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MUM AND POSTDOC AT SISSA,

by Virginia Agostiniani

The fact that most of my female colleagues of a similar age to me (around 30) and typically holding non-permanent positions have made the choice of not having a baby or planning to postpone the event has never weakened or delayed in me the idea of becoming a mum. I have always optimistically thought that being a mum and a postdoc couldn't be, in the end, so difficult. At least, that's what I thought before my child was born... The aim of this short article is to report my experience and that it was, indeed, difficult for me, even if my institution (SISSA, Trieste) gave support in helping me to survive.

In October 2014, I started my postdoc at SISSA, whose scope is contributing to the mathematical modelling of some active materials in the framework of the ERC grant "Micromotility" held by Professor A. DeSimone. Just a few months later, my maternity leave began, which in Italy covers a period of five months, one month or two before the birth of the baby plus, respectively, four or three after. Among the adversities that an Italian mum-postdoc encounters, the financial one is probably at the top. In this respect, the economic treatment of SISSA is 100% satisfying. And not only satisfying but also quite singular in the Italian panorama. To explain this, let me first recall that Italian maternity leave for postdocs is meant to be an interruption of the period of the contract, to which five months are then added at the end. At the same time, INPS (the Italian Social Security Service) pays 80% of the salary during the interruption (usually many months later and with many bureaucratic disruptions). Well, SISSA covers the part of the salary that is not covered by INPS so that, during the months of leave, one can count on a full salary. In my case, SISSA's contribution to maternity leave was even more relevant because the INPS regulations stipulate that a postdoc is entitled to 80% of the salary during maternity leave only if they have paid contributions for at least two months in the two years before the leave starts. Otherwise, nothing! Well, I didn't fulfill the requirement since I had been a postdoc for two years in Oxford before my Italian contract started and SISSA on their own covered my entire salary during the leave. Note that if I didn't work at SISSA but, for example, in an arbitrary Maths Department of some Italian University, the state wouldn't have given any economic support to me. And all this in a period where the need for a salary is more urgent than ever.

Exactly four months after my baby's birth, I am, at 9 am, in my office. From that point on, a very very hard period begins for me, in family as well as at work. Usually, in order to maximise the working time, I hardly find a moment to breathe during my office hours. This is due to many facts coming together: (1) I am working on a very hot topic and I need to proceed quickly, also to recover some of the "time lost" during the leave, this not only because I am required to produce some results during my present post but also in view of my overall career, since my position is not permanent; (2) My husband works and lives for most of the time in another town, situated four to five hours by train away from Trieste; and (3) Neither my family nor my husband's family live in Trieste or close to it. Here, again, SISSA's regulation helps but in this respect its help is less incisive. Here, we deal with a KINDERGARTEN. I feel the need to write this word in capital letters because it represents a dream for me (not for a few weeks yet, though). The fact is that SISSA has a very nice kindergarten situated in the beautiful park surrounding the main building. It is also highly ranked as a kindergarten for the activities undertaken and the overall organisation and concept; it is far from being a simple "baby parking". Moreover, SISSA provides economic support for childcare, so that the monthly rate is approximately 300 euros, which is a very good rate. The drawback is that the kindergarten only accepts babies who are older than 13 months. But this is a problem because most of the people working at SISSA, excluding admin people, are people whose families live far away and are therefore unable to offer their help when a baby arrives. So, I am sure that when my baby is finally accepted at the kindergarten, he will be superhappy and the teachers will prove to be supergood and trained, but arriving at that moment has been so difficult, for me as well as for my little son!! Just to give an idea, we spent the last nine months - between the end of the leave and now - finding and changing temporary and private (and bad) kindergartens, together with carefully scheduling grandparents' humanitarian visits.

Apart from SISSA's regulations concerning maternity leave and childcare, I have to say that the first year of a baby's life requires specific attention towards them and, even if I have had to renounce to some conferences and some occasions to make progress in my job, I feel happy for not having deprived my baby of all my attention and support. We cannot have everything at the same time (at least, we mums) and the first year of a son happens once in a life. Also, carrying him to some conferences with me so as not to interrupt the breastfeeding - with the key aid of my husband - has been doubly stressing in terms of preparation for the conference but also doubly rewarding: my little son, in his official role of little mascot, has been many times the subject of amusement for the conference participants, making social dinners and coffee breaks less conventional!