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Thursday, May 10, 2007

—
Chair

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi

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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Yasmin Ratansi (Don Valley East, Lib.)): I will call the committee to order.

For the benefit of the witnesses, we have an outstanding motion from the last meeting and would like to bring it forth. We will try to be as expeditious as possible, and then we will go to the business at hand.

Ms. Minna, would you like to read your motion?

Thank you.

Hon. Maria Minna (Beaches—East York, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair. It states:

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) that the Standing Committee on the Status of Women recommend to the government to immediately introduce proactive pay equity legislation as recommended by the 2004 federal Pay Equity Task Force and that the Chair report the adoption of this motion to the House without delay.

The Chair: What I'd like to see is the committee's direction. Before I acknowledge anyone to speak, I want the committee's direction.

We have witnesses here. Can we limit this debate to 10 minutes? Would I have a consensus to limit this debate to 10 minutes?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Okay. So 10 minutes is what we will do. Whomever is speaking, I'll cut them off at 10 minutes.

Ms. Smith.

Mrs. Joy Smith (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Yes, Madam Chair, I would like to speak to this motion, because we feel that pay equity is extremely important.

Going back to what happened during the previous government, we did study this. There was a task force, and there was a letter to Ms. Neville—who was at the committee at the time—from the Honourable Irwin Cotler and the Honourable Joe Fontana. They said in that letter, “the Report does not provide an adequate blueprint for implementation of pay equity in a broad range of federally-regulated workplaces”. And they also said, “Given the complexities associated with the implementation of proactive pay equity legislation, the Government”—the Liberal government at the time—“cannot, at this time, introduce federal legislation by October 31, 2005, without further study and consultation”.

We had agreed with that.

Also, the fact of the matter is that Irwin Cotler, the then minister, did say on November 21, 2005:

I want to emphasize that this proactive pay equity legislation, to which we are committed, must be drafted carefully in order to avoid the types of pitfalls that have continued to plague us under the current system. This will not be an easy task, given the need to determine the methodologies, the ways and means that are required for implementation of pay equity in a workplace.

This act cannot be drafted in one day.

I'm saying, as I said the other day, that our minister, our government, feels very strongly that pay equity is a huge, important issue. Our government looked at the legislation and wanted to take action immediately, because we agreed that this could take a very, very long time. So Canada's new government does recognize pay equity as a human right. Pay equity provisions have been in the Canadian Human Rights Act since 1977. And as I said the other day, the equal wage guidelines were enacted under the Conservative government in 1986, and this government remains a strong supporter of pay equity.

So what has happened, basically, is that the implementation plan has been put in place, using the legislation that is there. That's why we, on this side of the House, cannot support this motion, because we want things to move quickly and not to be held up.

The Chair: Ms. Mathysen.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I am supporting this motion by Ms. Minna because I think it's very important that we revisit the work of the pay equity task force. If any of the committee members have read this report, they will note that it sets out pay equity step by step; it's very, very clear, and very precise. And the plan they propose is very, very doable.

In terms of this committee, we've had witness after witness come here to talk about women who are in poverty. These women are working at a substandard level in terms of their wages and salaries. Last week we had a report from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives that, once again, verified that women and families are suffering because we haven't managed to make sure their incomes keep pace with inflation. The reality is that the affordability gap widens and widens.

This recommends proactive pay equity. What we have in this country is a complaints-based system that is litigious and requires individuals who don't have the benefit of unions to basically step out on their own. In a recent report from the labour unions in this country, they're saying, point-blank, there is absolutely nothing new in what the current government is proposing in terms of pay equity, that all the things they're talking about have been tried without any positive results.

We simply have to move ahead; we can't keep pedalling backwards. It's time for proactive pay equity now, and this government needs to move on it. We've been waiting too many years.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Mathysen.

Ms. Minna.

Hon. Maria Minna: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I know that Ms. Smith read extensively from a letter from Mr. Cotler and Mr. Fontana, the former Minister of Justice and the former Minister of Labour and Housing. However, there is another part to this letter that is also very clear. It says:

Therefore, the Government is developing substantive proposals for legislative reform and will work closely with stakeholders through this process. The Minister of Justice and the Minister of Labour and Housing will appoint an impartial facilitator to lead discussions with major stakeholder representatives. These representatives will discuss the Government's proposals related to the above-mentioned four issues, and will consider alternatives that respect basic principles related to pay equity. Drawing on these discussions, the Government will consider a range of methodologies and processes in implementing pay equity reforms and will work towards introducing a bill on pay equity by late 2006 or early 2007.

Presumably there were some instructions left at the department. We had made a commitment that there would be in fact proactive pay equity reform legislation tabled in Parliament either by late 2006 or early 2007. This is 2007 and you've done nothing. The current government's response is that they wish not to go in that direction. I guess what I'm saying is that with respect to the current system, however well meaning or however many more people are assigned to enforce it, the fact of the matter is it doesn't work. It's been there for 35 years and there are litigations that have been going on for 25 years. It isn't going to work.

The letter concludes with:

The Government is committed to effective and efficient proactive pay equity reform.

That commitment was there and was made by the two previous ministers. The former Prime Minister made it public towards the latter part of 2005, clearly stating that he intended to introduce proactive pay equity legislation. Given the fact that there really are two diverging directions here in terms of this, I would like to suggest, Madam Chair, that we are not going to change pay equity for women in this country unless we in fact embark on a proactive legislative process.

• (1540)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Minna.

Mr. Stanton.

Mr. Bruce Stanton (Simcoe North, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

With the greatest of respect, the motion speaks to the need to produce this proactive pay equity legislation quickly, saying "without delay", "immediately introduce". By the minister's own words—this was Minister Cotler at the time in a joint letter—he was very clear, given the complexities associated...and I should say this is in the fourth report to the Standing Committee on the Status of Women from October 5:

the Government cannot, at this time, introduce federal legislation by October 31, 2005, without further study and consultation.

There's an admission here that in order to.... I'd be the first to suggest that all government legislation is in need of review from time to time. It needs to be updated. Sometimes there are things with which you find glitches and you have to update it. The fact of the matter is we have pay equity legislation. The minister has been clear in his commitment to implement proactive measures to make sure that the pay equity legislation we do have is being implemented and that workplaces are required to move forward on these. He's backed that up with 100 or more inspectors right across the country to make sure that the existing legislation is being implemented properly.

We can debate this until the cows come home, but really, when it's all said and done, what the member is asking here, this rather immediate proactive pay equity legislation, defies the very recommendations of the previous government's minister on this topic.

The Chair: Ms. Minna, did you have a final comment?

Hon. Maria Minna: Yes, Madam Chair. It's just to say that I appreciate that Mr. Stanton is saying that they said in 2005 they were not ready, but the point I made is very clear. Both ministers also said they would be ready by late 2006 and 2007, after having consulted with stakeholders, who would have assisted the government in actually drafting the legislation.

The election was lost, and obviously the current government wasn't going in that direction, so a year and a half in fact has been lost. We do have different objectives, obviously, but on the comment that we do have pay equity legislation, yes, we do, but as many people have said, it's complaint-based, not effective, and not proactive.

This is a clear commitment from the previous government to say that we would, by late 2006 or early 2007, have proactive new legislation introduced. The preliminary work wasn't done in the last year and a half because of different positions, and obviously there won't be any. What I'm trying to do is rectify the situation and get back to a situation where we in fact are working towards proactive pay equity legislation once more.

The Chair: We're coming to the end of the time. We have presented a few reports, and we've received responses from different ministers. We tried to get the ministers to come before us.

I am not making any suggestions, but would it help us if we had the ministers before us? We all want to work to ensure that pay equity comes.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Yes.

Mrs. Joy Smith: That's a great idea.

The Chair: Okay, call the motion then.

I can't, but whoever wants to call the vote can.

Go ahead, Ms. Minna. You can call the vote.

• (1545)

Hon. Maria Minna: That's what I was suggesting we have a vote on. I think we have—

Mrs. Joy Smith: I like your suggestion. I think all of us around the table are definitely in favour of making sure pay equity happens. For goodness' sake, I think a lot of us have experienced the inequities ourselves. The difference is that on our side of the House we're saying let's not take three years to do legislation. The legislation is there. The minister is pushing it forward and trying to make it happen, because prior to that there was no implementation plan.

As for the argument that we were going to do it quickly on the eve of the death of the government before the election, with all due respect, there were 13 years in which to do it. I think everybody around this table believes that pay equity should be put in place. So I would suggest that before we move with this motion, we ask the minister to come and talk specifically about pay equity and the legislation, rather than holding anything up.

The Chair: Okay. I'm at the will of the committee, and if the committee would like to call the vote, it's the committee's prerogative and not mine. I would like to have the question—

Mr. Bruce Stanton: A point of order, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Stanton. Our 10 minutes are up. I had decided to give 10 minutes, and I shouldn't even have given you an option, but I was just trying to see if I could balance things out.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Correct me if this is procedurally incorrect, but I'd like to move that we continue on with other business and leave this matter pending—

Hon. Maria Minna: Sorry, the meeting is still on, with all due respect, and we will continue with the meeting and that result.

