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—
Chair

The Honourable Hedy Fry

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•(1105)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.)): Good morning, colleagues. I want you to bear with me this morning. As you can see, my allergies are really giving me trouble. If I sound deep-throated, it's not because I'm trying to sound sexy; it's the only pitch I can speak at.

Good morning to Minister Guergis and Ms. Clare Beckton, coordinator. Welcome to the committee.

I know the minister has a presentation. That is meant to be about ten minutes, please. Then we will open it up to the members to interact with the minister.

Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Helena Guergis (Minister of State (Status of Women)): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Let me first say that your voice is really working for you this morning. That's good.

I'd like to take this opportunity to give my congratulations on your recent election. I'd also like to congratulate all the members of Parliament on their recent appointments to the status of women committee. I want to commend you for the important work you have done on women's issues in the past and for the important work you are about to do.

[Translation]

It is a pleasure to be with you today.

[English]

As a founding member of the standing committee, I am in the unique position of having first served as an opposition member, then as a member of the government, and now as the Minister of State for Status of Women. Given the strong role I believe this committee can play in Parliament, I am particularly enjoying my new vantage point.

I am very pleased to be here today, to outline the Government of Canada's commitment to women's full participation in Canadian society, Status of Women Canada's recent accomplishments, and our future actions.

In October 2008 I was honoured to be appointed Minister of State (Status of Women). My distinguished predecessors all had multiple portfolios, and I have the distinction of being the first minister with sole responsibility for Status of Women Canada.

I welcome this opportunity to describe Status of Women Canada's accomplishments under this government—a government that has brought in the highest level of funding for Status of Women Canada in almost two decades. I believe this has happened because of the leadership of Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the high priority placed on the plight of women.

I will outline our plans to further advance equality for women, address violence against women, promote women in leadership, and advance their economic security. We are undertaking these actions in order to bring about their full and equal participation in all aspects of Canadian life.

[Translation]

Our government is committed to promoting equality for women.

[English]

It is undeniable that the currently most pressing issue on the minds of Canadian women today is the economy, particularly because in times like these, lower-income Canadians are the most impacted and women are disproportionately represented in this category.

It is important that those of us whom the public have entrusted with managing their welfare act immediately and effectively to bring relief to all Canadians. This is why our government brought forth in Budget 2009 a multi-year action plan to stimulate economic growth, restore confidence, and support all Canadians—women and their families.

Immediately upon my appointment, I embarked upon a listening exercise to meet Canadians, especially Canadian women, to hear their concerns and seek their input and solutions to address the challenges that women are facing across the country. Since October, I have met with and spoken to Canadian women from coast to coast to coast: women with disabilities, senior women, aboriginal and immigrant women, single parents with dependent children, representatives of women's groups, businesswomen, and elected women from provincial, territorial, and municipal governments.

In my meetings with women in women's organizations, they expressed the need for tax cuts to inspire spending and asked for funding for roads, for bridges, for recreational centres to help spur economic growth, but they wanted to see actions that would help the vulnerable. They also expressed concerns that there be no cuts to women's programs such as they had faced in the 1990s.

I am proud to say that women believe our government has met their request.

Instead of reducing funding, as had been done in the past, we added an additional \$10 million in ongoing funding to the budget of women's programs, bringing the total for Status of Women Canada's budget to \$30 million annually. It is as a result of such funding levels that we are now in a position to extend assistance to more women's groups in communities than ever before.

Budget 2009 addresses all of these concerns by: making changes to EI, including a plan to extend maternal and parental benefits to self-employed Canadians, 47% of whom are women; there are measures to raise the child tax benefits; there is more funding for social housing; there are resources for northern communities, for aboriginal Canadians, including aboriginal women; and there are more resources for health care for women, including an additional \$554 million through targeted support for the implementation of wait time guarantees and the HPV immunization programs to protect against cervical cancer.

