

COLUMN / What I am about to tell you is disturbing. Extremely disturbing. Because it is about a situation where the Director of Youth Protection (DYP) did not act. When it should have.

Joannie and Sophie reached out to me somewhat out of desperation. [Because I have already written on the subject that concerns them](#), and because they felt they had tried everything to ensure that the situation they saw was taken seriously. A situation where they suspect that a little girl may have been the victim of female genital mutilation. Here. In Quebec.

They first called the DYP. It was the right thing to do. The right door to knock on.

But the door quickly closed. Joannie and Sophie are still struggling to explain why.

Joannie and Sophie are not their real names. They asked me to use pseudonyms to preserve their confidentiality and to not give any clue about the identity of the child. Also, to not break the bond of trust they have with the family of the girl, who attends the childcare centre where they both work, in the greater Quebec City region.

It should be noted here that Joannie is an educator at the childcare centre, and that Sophie is the director.

CAPTION: Joannie and Sophie have worked in early childhood education for years. This is the first time they have faced a situation like this. (Archives *La Tribune*)

“I have been in the early childhood education field for several years. This is the first time I have seen something like this, says Joannie. While changing the diaper of a little girl in my group, I had to part her labia. That’s when I noticed that her anatomy was different from what I was used to seeing. There was no clitoris. I had to look two or three times to make sure of what I was seeing. It seemed very serious to me. I was really upset.”

After the child left, at the end of the day, Joannie went to tell Sophie about the troubling situation.

“When I saw how surprised she was, I understood that she was not aware of the situation either. I understood that it was something big, that it was perfectly normal for me to feel uncomfortable.”

In the following days, during a diaper change, Sophie took the opportunity to see for herself what her colleague had described to her. And she came to the same conclusion. The two-year-old girl appeared to have undergone an excision.

It was the Info-Santé nurse who directed Joannie and Sophie to the DYP, emphasizing that the performance of excision is illegal in Canada. (Archives *La Tribune*)

“Even if we welcome children from families of various origins, it was the first time that we were faced with a situation like this,” explained the director.

She was very candid about it: initially, she didn’t know what to do in such a situation.

So at first she contacted Info-Santé.

“In terms of health care, there was nothing else we could do, because it was completely healed. There were no stitches, no swelling. It was not a recent event or a healing injury. It was already a done deal, if we can say it that way. Nonetheless the nurse told us that excision was an illegal act in Quebec.”
It was she who directed them to the DYP.

Reporting, disappointment, frustration

“Both of us were very shaken. We decided to report the case.”

And that is when they hit a wall. They weren't expecting that.

“The employee I spoke to told me that she had to consult her immediate superior to determine whether my report was going to be accepted for assessment or not.”

The response was quick. She called Sophie before the end of that day to inform her that the report was not retained. Because it was “an issue far too delicate for them”.

Too delicate?

I stop the unfolding of events here to highlight these two words: too delicate. Really? The organization that is supposed to be the guardian of the Youth Protection Act found the question “too delicate”?

Apparently yes.

“The employee told me to do my own investigation, by questioning the parents to try to get answers to my questions. Quite frankly, I was very angry. The purpose of our reporting was not necessarily to remove the child from her environment, but to at least ensure her protection,” explains Sophie.

She tried to explain that it made no sense to shift the responsibility to them to look further into the issue.

Caption: “We have to keep the bond of trust with the parents (...). Above all, we do not want the child to leave the childcare centre. We don't know what could happen next,” says Sophie, director of a daycare centre. (Simon Séguin-Bertrand/*Le Droit*)

“We have to keep the bond of trust with the parents. We can't start asking questions. And above all, we do not want the child to leave the childcare centre. We don't know what could happen next”.

A waste of time. The grievances of the director did not prompt a favorable response. Even if it raised the possibility that an illegal act could have been committed in Quebec. An act that could mean a prison term of 14 years for the person who committed it.

The fact that the DYP puts the onus back on us is absolutely appalling,” explains Joannie. “We are talking about what we saw, but we don't have the medical skills to analyse the case further.”

The two colleagues told me that the parents are from North Africa and that they have been in the country for a few years. Their little girl was born here.

“We have an idea of what might have happened, but we don't know the context. And the authority that can confirm or invalidate the doubt that we have refuses to take up the case.”

Yet this is the role of the DYP, notes Sophie.