The Chair: Procedurally, I think you're out. You all agreed on 10 minutes. We're now finished with the discussion. We move. Which way does the committee wish to go?

Hon. Maria Minna: I call for the question.

The Chair: Okay, Madame Deschamps. Just one quick one because I'm past—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): I would like to make a comment, Madam Chair.

I don't really care if we refer to the previous government or to the current one. Last week, all parties were approached by women's groups, who reminded us of the report that was tabled in 2004.

I think this act should be effective as quickly as possible, if I can use the Quebec act as an example, since it works quite well. And Quebec is still part of Canada.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Deschamps.

[*English*]

Discussion time is over, Madame.

A recorded vote—is that what you asked for, Ms. Minna?

Who asked for a recorded vote? Nobody did. Okay, fair enough.

You're calling for the question.

Mr. Van Kesteren, you're being asked whether you want to vote yes or no on the motion.

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren (Chatham-Kent—Essex, CPC): [*Inaudible—Editor*]

Mrs. Joy Smith: Mr. Van Kesteren was wondering whether or not we can limit to 10 minutes a discussion like this. Is it legal to do that?

The Chair: The vote has been called. The committee agreed. Now you can't backtrack on anything. So we're moving forward.

(Motion agreed to [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: The motion is carried, and we will now move on to our witnesses, regarding the economic security of women. We have with us Diane Martz, appearing as an individual. We have Colleen Purdon, Rural Women Take Action on Poverty Committee, and Ellen Gabriel, who is the president of the Quebec Native Women's Association.

Welcome to you all. You each will have 10 minutes of presentation, after which the committee members will start asking questions, and then you will have a minute to wrap up.

The clock will go “beep”. Please pay attention, because we have time constraints.

Ms. Martz, could I ask you to start, please? Thank you.

• (1550)

Ms. Diane Martz (As an Individual): I'd like to thank you for the invitation to speak to you today about rural women and economic security. I'm currently the research director with Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence and was formerly the director of the Centre for Rural Studies and Enrichment, associated with the University of Saskatchewan.

Although many aspects of economic insecurity may be similar in urban and rural places, there are a number of factors that make it different. These would be such things as cultural and spatial invisibility—that is, poverty in rural areas is not concentrated and is not necessarily admitted—isolation, economic structure and restructuring, rural attitudes and culture, and the withdrawal of health and social services from rural areas.

That economic security is a growing problem in rural Canada is brought home by a report by the Canadian Association of Food Banks in 2003, which pointed out the irony of increasing numbers of people living in Canada's food-producing regions, and even food producers themselves, needing to use food banks.

I'm basing my remarks today on recurring themes from a number of studies I participated in, on rural child care, intimate partner violence in rural regions, the work of farm women in farm families, the new rural economy, the role of the public sector in rural Saskatchewan, and the work of women in the agricultural and forestry processing sectors. I'll focus on four areas, including women's opportunity for work in rural areas, income, family care, and agriculture.

In the context of women's work opportunities, employment for women in rural Canada is a necessity in order to maintain the family, care for children, and in many cases supplement farm income. Women able to earn a substantive wage give themselves and their families the option and security to live in rural communities and achieve a good quality of life.

Job opportunities available for women in rural communities are limited, particularly jobs that pay a decent wage. Rural women perceive that they have few options. Most of the jobs open to them are service sector jobs that have been traditionally held by women, jobs such as being waitresses, child care providers, nurses' aides, teachers' aides, or in secretarial and clerical positions. Traditional women's jobs that offer better pay—professional jobs such as teachers, nurses, and government jobs—are being lost from rural areas as schools and hospitals close and government offices are relocated into urban areas.

Traditional ideas about suitable work for women persist in some rural areas. Although this is slowly changing, occupational segregation remains, with women overrepresented in low-paying clerical and service sector jobs.

In terms of income, average wages in rural and small town Canada have been consistently lower than average wages in urban areas for decades, and the proportion of persistently poor tends to be highest in rural and small town Canada. Average wages are lowest for rural women, of all the groups we look at, and higher proportions of low-income women remain low income over time. This is often, actually, linked to low pay, so there are an awful lot of working poor in rural Canada. In rural Canada, even with one or two household members working, the chances of being low-income are higher than in urban areas.

Women told us that the jobs open to them are low-paying and part-time. Minimum wage jobs do not provide an adequate income for women to survive and pay for the day-to-day needs without being reliant on someone else to help pay the bills. This has implications for both the economic and the overall security of women, as the lack of financial resources limits women's options in abusive relationships, and single women can't support a family.

Women with small children find that the income from a minimum wage job would all go to day care, so it's not worth it. As a result, women may postpone going back to work because they can't afford the child care bills when working at minimum wage employment. Those years not working have an economic impact in lost wages, lost opportunities for advancement, and lost pension contributions, hindering economic security later in life.

On the topic of child care, for decades rural women have been telling researchers and government representatives that good quality,

flexible child care is a critical need in rural Canada. Strategies to meet the child care needs of families in rural Canada are essential and must be specifically targeted to the rural areas in order for the programs and the money to actually get to rural, out of urban, areas. Child care is a critical economic development issue for present and future generations, and it's a necessity for women who want to increase their education or earn a wage.

In one of the most economically vibrant rural regions in Saskatchewan, there was only one licensed day care centre and one licensed day care home, which provided child care spaces for fewer than 1 in 50 of the children aged zero to twelve. So there's obviously a critical need for child care options in this rural region.

What parents do now is meet their child care needs by multiple means. They go to family, friends, older siblings; they work tandem hours, so that one parent is at home while the other is at work.

● (1555)

Parents want licensed child care. There's an assurance of safety and quality there, and it offers the opportunity for subsidy, which is critical in low-wage areas such as you find in so many of our rural areas.

Innovation around child care. You have an awful lot of families who are dealing with shiftwork, farm families and so on, who need non-traditional types of day care. The lack of access to quality early childhood development and care has a number of additional implications for women and families. It reduces the availability of people for the labour force, exacerbating a well-recognized rural regional labour shortage. Women turn down education and advancement due to their child care needs, and women end up travelling to multiple communities every day to drop off their children in one place and then go to work in another.

The affordability of child care is a significant issue for parents. Some note that with a minimum wage job they cannot afford to pay for child care. Funding for child care based on small subsidies and vouchers will not result in the provision of licensed child care options in rural Canada, so program funding needs to receive priority as new licensed facilities that offer quality child care are needed desperately.

Elder care is another element of family care that rural women are increasingly engaging in. With the aging population in rural Canada and the out-migration of family members, the rural women who remain are increasingly called on to provide elder care. In our study of the work of farm families over the period 1982-2002, 43% of farm women were providing care to elderly or chronically ill family and friends. This is an increase from under 10% in 1982. As others have noted, this impacts women's economic security, as they may be forced to reduce their work hours. It influences their job choices, their job mobility, as well as their health. These changes have shifted health care costs from the health care system to the household, and they're most often borne by women.

In the context of farm women, although many continue to discount the significance of agriculture in rural Canada, it's still an important sector. In Canada, the family farm remains the dominant form of agricultural production, and 98% of Canadian farms are still family farms. On many of these farms there are multiple people working full-time and part-time jobs in agriculture, and many of them are never counted in official statistics. Nevertheless, the family farm is undergoing dramatic change. Farms are becoming larger and fewer, and the number of Canadians engaged in agriculture has declined. Farm family members are increasingly working off the farm, work relations are changing on the farm, and transfers to the next generation of farmers are being called into question. This structural transformation of agriculture has meant that in Canada, most remaining farms are marginal units incapable of fully employing and sustaining farm families.

Farm families who choose to remain on farms are responding in a variety of ways. However, while this adaptation provides continuity to the farm family, it's not without significant cost to family, farm, and community.

Agriculture is also more than an economic sector. Farms and farm families contribute economically and socially to many local rural communities and are responsible for controlling land use on vast areas of land. The family farm is an important part of the rural landscape and a critical part of the survival of many small towns in rural Canada. The changes in agriculture have had significant social and economic impacts on farm families in rural communities that extend well beyond the agricultural sector.

Statistics Canada, in 2001, reported that only 17.7% of the average Canadian farm family's net income came from the farm. Even with the largest farming category with net receipts over \$250,000, they derived 39.5% of their net income from the farm operation.

Women play a significant role in the economic security of the family farm, just as the viability of the farm affects the economic security of women. That the role of women in agriculture is still unrecognized and unacknowledged speaks to the persistence of the predominant view that agricultural work is done by men.

Between 1982 and 2002, farm women expanded their work roles over a broad range of farm work, moving into non-traditional female roles as they responded to the increased opportunities offered by social change and the increased pressure on the family farm created by economic and political change. Even as they expand these roles, they continue to do most of the domestic work. Responding to both

opportunities and pressures, farm women are increasingly working off the farm.

Economic pressures in agriculture and opportunities in the oil and gas sector have also created an interesting situation in the prairies of men leaving the farms after harvest to work in the oil patch, returning in the spring before seeding, leaving women, children, and elderly relatives to manage the ongoing activities of the farm operation in their absence. And farming is a year-round activity; it doesn't stop after harvest.