As mothers and caregivers, aboriginal women will benefit from the additional \$325 million to continue practical partnership approaches with aboriginal organizations and provincial and territorial governments on delivery of first nations and Inuit health programs and child and family services.

On issue after issue, our government has responded to the needs of women by developing supportive policies and measures to address critical challenges and by providing the resources to assist in dealing with them.

Our government will continue to create the conditions for women to succeed by encouraging women in leadership, promoting women's economic security and prosperity, and addressing the crucial issue of violence against women.

On behalf of the Government of Canada, I was pleased to sign in November Canada's commitment in support of the United Nations Development Fund campaign "Say No to Violence against Women", an effort to expand awareness and political commitment worldwide to end violence.

I was also pleased to support the YWCA Red Rose campaign to end violence against women, a campaign that I know enjoys the support of all parties in Parliament. Women's organizations such as the YWCA, Women Building Futures, Equal Voice, Home Horizon, etc., are of immense importance in delivering services to women in communities all across Canada. That is why, over the last few weeks, my focus and my attention have been on the awarding of grants under a call for proposals from the Women's Community Fund and on the creation of new partnerships under the Women's Partnership Fund.

I have had the pleasure of personally announcing support for projects by women's groups in Toronto, Moncton, and Ottawa, meeting representatives of the organizations doing the work and some of the women who are benefiting from the initiatives.

• (1110)

I am pleased to report that I have approved a total of 71 projects valued at more than \$11 million over three years under the Women's Community Fund.

I am confident that these initiatives will advance equality for women and their full participation in the economic, social, and democratic life of Canada. These projects will yield concrete results for Canadian women and girls, including helping them to find jobs and secure their economic security and prosperity, increasing financial literacy skills, supporting them in leaving the sex trade and leaving situations involving violence and abuse, building confidence in young girls to take on leadership roles, and expanding opportunities for employment in the construction sector as infrastructure investments move forward through our Women Building Futures initiative.

Through the Women's Partnership Fund we have been successful in creating partnerships and leveraging financial and in-kind contributions with partners across society that will support women's leadership in the advanced science and technology sectors; will open doors to corporate markets for women ready to seize new business opportunity and employment opportunities through education, training, coaching and mentoring programs; and will support young girls' leadership development and their engagement in civic and political life.

Our government recognizes that women's contributions to the economy are substantial and they are growing rapidly. Women now make up approximately half of the employed workforce in Canada. They establish businesses at twice the rate of men. They excel in previously male-dominated careers and courses of study. They wield significant power in the economies of Canada and in the world.

In the coming months Status of Women Canada will implement a number of priorities involving strategic policy analysis, planning, and development among other initiatives, developing our action plan, and strengthening gender-based analysis.

Since 2006 our government has worked hard to address the challenges facing the full diversity of Canadian women to promote the conditions for their success. Our reforms have allowed more women's groups to access government assistance and in the process reach over 100,000 more women directly.

As a country we have a foundation upon which we can build a stronger and more prosperous future for all Canadians, women and men alike, and we know that more women will prosper. The more that they do the more Canada will prosper.

Thank you.

• (1115)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister. You've got four minutes left. Excellent.

Now I would like to open up the discussion, beginning with Madam Neville.

Hon. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): Do I get the extra four minutes?

The Chair: No.

Hon. Anita Neville: Thank you, Minister, for appearing here today and thank you for agreeing to meet with me prior to this, as well as Ms. Beckton. I appreciated the opportunities to meet with both of you before this.

I only have seven minutes, and I probably have seventy minutes' worth of questions, so I'm going to try to ask some questions. You raised a number of interesting comments in your remarks.

My first question we raised it earlier with Ms. Beckton. I'm interested in knowing what kind of gender-based analysis was done of the budget, and if one was done, whether we could have it. That would be my first question.

My second question relates to the criteria of the various funds. When we met with Ms. Beckton, I think it was on the community fund particularly that she indicated that the criteria for each proposal call have changed, nuanced somewhat. I don't know whether it's the minister's directive, whether it's advice from whom, but I'm interested in knowing what the changes are. I had asked for them; I haven't received them yet. How have the different criteria for each proposal call changed?

