so that I could afford to live, and I set out to find a job.

I wanted to shout. "Why am I not allowed to get my degree? I am in the top ten per cent of my class, so what makes me less deserving than anyone else? Should I be punished just because I love and raise my child?"

Every time I opened my medicine

cabinet through the dark weeks of a severe depression, I saw sleeping pills, antidepressants, and tranquilizers. I had fantasies of swallowing whole bottles. If my life was always going to be this all-encompassing exhausting task of just staying alive, with no dreams, no security, and no hope, I did not want to live. My daughter became my only purpose for living.

Then I got a bursary from the Antigonish Women's Resource Center. I began to see a psychologist. Later that week I was offered a job at the Women's Center. My mind slowly became clear and I was able to see that I had achieved a great deal in my two years as a single parent student. With my new-found sense of security I was able to recollect the people and systems that supported me.

In my apartment building there are other single-parent students. This past school year one of them drove my daughter and me to daycare every day in exchange for a little bit of gas money. It was she who realized I was depressed and directed me to the help I needed. My best friend is also a single mother in university. When our children play together we have some time to socialize. Through her support I learned that it is all right if my life follows a different pattern than my peers. Although my mother does not have any money to offer me, she does all that she can to help me

achieve my goals. She drives me places that I need to go, and she and some of my other relatives pitch in to babysit or do housework when I am too busy or too tired. I am now also fortunate enough to finally have a subsidized childcare space.

The Antigonish Women's Resource Center has an important impact on my life. There I was able to learn that poverty was a situation, not an identity, and I that I could have big dreams for myself. When I struggled to achieve my education the staff were always there to listen and offer advice. They helped organize meetings and marches against this unfair policy. They invited me sit in on meetings where I learned about the government and social policy. They even asked me to give a speech about my struggle in university which subsequently turned into this article. I didn't realize they were working to empower me. Because they recognized the potential in me, a poor single mother, I became able to see the potential in myself.

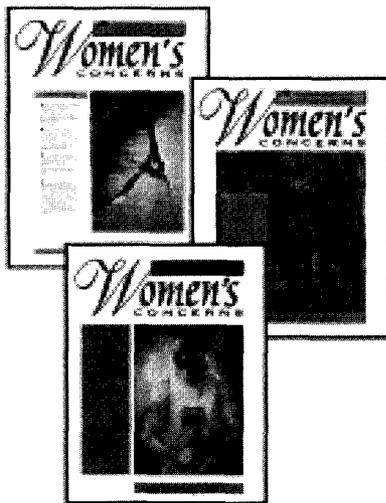
Many women have dreams like mine, of having careers and good lives. We should never be asked to choose between these dreams and loving and raising our children. Some people say that a woman can do anything she wants as long as she puts her mind to it. Instead, I would like to offer that a woman can do anything she wants as long as she has a support system. Not all women have the benefit of a support system like mine. Nonetheless, they still deserve to pursue the kind of education and careers they want and their children also deserve to escape from the cycle of poverty. This is why Canadians need to improve support bases for women, rather than continue to diminish them.

Since writing this article, Jennifer Hines and her daughter have moved into a nice low-rental apartment where they are both happy and healthy. Jennifer plans to graduate in 2006 with a BA Honours from St Francis Xavier University.

The Employability Assistance for Persons with Disabilities Program, which is a program for adults with vocational handicaps funded by Human Resources Development Canada in partnership with the Government of Nova Scotia.

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