• (1600)

Finally, women are intimately involved in the economic aspects of farming; 81% of them maintain the books and paperwork for the farms. They're increasingly working on the farm, replacing hired labour, and working off the farm, bringing in money to support the family and at times the farm operation.

The Chair: You will have an opportunity during the Q and A.

Ms. Purdon, for 10 minutes.

Ms. Colleen Purdon (Coordinator, Rural Women Take Action on Poverty Committee): Thank you for this opportunity to speak to the standing committee on behalf of the Rural Women Take Action on Poverty Committee.

We're a group of women from Grey, Bruce, Huron, and Perth in southwestern Ontario who came together in 2001 out of concern about the increasingly serious impact of poverty on rural women and their families.

From 2001 until the present, we have engaged diverse rural women and community service providers in a large-scale participatory action research project that focused specifically on the experience of women and poverty in rural communities and developed strategies to address rural poverty.

We began in 2001-02 with a series of community workshops with poor women. We asked them about the impact of poverty, why rural women are poor, what helps them, and what needs to change. The findings and recommendations from these workshops are outlined in the report *Rural Women Speak About the Face of Poverty*.

From 2004 until 2005, we organized a series of workshops with women to follow up on the key recommendation from the initial research: the need for a comprehensive source of information on poverty, advocacy, supports, and self-care for women who are poor and community agencies that deal with poor women.

Women who understand poverty from their own experiences created a handbook called *How We Count*. They said, when you're poor you don't count. This book was put together in 2005.

On June 6, we'll be launching the third phase of our work by having a women's gathering to address negative community attitudes towards poor rural women. We'll bring 80 women and advocates from the four counties together to look at strategies to change community attitudes. We plan to carry out community report cards on women's poverty, an art project to celebrate the value and the contributions women make, and to develop a kit to help women advocate and lobby for change in their own communities.

Our work is funded through grants from Status of Women Canada. We are very indebted to the staff at the Status of Women's London regional office for their ongoing support of our work. We regret that the office and staff expertise is no longer available to us and our communities.

I would now like to provide a short overview of the key issues that have been identified through the research and work with rural women.

First of all, there are the key issues from women involved in our study. The first one is that rural women said they're plunged into poverty when things happen that they have little control over: a sudden illness, an accident, a disability, an abusive partner, the loss of employment or their partner's loss of employment, a death of their partner, a separation, or a fire or accident.

Second, rural women are poor because there are no jobs, or no opportunities for women to use the good skills they have. Most of the women we worked with had excellent skills and education, but they could not find jobs. Higher-paying jobs are reserved for men in rural communities, and women are forced into low-paying work that leaves them in poverty.

Third, social assistance, government pensions, and minimum wage jobs do not cover basic needs for food, housing, heat, transportation, and health care in rural communities. Women and children can be left destitute or dependent on family or charitable supports to cover their basic needs.

Four, rural women cannot access services, supports, or employment. There's no public transportation, or women don't have a car, their vehicle is unsafe, or they don't even have the money for gas, insurance, or repairs.

Five, rural areas are underserved and services are fragmented. Women reported having difficulty accessing necessary employment, health, and education services. They're either not available or women don't have the information they need to access the services. They don't have a telephone or a computer or the Internet to access services because they can't afford them.

Six, rural women and their children are geographically and socially isolated. This contributes to depression and safety issues, particularly for abused women.

Seven, rural women and their children experience open discrimination in their communities. They are often publicly humiliated by service providers. They lose their privacy because of their poverty.

Eight, it's very difficult to access training and education in rural communities. Women reported that they can't access post-secondary

education because it doesn't exist in the community or they can't afford it.

• (1605)

Nine, women said once they're poor, it's very difficult to get out of poverty and remain in their community.

Ten, women spend a great deal of time and effort trying to survive a complex and uncoordinated agency and community response to poverty. There is no agency that deals with poverty or helps women navigate services. Providers may not even be aware of other community supports or decide just to respond to their piece of the poverty problem.

Eleven, there's a lack of good, accessible, and affordable child care in rural communities.

Twelve, rural women's inequality and their dependency on men contribute to their poverty. Women are economically dependent on men and are left in poverty when their marriages end. Women are usually the caretakers for their children, and men who don't pay child support leave women and children in poverty. Women in our study said men leave women with children, debt, and poverty, and men abuse women and force them to leave their homes, their jobs, and their economic security in order to be safe.

Thirteen, rural women are much more likely to be at home with their children, and their strong traditional values support women staying at home, but there is no monetary value or supports later for women who make this choice.

Fourteen, rural women on farms are poor because farms suck up all of the money. Even with two jobs in the family, women reported that they are poor because the farm takes everything. Farmers are asset-rich but income-poor and often can't access supports because of their assets.

Fifteen, government policies and programs reflect the fact that—and this is a quote—"Men are the gender in power". Funding for child care, housing, social assistance for women, and disabilities is not adequate and traps women in poverty.

Sixteen, there's an urban bias in government policy and an assumption that infrastructure exists where there isn't any in a rural community. We are underserved and lack infrastructure, both social and physical.

Seventeen, there are many, many myths about living in a rural community—for example, it's cheaper to live there, you can grow your own food, and there's a lot of housing—all of which are not true.

Eighteen, federal government and provincial and municipal governments don't use a gender or a place analysis, so the needs and realities of rural women in the communities are not factored into government decision-making at any level, and many government programs simply don't benefit women at all.

Nineteen, women and children often need to leave their rural community for employment or training or opportunities, and the only way they can leave poverty is to leave their community. So we're exporting women and children from our rural communities.

So here are the key recommendations that I was asked to bring forward.

First, rural women need economic supports and programs that support them as parents and that recognize the legitimacy and value of parenting. Women should not suffer economic hardships because they're the primary caretakers of children in rural communities.

Second, rural women with children and disabled and senior women need a guaranteed income that covers their basic needs and makes up for the lack of infrastructure and services in rural communities.

Third, all levels of government must use a gender and geographic or place analysis in the development of their policies and services, and we feel there's a critical role for the federal government in this.

Fourth, concrete action is needed to improve the economic security of women in rural communities now, so they're not dependent on men and male wage earners. Some examples are pay equity, a living wage, programs to support the work/family balance, support for women entrepreneurs, training programs that build on a woman's skills instead of forcing her to retrain, economic supports for abused women when they leave an abuser, and better access to education and training.

Fifth, we ask governments not to use a population-based approach to funding and services but really to look at the real costs of providing equal levels of service for communities in rural areas.

Sixth, rural communities need a horizontal and collaborative approach to funding among the federal, provincial, municipal, and community funding sources to break down the artificial funding and program silos and barriers and to really prevent and avoid the current waste of public funding that's happening everywhere.

Seventh, rural women need more investment in alternative and distance education and an investment in broadband Internet.

Eighth, rural women need long-range planning and policy development, by all levels of government, to support rural communities as viable places to live and work for women and their families and to address rural depopulation immediately.

•(1610)

Ninth, we need policies, programs, and funding to address transportation and access issues for poor women and poor people in rural communities and a national child care program that builds new child care spaces and provides quality, affordable, and accessible child care suitable for women.

Finally, we need some national program or something to address stigma and discrimination against poor women in their communities and to encourage more corporate and community responsibility for poverty reduction.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now go to Ms. Gabriel.

Ms. Ellen Gabriel (President, Quebec Native Women's Association): I will tell you just a little about the association I represent. It's a non-profit organization that began as a grassroots movement in 1974 by aboriginal women, and it is the only organization working today on behalf of aboriginal women in Quebec. Our mission is to support and encourage local initiatives for improving the living conditions of aboriginal women and their families.

The socio-economic situation of aboriginal people, especially aboriginal women, is one of the consequences of colonization. Before the arrival of Europeans, the aboriginal nations were independent, as reflected in their own customs, languages, legal and government systems, and cultures. Following contact with the Europeans and the colonization that ensued, the traditional systems of aboriginal society were compromised. Legislative measures, especially the Indian Act, and other government laws and policies were imposed upon aboriginal people that led to the loss of their independence.

The value of aboriginal women in our society today has diminished to where, as Amnesty International has stated, we have become a commodity in society in general. Aboriginal women were decision-makers; we were equal to men in our societies, and now we are forced under a system that promotes male leadership and not female leadership. There is no gender equity in the kinds of self-government negotiations that presently exist. The role of aboriginal women has been extremely marginalized, which is ironic, considering that feminism got their idea from aboriginal women in the Americas.

I'd like to state two references from literature:

It was through the attack on the power of Aboriginal woman that the disempowerment of our peoples has been achieved, in a dehumanizing process that is one of the cruelest on the face of this earth

This is from Armstrong in 1996.

When women were deprived of their traditional role and responsibilities, whole Aboriginal nations were weakened as traditional structures and systems were eradicated

That is Fiske et al, 2001.

I can read to you statistics that you already have within your possession. I'll read a couple of them just to emphasize the point I'm trying to make and the seriousness of economic security for aboriginal women.

Today we have the fastest growing population. A large portion of our population is under the age of 35, and in some communities, 61% of the population is under the age of 25.

In Quebec, aboriginal women account for 8% of the total female population, and the majority of aboriginal women live off reserve, and that's at 72%, while 28% live on reserve.