In your comments you talked about leadership. You talked about jobs, economic security. You talked about violence against women. One of the questions I asked Ms. Beckton when we met was whether we could have a list of those projects that were denied funding, and I was told there are privacy law concerns about that.

I am interested in getting a list of those that were granted funding, but I have received a number of representations from people who have been denied funding. I want to ask specifically about two at the moment, and I suspect my colleagues may have others.

My first one is particularly related to the Assembly of First Nations. They have put in a number of requests for funding, one under the community and partnership fund, one for the Aboriginal Women's Summit. It was submitted in December 2007. Another one is called "Restoring Balance", and I have the brief description on the culturally relevant, gender-based analysis, capacity-building, which certainly ties in with your comments.

Another one is entitled "Women's Wisdom and Well-Being in a First Nations Context: Walking the Way of our Ancestors", which also speaks to leadership issues, and another one that was recently submitted is "Women's Wisdom and Well-Being in a First Nations Context", which also speaks to both leadership and health, none of which have received a response.

I'm trying to be quick so I can get a response from you.

The one that's giving me the greatest concern is CAIFT. On December 2 they submitted a proposal to improve the representation of women in predominantly male sectors of employment in Quebec and to optimize the potential of the female workforce in a sustainable manner to help women achieve better economic security.

I'm advised that the negotiations were going on very well. They had every expectation that they would have a partner, in that they met the program requirements in every regard—economic prosperity, women's leadership. When they put out a press release criticizing

the pay equity initiative brought in in the economic stimulus, they abruptly had a response indicating that their project would not be dealt with as initially expected and that there was no more money.

I'm advised that both the organization and the officer in charge, who has now left the organization, were in shock.

It's a lot of questions, and there's not a lot of time, but I'd appreciate whatever answers you could give me in the time.

• (1120)

The Chair: Madam Neville, you have three more minutes, if you wish.

Hon. Anita Neville: The minister has a few minutes.

Hon. Helena Guergis: To address the first question on gender-based analysis, I know that this question has been talked about a great deal around this table, and I do first want to recognize the great work of the committee. I was a part of one of those reports. I do happen to know that it has been told to this committee before that since 2006 the Department of Finance has been conducting gender-based analysis on tax measures, where data permit.

I don't think it's any coincidence that it started since our government formed in 2006, if I can point that out. I would strongly encourage you to have a greater conversation with the Ministry of Finance with respect to the details on what the gender-based—

Hon. Anita Neville: What is the role of your department, though?

Hon. Helena Guergis: Ours is to work with other departments on going through the gender-based analysis process. But to think that Status of Women Canada would have all of the gender-based analysis for every ministry going on and be the ones to answer for each specific ministry, line by line, is not realistic.

We work with them, and we walk through the process, and we train them when training is required and requested of us.

Hon. Anita Neville: Do you actually do an analysis—

Hon. Helena Guergis: Status of Women Canada worked with finance department officials on the gender-based analysis for the tax measures. So if you need more specific details on that, you would have to speak to them.

Hon. Anita Neville: That was only on the tax measures.

Hon. Helena Guergis: That's correct. I think it's also important to point out, though, that under our leadership, Treasury Board submissions are not accepted now unless there has been gender-based analysis. They are turned away. They're not accepted.

You could also speak to Treasury Board in more detail on their process where gender-based analysis is concerned.

Hon. Anita Neville: If I get another round, I'll come back to it.

Hon. Helena Guergis: With respect to your questions on criteria, I would say to you that with the announcement of an action plan for Status of Women Canada in 2008, in the budget process, we were very clear that we wanted to see three pillars. Since that time, the funding has been in line with those three pillars of economic security—women's security—and ending violence against women, and women in leadership roles.