“Because it has the legal authority to ask these questions. The fact that it bails out like this is unacceptable.”

Joannie and Sophie both sigh. They still can't believe it. And they are worried.

Caption: “The DYP is the legal authority that can ask questions. The fact that it bails out like this is unacceptable,” sigh together Sophie and Joannie. (Simon Séguin-Bertrand/*Le Droit*)

“It’s too big for us alone. We know that it is impossible to turn back the clock for this child. But there is still time to act for the other little girls who may be born into this family. That is also why we reported this case.”

“I contacted the DYP in the region concerned, who referred me to the communications department of the National Capital CIUSSS (Integrated University Health and Social Services Centre). There, they gave me a more than laconic answer: ‘The Youth Protection Act prevents us, in all respects, from transmitting any information whatsoever that could make it possible to identify a child, or his parents, followed by our services’.”

“So I decided to go a step higher, from the Director of Youth Protection (DYP), to the Ministry of Health and Social Services. Same answer. Same sad story. No interview. ‘Although the situation you report is worrisome, you will understand that we cannot comment on a specific case.’ That is the only written response that I got following my request.”

“If I were cynical, I would say that specific cases are convenient.”

Caption: A report concerning possible female genital mutilation to the DYP must normally be accepted for assessment and considered as both sexual and physical abuse. (123rf)

Luce Couture and Andrée Yanacopoulo together signed the book *Silence, on coupe!*, in which they expose the existence of female genital mutilation here in Quebec. They argue for the need to act and enforce the law.

“We have collected testimonies. We know that it happens and that little Quebecers undergo these mutilations, even if it is illegal. We have a duty to investigate, to know, to change things. And if the DYP does not take care of it, who will? Those responsible must do their job and protect little girls,” they insist.

Caption: Andrée Yanacopoulo and Luce Cloutier together authored the book *Silence, on coupe!* in which they exposed the existence of female genital mutilation in Quebec. They hammer home the importance of better protecting little Quebec girls. (Maxime Picard/*La Tribune*)

A very well-informed source agreed to explain to me on condition of anonymity what should normally have happened after the educators made the report. Let’s call this source Frédérique.

“It is not a situation that we see frequently, but this type of report must be accepted for assessment as much as a case of sexual abuse as physical abuse. A daycare that makes this kind of report requires us to go and investigate. Hence, the response given to the educators is astonishing.”

Caption: Female genital mutilations are illegal in Quebec. The act is punishable by up to 14 years in jail. (123RF)

At least.... because normally, the report should have made it possible to trigger the multisectoral agreement, which provides for collaboration with the police services in order to see if there is reason to open a criminal investigation.

“In such cases, we put in place immediate protective measures. We have the child seen by a doctor to assess whether it is indeed an excision,” explains Frédérique.

“Then we meet with the parents. We can take in consideration the cultural context to adapt our approach, but it does not change the situation.”

Caption: The *Youth Protection Act* is clear: any professional or person who suspects physical or sexual abuse of a child is required to report it. (Patrick Woodbury/*Le Droit*)

“That’s where, yes, it’s true that it’s delicate. You have to be tactful in your approach. During the interviews, we will be sensitive to the migratory journey of the people who are in front of us. After that, it doesn’t excuse the act, and it does not minimize it either. The *Youth Protection Act* (YPA) is the same for everyone and applies to everyone... regardless of culture. There are no exceptions.”

There is also no exception either as to the duty to act in case of doubt.

“The protection of children is a shared and collective responsibility,” reminds Frédérique.

Caption: “When people express reservations about the idea of making a report, I tell them that we prefer that they do it, that we go and see for ourselves. In the end, if it is not justified, so much the better. We close the file and everyone is reassured. But we are not left with a doubt,” explains Frédérique. (Simon Séguin-Bertrand/*Le Droit*)

Section 39 of the YPA is clear. Any professional or citizen who suspects physical or sexual abuse of a child has an obligation to report it.

“When people express reservations about the idea of making a report, I tell them that we prefer that they do it, that we go and see for ourselves. In the end, if it is not justified, so much the better. We close the file and everyone is reassured. But we are not left with a doubt.”

And no file is “too delicate”. That DYP workers think otherwise is disturbing. Extremely disturbing.

Société



Karine Tremblay

Karine Tremblay has been a journalist at *La Tribune* since 1997. She covered arts and culture for more than 22 years before devoting herself more to writing columns.