Rodolpho Stavenhagen, special rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people, wrote about this situation in his report that he submitted upon his visit to Canada. It reads as follows:

Economic, social and human indicators of well-being, quality of life and development are consistently lower among Aboriginal people than other Canadians. Poverty, infant mortality, unemployment, morbidity, suicide, criminal detention, children on welfare, women victims of abuse, child prostitution are all much higher among Aboriginal people than in any other sector of Canadian society, whereas educational attainment, health standards, housing conditions, family income, access to economic opportunity and to social services are generally lower.

The life expectancy of aboriginal people is lower, according to the royal commission. We experience more health problems, and social problems ranging from violence to alcoholism are more widespread in aboriginal communities. Water supply systems, waste water systems in aboriginal communities are more often of poorer quality. And a smaller portion of aboriginal people have jobs.

Aboriginal people want the Canadian government to know and acknowledge that all of these social problems are primarily due to the loss of lands, resources, legal systems, governments, economies, and social institutions, as well as to the negation of their identities, languages, and cultures. What aboriginal people are seeking above all is to gain control of their lives and assume responsibility for their own future.

• (1615)

In terms of education, statistics show us that four of every ten aboriginal women have not completed high school. In 2001, only 7% of aboriginal women had earned a university degree, compared to 17% of non-aboriginal women. On the other hand, the percentage of aboriginal women with a college diploma or certificate is practically the same as that of non-aboriginal women.

I'm no expert on statistics. They make me dizzy, so sometimes I wonder what the actual situation is. I do know that the majority of people in post-secondary education are aboriginal women when we're talking about the aboriginal population.

On reserve, we see that the majority of employees in education and social services who are teachers and secretaries and sometimes band managers, if they are allowed, are women, but they are not involved in the majority of the decision-making positions in our communities.

Aboriginal women earn on average \$12,300 per year. The average income of aboriginal men is \$15,500. The average income of

aboriginal women living on reserve is much lower. It's under \$11,000.

The jobs for aboriginal women are poorly paid, and aboriginal women are less likely to be in the labour force than non-aboriginal women. In 2001, 47% of aboriginal women had jobs, compared to 56% of non-aboriginal women. Unfortunately, it is not always easy for anybody to find jobs, but that is particularly so for aboriginal women, who often face discrimination and racism in their search for work. Other factors obviously come into play, such as education, experience, linguistic and cultural differences, age, and absence from work due to domestic violence. In some cases, domestic violence can lead to dismissal.

Unemployment for women living on reserves and in rural regions is standing at 22%, compared to 14% among aboriginal women living in urban areas. One of the predominant factors that affects aboriginal women is violence. Surveys show that aboriginal women are more likely than non-aboriginal women to be subjected to severe violence that puts their lives in danger, such as being beaten, strangled, threatened with a firearm or knife, or sexually assaulted. They are also more likely to be victims of psychological violence than their non-aboriginal counterparts.

Violence brings with it numerous psychological impacts, such as disturbance and frustration, and we can go on and on. However, there is a lack of resources available for these victims, who are often forced to leave their communities for an urban centre, only to experience racism at the hands of the general public. Aboriginal women who are victims of violence are also confronted by isolation and linguistic, cultural, and geographical barriers.

Aboriginal women who are in the urban areas are also there because they are not welcomed by their communities, due to the fact that Bill C-31 did absolutely nothing to resolve the issue of women who face sexual discrimination because of the Indian Act.

As long as the aboriginal peoples of Canada remain bound by the Indian Act, and as long as the federal government has full power to make legislation on aboriginal issues, we will not be able to truly speak of aboriginal peoples' active participation in the social, economic, and political life of this country. Aboriginal women would like to participate in the implementation of education and training programs, including school programs that are adapted to aboriginal culture. They would like to participate in discussions leading to solutions that will give aboriginal people skills that meet labour market needs. They would like to participate in the creation of institutions that will support job and business creation. They would like to obtain recognition of their education to allow them to receive a decent income.

I want to tell you of my experience with women who have PhDs. They have been told by their non-aboriginal counterparts that they have only received those PhDs because they are aboriginal persons, that they did not earn their PhDs as others did. So women who have an education face racism even from the other so-called educated people.

We would like to recommend the following in order to promote economic development of aboriginal peoples and to increase the standard of living.

•(1620)

We'd like to intensify discussions and negotiations leading to self-government or to self-determination agreements that will allow aboriginal people to take charge of their own destiny, improve their social conditions, and participate in the social and economic life of this country. We'd like to include aboriginal people in all discussions and negotiations to ensure their participation within the decision-making structures on the basis of gender equality; conclude agreements allowing aboriginal people to obtain ownership and control of their lands and resources—right now we only have a certificate of possession—develop and implement educational occupational training programs; and implement cultural sensitivity programs at all levels to address the stereotypes and misconceptions about aboriginal people.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now go to the first round of questions.

We'll have Ms. Minna for seven minutes.

Hon. Maria Minna: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I thank all of you. It was an excellent presentation. It was actually terrific. We've heard a great many fantastic presentations here in the last few weeks.

I have to tell you that when we embarked on this, I had worked with women's issues for many years, so I had a sense of what I thought we would find. And I guess my...not disappointment, but distress comes from the fact that not only did we find a lot more than I thought we would, but also the fact that a lot less has changed than I thought had, especially in some parts. Maybe that's more the situation. I suppose I should know that from looking around our own Parliament, in terms of the number of women who are here and elsewhere. That should tell us a great deal.

Both Ms. Martz and Ms. Purdon have spoken eloquently with respect to rural women's issues— isolation and major problems. One of the things that was said was that a national child care program should be targeted and designed and situated, obviously, to meet the needs of rural women, specifically with the rural and space lens being put on it, which is a given to me. Of course, the delivery of that national program would be provincial. But there should be that kind of consultation because of shift work and all kinds of other situations. That's one issue.

The other issues are—well, there are many—transportation and access to education for women so they can upgrade themselves and as a result get better jobs, hopefully, or even get to the jobs, if there is good child care.

So it seems to me, from what you've said, that all of it is obviously fundamentally important. And there's no question about economic security and guaranteed income for women on the farm and possibly a pension of some kind, especially for those women who continue to work and contribute to the farm but have no other way of paying into an actual pension.

Then of course there's the issue.... When I say education, I also mean access to long-distance education. So it seems to me that the issue of accessing government social infrastructure.... And the women's regional program offices were closed, I think. I'll ask you if

you could comment on what impact that has had on the ability of women in rural counties to even access that bit of programming.

It seems to me, from what you've said, that the social infrastructure of rural Canada—that is, being able to access social programs or government offices to access the programs—and education, transportation, and child care, while not the only supports, are probably the most basic supports we could think of in the short term, almost immediately.

Am I wrong here? I'm not trying to say that the other issues are not important. I'm just trying to look at a basket that one could say would get us started. Would that be a reasonable basket?

•(1625)

Ms. Colleen Purdon: I think what's missing from the basket is that if you are plunged into poverty as a woman, the welfare rates or disability pensions aren't enough to feed your family. That's a kind of

Hon. Maria Minna: Economic security needs to be part of the basket. Okay.

Ms. Colleen Purdon: It has to be, because that's one of the biggest problems for women. If a woman is on welfare and has children, she can't run a car. You can't put gas in a car on welfare, unless you have help, unless you have a parent or somebody who is going to help out with those things.

The women we were talking to are barely covering those very basic things, like food and housing, if they're relying on assistance or minimum wage jobs. You can't run a car if you have a minimum wage job either. In fact, if you have two minimum wages, you're lucky to be able to run a car.

In a rural area, where you're dependent on a car to get anywhere, you're stuck. You're just stuck. As soon as you're in poverty, how do you get out of poverty if you don't have a car and you have no way of getting transportation? And what if you don't have a computer and you can't pay for Internet access? You may have Internet access in your little town, but you can't pay for it because you don't have enough money.

There are multiple barriers. I think what women were saying to us is that the only way they can get out of poverty is to get out of their communities.

Hon. Maria Minna: So economic security, whether it's welfare or other financial assistance, says that in addition to the extra financial what have you, when we look at the financial package, we need to add the rural and the condition and the space, as you were mentioning; that is, add on to the amount or the income, the access to long-distance education, Internet, what have you, those things that we consider to be extra and take for granted but are not necessarily extra or taken for granted. They're essential parts of surviving. Otherwise, you're just subsisting.

Ms. Colleen Purdon: And we're talking about women who have worked and who were part of the economy, but for various reasons they've been plunged into poverty. Most of the women we talk to are in those situations. They're not the chronically poor. There are chronically poor women as well, but most of the people involved with our work to date have been people who have been pushed into poverty because of something they couldn't control, and now they're having enormous difficulty getting out.

Hon. Maria Minna: So what that says to me is that for those women who are on assistance of some kind in rural Canada, the assistance must include transportation—an additional what have you that deals with the issue of transportation—and access to the Internet, access to a computer to be able to access education so that they can actually be able to....

And then for all women, regardless of whether they are on assistance or not, we need national child care, designed to meet their needs.

Ms. Diane Martz: I would say child care seems to weave itself through most of these things we're talking about.

Hon. Maria Minna: Yes. That's why I said that's in the basket as a must. That's a given.

Ms. Diane Martz: Exactly. On the larger scale, we have some examples in Canada of child care programs that deliver child care at affordable rates to a large proportion of the population. And then when you look to rural, there are a number of different rural models around, in Manitoba and so on, where they've done some really—

Hon. Maria Minna: Right. I've seen them. They're excellent, actually.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam.

We now go to Madame Deschamps for seven minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Even though the room is quite warm, we will try to keep a cool head and concentrate on what you have told us. However, it feels like what rural women and women in communities are experiencing is almost like a work of fiction. If we rely on what we have been told today and what others have told us in the past, women who live in rural communities, aboriginal women and immigrant women—if I can use that term to describe minorities—are at a great disadvantage.

I represent a Quebec riding that has a rural component. I understand the problems that these women must face because they are often the engine, the lifeline and the support for their family. They are the ones who must bear the extra burden if the structure is weakened by a lack of funding. Ms. Martz said that more and more farm women must become multi-taskers, without having the benefit of any type of financial compensation or salary. Women who live in rural communities have a very tough life. In recent years there has been an exodus of people fleeing the poverty of urban centres to settle in rural areas. They think that by moving out into the country, they will manage to escape poverty, but they are then sorely disappointed because there is poverty further away from the cities,

and the governments are less sensitive to it. What's more, these people are located away from the services, where access is limited.

I would first like to hear what you have to say about this, because you are aware that some measures have been implemented. You spoke earlier about access to day care. Do you believe that the government move to provide families with \$100 per month for each child under six will be of any help to some families? I know, for having experienced it myself, that providing day care spaces helps women gain a certain level of autonomy and it also gives them a choice. Even if they are not employed, they still have the choice of sending their children to a day care centre and do something other than housework, which allows them to break free from their isolation. We must not forget that the farther one is from urban centres, the more likely one is to be ignored by various levels of government. It is easier to be forgotten.

• (1630)

[*English*]

Ms. Diane Martz: I can speak a little bit about farm women and recognition of their roles.

This is very well illustrated in the creation of the agricultural policy framework. Even though governments now have a mandate to look at gender balance in trying to develop agricultural policy, they were very challenged in getting any input from women. Even though women play a tremendous role today in the economic elements of farming—doing the paperwork and the books—they have to deal with any additional paperwork that comes to the farm.

As we develop policy we need to do a much better job of talking to women on farms. They have a little different perspective on the role of farming. The whole business of women not being recognized for their roles has been going on for decades. I'm not really well versed in the whole pension debate, but I think that has come up here. Farm women need some recognition for their roles over the long term on the farm, and pensions would be one way to do that.

The other thing I have a bit of experience in hearing about is the income support program that was introduced for the family farm. In the past year, if you had revenues of \$50,000 you could qualify for some support in a low-income situation. This was beneficial. I heard positive reports on the program, and families found it useful. It was sort of a guaranteed income. The problem this year is that they're not allowing any new families to become part of it, so there are people who are going to miss out on that one.

Agriculture is a very volatile business. If we want to have farmers we need to have agriculture.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: In view of what you have said, if the government were to correct the situation and adopt measures to support and perhaps enhance the perceived value of the role of the farm woman, could this also encourage more young people to stay on the farm?

•(1635)

[English]

Ms. Diane Martz: I don't know. I think at this point a lot of farm families are counselling their children not to go into agriculture. They don't see it as a way of life they would want to inflict on their children. But lots of kids still want to do it.

But to qualify that, I know from my work on my PhD that there are women on farms who are assuming different kinds of roles. Some women have decided that they're going to make their full-time job on the farm, and those women are acting as the major decision-makers on these farms. Those women I think feel positive about their roles.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now go to Mr. Van Kesteren and Ms. Smith.

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren: We're going to share our time. Thank you.

This is the first time I've come here, so this is all new to me. When they asked me to come, I thought, wow, what do I know about that? But then I thought, especially when I saw the witnesses, I know a little about farming; my riding is a farming community.

My wife and I raised eight kids in the country, and for the first 20 years we were poor. So I know a little bit about poverty. I'm not claiming to know everything about those issues, but I understand, and it's hard to appreciate that unless you've experienced it yourself.

I'm wondering about the government's commitments to agriculture, and I think, Ms. Martz, you made some fair statements about the farm program. The reason it has been put on hold is because there was such a backlash to it. Farmers just were angry about the fact that we would suggest that there...and I think it's \$25,000 that was the minimum wage and not \$50,000, but we did infuse \$1.5 billion in 2006 and \$1 billion in 2007. You mentioned the \$550 for the family options.

Just quickly, is our government going in the right direction with farming?

Ms. Diane Martz: Did you talk to women and ask them what they thought of that? Most of the people I heard positive feedback from actually were women who saw that as a benefit. So that might be an option, a little bit wider kind of consultation.

Do I think we're going in the right direction with farming? Well, I think we need a rural policy in this country that focuses on rural Canada and doesn't leave it at the mercy of the markets in terms of what goes on.

I think we need to figure out that agriculture is a social issue as well as an economic issue, and we have to decide if we want food security in this country over the next 50 years. So I think there are some real serious questions we have to ask about agriculture and whether we want to have it.

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren: I know—because, as I said, I'm in a rural community, and it's not one of the poorer ones in southwestern Ontario—there have been some struggles, especially in the grains and oils. But across Canada—and I recognize that this is a big country—where's the biggest problem? What part of the country?

Ms. Diane Martz: I'd say the prairies, but then I'm biased.

Certainly, with BSE—and we're doing a new study looking at the impact of BSE on farm families with low commodity prices—although things have definitely improved over the last year, whether that will continue to be a benefit with rising input prices that go along the same.... But the prairies have definitely seen some real problems, and if you look at the statistics on low income, you can certainly see it there.

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren: I think I probably agree with that.

I'm not trying to be cruel or anything like that, because we all want solutions. We all want to move in the right direction. A pointed question: which government has governed Saskatchewan more in the last 25 years?

Ms. Diane Martz: The NDP.

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren: I'm asking because I'm wondering if our government is going in the right direction. Which has the majority of federal seats, and why do you suppose that is?

Ms. Diane Martz: I think a lot of the things, though, that are impacting agriculture aren't necessarily provincial policy. Agriculture is a global phenomenon, and I think all levels of government have a role to play in this.

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren: But you have to agree that they're sharing. There's a contribution from the federal side and there's a contribution from the provincial side.

Ms. Diane Martz: Yes, I think both levels of government have discounted rural an awful lot, and we're just now starting to recognize that it exists again. So I think it's a good opportunity to do some good stuff.

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren: I don't know whether you realize this, but agriculture is the second largest expenditure next to defence. It has become that. We recognize the fact that there are some real problems in agriculture.

I'm wondering about the \$100, and I think it was touched on. Do you think it's helping? Is the \$100 they're getting per month something that farm women like? Are we heading in the right direction on that one?

•(1640)

Ms. Diane Martz: I don't think so. I think you're not going to get.... Rural people, when you ask them, would like to see licensed day care, and the \$100 doesn't really contribute to that in rural areas. Partly, it's a quality and safety issue for families, but it's also a subsidy issue. If you don't have a licensed child care situation, you can't get a subsidy, and if you don't have a high income, it just doesn't pay to work and send your child to day care.

We need infrastructure in rural Canada, and I don't think the \$100 contributes very well to that.

Ms. Colleen Purdon: I really want to say that. In our rural community, we don't need...well, people would love to have \$100 in their pocket, but if you don't have a child care space, if you don't have facilities, if you don't have places for children, then it's of no benefit.

For the women in our study, there's no place for their children, and the Conservative government's child care policy is not helping build. In fact, we had a lot of plans in our community for child care spaces that have all been shelved now because of the new child care direction. There was a lot of hope that there would be a child care strategy for our community, which is now shelved.

It has not helped.

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren: I only have one quick question left. Why? The only way we can look at this is that it's a vote on what our policy is. Why have rural Canadians, right across this country, elected Conservative governments with those policies? How can you explain that, if that's not what—

Ms. Colleen Purdon: I can explain it for you. I think ours is a very conservative community in which men basically run government at the municipal level, the provincial level. There's not much consultation with women in our community about what's good for women in the communities. The politicians are not consulting with women. There's no gender analysis of how these policies impact.

Nobody in our community asked how the Conservative policy would play out for rural women in our community. It wasn't asked. I think it's a reflection of the conservative nature of the communities more than anything.

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren: I was supposed to split my time with my colleague.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds. Do you want to make a comment, or would you like...?

Mrs. Joy Smith: That's okay. Those were very good questions. That's fine; go ahead.

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren: What about the split income? Is the split income part going to help you? Is the policy for the split income going to help rural Canadians?

Pardon me, I meant the split pensions.

Ms. Colleen Purdon: Well, it will help some people, but not the people we're working with in this study. They don't have incomes. Many of them don't have pensions. If you're working in a minimum wage job, you don't have pensions or assets that are going to be of any help to you. It benefits people in a certain wage bracket, but not the people we were consulting with.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go on to Ms. Mathysen for seven minutes.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I must say we are truly fortunate to have your expertise, and I'm so glad you're here. I understand, Ms. Gabriel, this is your second committee today, so you are truly remarkable in your ability to keep plugging on.

My first question has to do with housing. It seems to me that this was addressed, and it's key in terms of women's economic security:

the lack of affordable housing, the lack of decent housing, whether it's on reserve, off reserve, in rural areas. There is a real problem, and it hits low-income families, and particularly families headed by single women.

Do we need a national housing policy? Do we need an overview of global, federal policy in terms of housing so that we don't have the kind of housing shortage we see now?

Ms. Ellen Gabriel: Well, for on reserve and off reserve, the problem is that there's just no possibility for women, especially in matrimonial property. Because the Indian Act really favours the men, in the dissolution of marriage it's usually the man who gets the house. When women leave the communities to go to urban areas because of violence, they often have to live in very poor sections of cities where they experience racism and abuse by landlords.

I think it would help. I'm getting a sense—and this is why cultural sensitization is so important—that the problem aboriginal women face is very similar to that of poor women living on the farm. In my culture in particular, we were farmers, and because of the diminishing land base we cannot be farmers anymore, and because of pollution we cannot be farmers anymore.

So I think that housing is a very important part, or at least a step in the right direction for providing economic security for aboriginal women.

● (1645)

Ms. Colleen Purdon: I think for housing it is a really important thing, but one thing I'm concerned about is how often there is a split between provincial and federal policy-makers and politicians. The most disadvantaged people in our communities are caught by this. It's like they're political footballs almost.

A national housing strategy that had support at the provincial level would be a wonderful thing for rural communities, as would a transportation policy that would help people live in more isolated communities so they could still access service. There may be cheaper accommodation in smaller communities, but if you don't have a vehicle, then you can't get to services and employment. It's of no use to you.

It would be good to have a more national vision whereby people have the right to decent housing. It would be good to get the idea back on the table, federally and provincially, that women and children shouldn't be living in substandard, unsafe housing because they were abused. That shouldn't be the option—i.e., live with your abusive partner in your nice house or leave your abusive partner and live in a horrible, unsafe place that still isn't going to even protect you from the abusive partner when he comes and bashes the door down. Those are the alternatives that women in our community are faced with now. There isn't decent housing in rural communities that people can afford. If you're on welfare or any form of social assistance, you can't afford any decent housing. You can't. You can't even feed your children properly.

So that's where we are. What women in our community are saying to us is why, when you get sick or you have an abusive partner or you lose your job and there is no other job to go to, are you treated as though you don't count, as though you've failed and are not worth anything? The women we work with are very eager not to be poor, but they have more barriers in rural communities. They are staying poor longer, having more trouble getting out of poverty, and getting more discouraged. In the end, many of them leave because they can't get ahead.

In rural communities, that's a big problem. Why are we exporting women and children out of our rural communities because we don't have decent policies and supports in rural communities for women and children? It makes no sense to me—or to them. They don't want to leave their communities. They like their communities. But the federal and provincial policies now make it almost impossible for women to survive unless they have family or friends. Many women don't have family supports. The women who succeed are the women who have family and friends and supports that they can call on when things happen to them.

We had these workshops where we had women sitting there saying, "I never in my life thought I would be sitting in a workshop on poverty. This wasn't in my game plan. I can't believe it." Teachers, nurses, farmers, all kinds of occupations—there they sat. They can't get out of poverty.

My question to you is why is that happening? We have lots of money in this country. Why is that happening? It wasn't happening 20 years ago. It probably wasn't even happening 10 years ago. But it's happening now.

The Chair: You have one minute, Ms. Mathysen.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: I'd like to quickly ask you, Ms. Gabriel, about the consultations that are now happening in regard to matrimonial property rights. Have they been satisfactory?

Ms. Ellen Gabriel: No. The time limit has been extremely short. By the time the money was gotten to by all the different organizations, it was too short.

There was the fact as well that there wasn't even proper consultation. There was maybe three weeks, sometimes one month to do proper consultation, or what was viewed as consultation. I think the 500-page report by Wendy Grant-John is probably not meeting the satisfaction of the minister in charge of this portfolio, but we'd like this issue settled. And we'd like proper consultation.

• (1650)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: Ten seconds, Madam Chair?

The Chair: I can't give you 10 seconds because then we'll get into another question.

I'll go to the five-minute round.

Ms. Neville.

Hon. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I thank each and every one of you.

I have so many questions, because you've really challenged us as legislators or politicians.

I'm struck, Ms. Purdon, by your question just now about why we can't make a change. I was thinking of initiatives I'm aware of in different circumstances, which tri-level—municipal, provincial, and federal—governments have begun as pilot projects, and which sometimes they've carried into ongoing projects. It strikes me that you're in a community that perhaps is ripe for something of that sort.

I have a number of questions. You mentioned, Ms. Purdon, that you received your money from Status of Women. I'm curious to know if it's been affected at all.

Ms. Martz, you're with the Prairie Centre of Excellence. I've received some information in the last day or two about some programs that are not getting funding through that. Are you being affected in your funding? I'll ask for your replies in a minute.

Ms. Gabriel, we met in committee earlier today, and of the solutions that you put out in your brief, many are macro-solutions. They are not solutions that are going to come about overnight. We know the issues of self-government, funding, housing, etc.

Also in your brief, you spoke to the issue of the importance of women's participation in a number of educational and labour market initiatives. You separated those out. I'd be interested to know why you separated those out. Do you believe there's something you can get a handle on as women to make a difference? How can we, as government, respond to that?

I'll put that out for the moment. Perhaps I'll ask for the rural responses first and then come back to Ms. Gabriel.

Ms. Colleen Purdon: Our funding was from Status of Women before the changes in Status of Women had taken place. We haven't felt any impact because we're working with funding from before the changes. I'm not sure if there was a project like ours happening now whether it would be considered by Status of Women Canada, the way it's being structured now.

One thing that was very clear is that the staff person in the London regional office worked very closely with our grassroots group to help us develop the project. When we did the first research piece, they helped us develop the next phase, which was trying to take action on the research and the ideas. The third phase is the project we're doing now to address community attitudes.

I want to just point out something about the way the funding world works. Governments have ideas of what they want to do, and there's a window, and if you can get your community needs pushed through that window, you'll get some funding. If your community needs don't fit in the window of the day, or the month, or the year—whatever the flavour of the month is—you don't get funding. The only place we could get funding to do what the community wanted was through what Status of Women was offering, through which they worked with you around what communities wanted to do.

It has worked very well for us. That's why I said I regret that office isn't there, because it was a real resource. When we talk about rural communities not having resources and infrastructure, having an office like that with a person who is very knowledgeable to help the community we found very helpful. I don't know what the new reality will be like. We'll see. We have lots of work to do, and it's not going to end when this project is over. It was very valuable, and I wanted to make a point on that, just to acknowledge it.

Hon. Anita Neville: I'm interested in hearing from the others as well.

Ms. Diane Martz: I've been funded a number of times through Status of Women Canada, both through the policy research funding pool and in the more regular research funding pool for community projects. I found it excellent. It allowed us to do work on rural women in Canada that hadn't been done, and so little work has been done on rural women. I was sad to see that go.

In terms of projects, we have an ongoing project similar to Colleen's, which is still working with money that came before the change. I think some of the stuff I've done wouldn't be funded under this current regime, in that advocacy seems not to be possible. I think advocacy is important, because how do you make better decisions if you don't get a critique of the decisions that are there?

•(1655)

Hon. Anita Neville: Thank you.

Ms. Gabriel, you probably don't have much time left.

The Chair: Can you answer in 30 seconds?

Ms. Ellen Gabriel: Good governance is a very hard issue to tackle overnight. We've made a lot of gains with many women's groups. In the region we work well with some of the provincial departments, so it's easier to make those kinds of gains in people who are open. With good governance we have to deal with our own people who have become colonized in their way of thinking and have a big resistance to aboriginal women becoming chiefs or being part of the decision-making process. That's why I think the macro solution is definitely ideal for us, but not the smaller steps where we have an open door already to enter.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go to Ms. Smith for five minutes.

Mrs. Joy Smith: I'm deferring to Ms. Davidson. She and I are sharing.

The Chair: Sure.

Ms. Davidson.

Mrs. Patricia Davidson (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Thank you very much.

I'd like to thank each of the presenters. I think we've heard some excellent comments today. I don't think it's anything we haven't heard; it's the same issue coming forward.

I am particularly interested in the rural aspect of things. I have been highly involved in rural issues. I come from a rural riding and have been in municipal politics at the local level for 26 years. You can't be involved in municipal politics without being involved in the pulse of the community. We're fortunate because we've always had women involved in politics in Lambton County, so maybe we're a different dynamic.

We had a pilot project for the best start program for the child care program in Lambton County—the rural pilot project. I was warden of the county when that took place, so I was very involved in initiating that program and getting it up and running. I watched it very closely. Although it was funded by federal money, it was negotiated with the province. The program was put together by the province and the county, not the federal government.

In checking with the director of that program last week, all of those spaces are still being created, and it is certainly going ahead. They were very proactive and renegotiated with the province, because the dollars are still going to the province. That project is still happening. So it can happen, but it takes collaboration and cooperation.

I know that things like isolation, lack of services, lack of transportation and job opportunities, and the welfare payment levels are all particular challenges in a rural community. They're challenges that you don't see in other communities. I don't have the answers for them. I was involved in trying to set up a transportation network in a rural community, and it's a huge challenge. So I really commend you, Colleen, on what you're doing, because it's a huge issue. We've had some success in my community, but you need to have a lot of cooperation. It requires cooperation and collaboration from all of the groups involved. So I have a bit of interest and background in that, and I know how hard you're working.

Do you have any particular suggestions about how we can do better down the road for women who are living in poverty in rural areas? Is there something we can put in place to give them some type of security when they become seniors? They won't have pensions because they don't have income. How can we start addressing that?

I know we need to address it at a younger level so they have some security once they become seniors, so where do we start with that? Is it follow-the-child funding, if they have children? Is it a payment or reimbursement for staying home and working at home on the farm and raising a family?

• (1700)

Ms. Colleen Purdon: I think the recommendation we had was for some kind of guaranteed income.

Mrs. Patricia Davidson: What does that mean, though?

Ms. Colleen Purdon: It means that if you are at home with your children you know you're going to have money. So if it comes as a social security or welfare payment, there will be enough money coming in to pay your expenses. We don't have national standards any longer for things like welfare. Each province organizes it the way they want. In Ontario they cut welfare rates by 20%, and people can't feed their families. So I think there needs to be some agreement that we want children to have enough to eat in our country, and provincial and federal governments need to get their acts together to make that happen.

Mrs. Patricia Davidson: But it's not all just a matter of welfare rates, is it?

Ms. Colleen Purdon: Well, it's disability, welfare, and employment insurance, where there is a huge area for reform. Why are women who are self-employed not eligible for maternity benefits, for example?

There's also the issue of pension levels, disability pensions and pensions for women. For a woman like my mother, who stayed home and raised eight children and never worked, she's not eligible. My mother now gets to live in poverty, because my father has died.

These are the kinds of things we need to be looking at.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We now go to Ms. DeBellefeuille.

[Translation]

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Beauharnois—Salaberry, BQ): Thank you very much.

I represent a rural riding. There is a farm women's union that is currently fighting for the recognition of their role as a financial partner; they want the fact that they work alongside their husband and contribute to the farm to be acknowledged. Over the years, they have managed to gain official positions in various agricultural unions in Quebec.

For a number of years now, farm women have been fighting for access to maternity leave benefits. There have been improvements to parental leave provisions in Quebec. Thanks to federal transfers, we have been able to develop a rather acceptable system of parental leave.

The problem is that farm women, because they are self-employed or are considered spouses, are not eligible for parental leave benefits when they have a child. This often leads to financial hardship for the family because, after the child is born, the woman must hire someone to do the work that she would normally be doing on the farm.

I am well aware of what Quebec farm women are doing to fight for this change to the Labour Code so that they will be recognized and will be eligible for parental leave, and so they will not incur any type of financial penalty for having children.

I don't know if the situation is the same in other provinces, but what is strange is that the father is eligible and is entitled to five weeks of parental leave, while the mother has no right to any parental leave whatsoever. The woman gives birth to the child and the man is given leave! That is the struggle that Quebec women are engaged in. I think they will succeed, because these women have never been shy about speaking out.

Does your research show that women from other provinces are experiencing the same type of thing? Have they told you that having children makes them poorer?

[English]

Ms. Diane Martz: I would say certainly. It's related to all the other things we've been talking about here, in that farm women with children don't have a whole lot of options in terms of child care and the other things they might need to enable them to either take a job off the farm or to work full-time on the farm as an equal partner in the farming operation.

So it sounds like a really interesting thing that the women in Quebec are fighting for, and I think it will be great news for women across Canada who are also trying to fight for some recognition on the farm.

Ms. Colleen Purdon: I think it's the same for self-employed women. Many women in rural communities are self-employed, because there are no jobs. They're very innovative; they make a job and they do it. They don't make much money, but they make enough to keep themselves together and feed their families, but then when it comes to maternity benefits or pensions, or if they get sick, they have nothing to fall back on.

So I think we need to be looking at more supports in rural communities so that women can work in rural communities and contribute to their communities and their families, but have some security to fall back on when things happen—or when they want to have a baby.

• (1705)

[Translation]

The Chair: Is that all? Thank you.

Madam Mathysen for five minutes.

[English]

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: Thank you, Madam Chair.

We've heard about the depopulation of rural Canada, which a group of women from rural Nova Scotia came here to talk about. What they proposed was that since health care services and child care and all the services we do have are calculated by population rather than need, it should be inverted and service provision should be based on need.

How would that help rural women? Would that make a difference?

Ms. Diane Martz: I think it would make a huge difference, in that this scenario should put some of those services back into rural communities. In terms of the lost health care services in rural communities, women are doing an awful lot of backfilling there—running their parents into the city for doctors appointments, looking after their day-to-day needs. One of the women who works with me goes to see her mother every day at noon. It reduces her mobility in terms of a job and so on.

This loss of services is really critical, both from a service perspective and also from an employment perspective, because the good jobs in rural communities were teachers and nurses and those kinds of jobs, in which they got decent wages.

Ms. Colleen Purdon: I think we need to rethink rural communities as places to live; we need to recognize that we might need a different approach to policy and funding for rural communities from urban communities, and that actually one size does not fit all. I think we all know that, but we just seem to keep doing it. If we want to keep rural communities as viable places for people to live and work, we're going to have to approach funding and program and policy differently. We just have to do that.

I live in a rural community, and I would love my children to live there, too, but it's rather unlikely that they would because they're not prepared to live on almost no income. Again, it's one of these big questions. We can't all live in Toronto. So why can't some people live in Grey and Bruce?

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: Ms. Gabriel, one of the recommendations in your presentation was to:

Provide awareness training on Aboriginal culture to managers in the federal public service and to managers of private companies that come under the jurisdiction of the Employment Equity Act to demystify issues regarding the hiring of Aboriginal employees...

Could you expand on that and explain that particular recommendation?

Ms. Ellen Gabriel: The royal commission has stated very clearly that services need to be reflective or accommodating to the cultural realities and the values that aboriginal people face; otherwise it's been proven that it does not meet the needs of aboriginal women or aboriginal people in general.

I forgot my train of thought.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: You once told me that language was absolutely essential to first nations. Unfortunately, we've seen cuts to language programs.

Can you elaborate on why language is key to the community and to the security of women?

Ms. Ellen Gabriel: Well, a lot of women speak their aboriginal language, and in Quebec it's a little bit problematic because we have to learn French or English. Sometimes the services are not offered in English; sometimes they're not offered for the aboriginal people, especially from isolated communities. So the services need to really meet the needs of aboriginal women, become more reflective of the values, because we're losing our language. We are forced always into little boxes that are taking away our identities. It's eroding our identity constantly.

I'm sorry, I think I'm just tired, because I had something to tell you. I'm sorry, I know my time's running out.

There are informal economies as well. Some people think people don't have an interest. For instance, the Cree take time off in the fall to go hunting. So you have informal economies with which people subsidize an income, to do arts and crafts. But also these kinds of activities that happen in communities, of hunting, of going away to pick medicines—these employers think there's not an interest, but there is an interest.

● (1710)

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: I know exactly what you mean. It was the same with the kids I taught in the school, where there was a huge population of first nations kids—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Mathysen.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: —and they would leave and it was, “Oh, well, they're not interested in school”.

The Chair: Ms. Smith, for five minutes.

Mrs. Joy Smith: Thank you.

I want to thank each presenter here today for your very insightful comments and your sage advice. I commend all of you for your very hard work.

I grew up in rural Manitoba, and we were very poor growing up, so I know a great deal of what you're talking about.

That's why we invite people to committees, for solutions. I know some of you have been involved politically because you feel very strongly about your views, and I commend you for that, especially to see women do that.

Ellen, if you would bear with me for a few minutes, I was very interested in a comment you made. My son is married to an Ojibway girl, and we're a multi-ethnic family. I was very interested...you just said a brief sentence, but it had such a big impact because it's what I'm hearing over and over again, when you talked about culture and education. I've had the opportunity, as a former teacher, to work on reserves.

Could you comment a bit on...? We talk about dollars and cents and we talk about political programs and about this, that, and the other thing. But the real root, the heart and soul of aboriginal people, is the culture. Could you make some comment in terms of the culture and its importance in the education of the children and their well-being so they understand their roots?

Ms. Ellen Gabriel: Sure. We talk about colonization and its impact, and one of the things that is very important to groups like Quebec Native Women and other organizations is the reinforcement of identity, the reinforcement of culture and language, as you were talking about.

For us to be a proud people once again, we need to have that back in our schools. We need children to learn the value. They need to learn their roles in society. This is the role of women, this is the role of men, and each one should be respected. Each one is dependent upon the other.

If we look at the problems we face in our community, it's because there's been an attack on our culture. There's been an attack on those values of how we organize ourselves socially.

Until people really understand how important it is for aboriginal people to retain that, we're not going to succeed. We're always going to be a problem, the Indian problem in Canadian society.

That's not what we want. We want to be independent people, people who are taking control of our destiny.

Until we get that in the schools, until we sensitize the public.... All the efforts we've tried have not changed the attitudes of the public much. But until we get that going, we're going to be struggling and, in a sense, spinning our wheels in the mud.

Mrs. Joy Smith: Thank you.

How much time do I have, Madam Chair?

The Chair: One minute.

Mrs. Joy Smith: Could you also speak briefly about the very important role of women in aboriginal society? I think that role has been lost in some ways, which is sad. Could you comment?

Ms. Ellen Gabriel: The role is to pass on the language, to carry on the culture, to teach those values. My society is a matrilineal society, so we were title holders to the land and protectors of the land, because we're like Mother Earth; we nourish.

Those are the kinds of things we have lost because of colonization. The role of the women has always been equal to the men. As I said, we were the inspiration for feminists because they saw that aboriginal women took an equal part in the decision-making process and in keeping the nation strong.

• (1715)

The Chair: Do you have a quick comment?

Mrs. Joy Smith: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Joy Smith: I think aboriginal women are very proud people and I think aboriginal people are very proud.

I think very strongly that this government really supports that in a big way, and I look forward to hearing more from you and of the leadership you're taking with aboriginal women.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Because we have to do some committee business, I can only allow one last question, and I understand the two of you are going to share the question, Ms. Minna.

Hon. Maria Minna: Yes. I'm taking Mr. Pearson's time, since he had to leave.

I have more of a comment, and maybe a question at the end of it. I couldn't help but comment and notice the irony of what's happening here today, and I guess it's been happening for a....

Ms. Purdon, something you mentioned earlier...you talked about the window you have, and then you talked about the research you did, that the local office helped you with the next phases. That allowed you to meet with each other, advocate, talk to, and inform women and be here today.

The irony of all this is that none of that, under the current system—the research and the advocacy—would be allowed. So a year from now or two years from now....

Yes. I'm sorry, I—

Mrs. Joy Smith: That's not true.

Hon. Maria Minna: Yes, it is true, that as an organization....

Madam Chair—

Mrs. Joy Smith: Madam Chair, I need to make a comment.

Hon. Maria Minna: No, I have the time.

The Chair: Ms. Smith, she has the floor. Your point of order, in terms of advocacy and equality that has been removed from the Status of Women, is correct.

Ms. Minna, continue.

Hon. Maria Minna: I'm sorry, that's what it says in the rules. In fact, an organization I was talking to only last week had their project refused because the research had a small component of advocacy. So I'm saying that even our work to help women in the next two or three years will suffer, because we won't have you and the kind of information you're able to give us. I thought I'd make that comment, and maybe you can add to that.

My colleague, I know, has another question. Maybe she can piggyback and then maybe you can comment for both of us.

Hon. Anita Neville: My question is on a different tack altogether.

I was listening to your comments, Ms. Purdon, and you may be aware that this committee studied the whole issue of maternity benefits for self-employed women a couple of years ago. Quite clearly, that would have to be extended to rural women, not only self-employed women. So it simply got me thinking.

Ms. Gabriel, I was struck by your comment, and I would like a response. You said that even extremely well-educated women face racist barriers. Does it affect their economic well-being? It affects their personal well-being, clearly. Could you say a little more on that?

Ms. Ellen Gabriel: There are cases of women who do have PhDs, masters' degrees, who cannot find work, or who have to resort to work that's not even in the field they've studied, because of racism and sexual discrimination. They can't find work in their communities because chiefs feel threatened by their education. They go outside to the urban areas and are thought of as getting their education because they're aboriginal; they got their degree, not because they earned it but because they're aboriginal. These are some of the problems that educated women face.

It's not all and it's not.... I don't know the percentage, but this problem does exist.

Hon. Anita Neville: And it exists, I take it, when there are employment opportunities, certainly, or are there, in aboriginal organizations in communities? Does it apply both in the aboriginal community and the non-aboriginal community?

Ms. Ellen Gabriel: It applies to both, but from a different kind of perspective, a different attitude.

Hon. Anita Neville: A different way. Thank you. I'll stop there.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'd like to thank you all for coming. You've given us an excellent presentation. You have destroyed all the myths that we had in our heads about rural women staying at home and wanting to do child care themselves, or whatever we had, and you brought us to light about women who are very strong. Mother Earth used to be the aboriginal women's role. You've challenged us. You have challenged us to ask, with all this wealth that is in the country, why are people still poor?

As we look at the economic study of women, we will take your challenges into consideration. As a collective, we all want to work toward a similar goal. Whether we come from different philosophies, nobody likes poverty. I don't think anybody here would like to have poverty as a flag for Canada.

So we thank you. I'd like to give you a minute each to wrap up. We'll start off with Ms. Gabriel. Would you like to start off? No? You're tired, so we'll start with Ms. Martz.

•(1720)

Ms. Diane Martz: I think there are probably two things I would really encourage you to have a look at here. In addition to the whole discussion around economic security, which I think is quite critical, I do think that some type of workable child care policy does intertwine with most of these discussions. If women can't get affordable child care, they can't move into working and making a decent income in order to support themselves and their families as well.

The other thing that I think is really important is that we take some time to bring back and revitalize the whole discussion around a rural policy. We need to do something in rural Canada that's not based only on economics. We need to decide what kind of rural Canada we want to have in this country in a very deliberate fashion. Hopefully, it will include farm families, rural communities, and all of those wonderful things that have developed a rural culture over the past century or so.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Purdon.

Ms. Colleen Purdon: I would like to emphasize that there is increasing poverty for women in rural communities, and many feel their solution is to leave their rural community. The huge gaps and holes in the social security network, which is no longer a network, are causing incredible barriers for women who are poor, either chronically poor or situationally poor. It's very difficult for them to get out of poverty and to use the good skills and abilities they have for the benefit of their families and communities. It's a net loss to our communities.

I echo the need for a rural policy and the need for gender and place analysis in federal policy-making that really consults carefully with women and rural people about policies, so we can ensure that policies don't further depopulate and disadvantage both women and rural communities.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Gabriel.

Ms. Ellen Gabriel: The movement in most aboriginal communities is nation-building. Nation-building cannot be conducted without good governance. Good governance cannot happen until there is gender equity in the decision-making processes.

The high rates of violence in our communities prevent people from investing in their communities, so many people resort to what are considered illegal activities. I would like to see these issues addressed.

They need to be addressed, because we need to get out of the oppression we have lived for hundreds of years. We are tired of it. We need some answers. We need real will from all people to help us become true and positive contributors to society, and in a country that is based upon the resources of the territories of aboriginal people. We are contributors to Canadian society and its wealth, and we want to continue to live in peaceful coexistence with Canadians.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'd like to suspend the meeting for one minute. We have some business that I need the committee's input on.

So we'll have a one-minute suspension.

• _____ (Pause) _____

•

•(1725)

The Chair: Committee members, I'd like to call the meeting to order. I have a couple of things that we need to discuss.

We had asked Minister Oda to appear, but Minister Oda is going to be at the ways and means committee in the House next Wednesday, the committee of the whole. She'll be dealing with votes 110 and 115, so Status of Women Canada is going to be referred there.

Would the committee still like the minister to appear before this committee, because we no longer have the mandate to study the estimates?

Yes, Ms. Minna.

Hon. Maria Minna: First of all, I have a question.

Was the mandate for the estimates never here? It was here? And it's been sent to the House because of...?

The Chair: To the House.

Hon. Maria Minna: Okay. Nonetheless, I wonder whether we would consider having the minister at least to discuss the plans and priorities part of the report, because that's more to deal with the future direction of the department and the programs than it is with these current estimates.

The Chair: Fair enough. So when we invite her for May 30, we will let her know that it is for future plans and priorities, that the estimates will be covered in the committee of the whole.

Is that fair enough?

Number two, next week we have the HRSD and Finance officials coming. I know that people are a little concerned about sending any written questions. The reason the officials were asking us is so they could send or bring the right material.

If you could throw in some things you think you want to ask of the officials—you don't have to stick by those things—they can bring information.

Has anybody thought through what they want the officials to come forth to discuss? Anyone?

Ms. Minna.

Hon. Maria Minna: Actually, I have a question before that, I'm sorry.

I think when Finance and HRSD appeared here last time we made some requests.

The Chair: For information from Finance for the gender-based analysis?

Hon. Maria Minna: Do we know if any of that has come in? I haven't seen it.

The Chair: I've asked the clerk, and Michelle informs me that they said they're working on it. But I want to find out when they will finish working on it, because we had asked them, did they do their

GBA when they were doing their budget? And if so, could they show us which tax credits were GBA-driven? Also, will they answer the question about the \$22,000 being too poor for a working income tax credit and too rich for a child tax credit? They're working on it, and we're going to find out if they will have the answers by next week.

Hon. Maria Minna: I think those would have been my questions in terms of actual information.

• (1730)

The Chair: We can ask them. Those are the questions we'll pose then.

Is there anyone else?

What is the general thrust of what you want to ask HRSD or Finance?

You have a copy of the letter that has been sent. For the next meeting, let's think about whether this is going to be part of a broader study, what the goal is, if it is a fact-finding mission, etc. So think through those questions, and then we'll discuss it.

Thank you very much.

The meeting is adjourned.

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