The criteria haven't necessarily changed to that extent—I can explain the pillars a little bit more for you, if you want—but there's a question of what we're putting the emphasis on, what we are paying attention to.

Before I turn it over to Clare, I want to talk quickly about some of the applications that can be denied. We're not going to be able to fund every application that comes in to Status of Women Canada. I know that you're not expecting that we would. What I can tell you is that there has been a 69% increase in the number of organizations receiving funding from Status of Women Canada because of the positive changes that we have made, because of the increase in funding that we have provided to Status of Women Canada.

I don't see all of the applications that are denied. I take my officials' recommendations that they are in line with what they're supposed to be, and that they work with those people. They come up to me for my review and my approval. I go through that process line by line, discussing each one of them with them at that stage, once they've made it through their processes.

The Chair: I'm sorry, the time is up.

Now we go to Madame Deschamps.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

First, I would like to thank the minister and Ms. Beckton for being here today.

Madam Minister, thank you for having accepted our invitation and for responding to it so quickly. We are going to enjoy this little chat. I am more comfortable with social, community and people issues than with figures and accounting. As I listened to your presentation, I felt all the hope and the optimism in your words. Everyone is fine, everyone is nice, everything is going very well here in Canada. I would love to be able to have that same feeling, but I find it difficult. I would love for you to look me in the eye and explain that it is so, especially at the moment, when a serious crisis is affecting not only Canada but the entire world. Even before the crisis, in my opinion, women had always suffered more discrimination in the programs available to them. The fact is that more women than men will be affected by this crisis. Could you tell me how you see the current crisis? What leads you to say that there is equality between the sexes? That is your position; it is your wish. Personally, I do not see the day when what you are suggesting to us today is going to happen.

Please, make your best case and try to convince me. Women are affected, more and more so. Take a specific example: Employment Insurance. You may be providing unemployed men and women with five more weeks, but if they are not eligible to start with, they are no better off. We know that only 33% of women are eligible for the

current program, as opposed to 44% of men. The five weeks may be meant as a present, but what good is it for women if they are not eligible? I find that the whole situation is difficult, but it is more difficult for women.

You travelled around meeting women's groups. Tell me specifically what their concerns were. What did they tell you?

• (1125)

[*English*]

Hon. Helena Guergis: Thank you very much. I appreciate your question, and I appreciate your taking the time to meet with me last week and hope that we can do that on a regular basis.

I'm not going to sit here and try to suggest that we don't have a long way to go. Women have come a long way, but we have a long way to go, and I think the fact that the Prime Minister has put a minister solely dedicated to Status of Women Canada is a clear indication that we know that we still have more work to do, and that's the approach we're taking.

With respect to EI, I'm not the best person to answer that question for you, because I'm not the lead minister, and I think you understand that, but some of the changes they asked me for when I went through some of my consultations were that they wanted to see more opportunities for training. Minister Finley has answered many times in the House that there will be an increase in training, and not just for those who are on employment insurance. And I urge you, because you are masters of your own destiny around this table, to have Minister Finley come here to explain in more detail to you what are some of those changes and to explain to you where the training opportunities will be.

That being said, there are a number of groups and organizations we are funding that are taking women through these kinds of opportunities. I mentioned one of them, Building Futures, an incredible program. I toured the facility where they are training women in non-traditional roles, as heavy equipment operators, welders, etc. But some of the women who are coming into this program have come through some extremely difficult situations in their lives. On the premises, there are apartments and rooms for them. They live there while they go through their training, because if you want to take the training, often you can't afford to take it and pay for your home and where you need to live at the same time. We recognize that, so some of the programs we are funding are doing these kinds of things and addressing these issues on the ground with concrete action where women are concerned. This is one of the areas.

In Budget 2009, with respect to small-business women, about whom I spoke in great detail when commenting that 47% of small businesses are now run by women.... The business women said they wanted to have access to maternity benefits, and I think the commitment to have a panel and an in-depth conversation about that will be helpful. I urge the committee members to be a part of that process. I've heard this need not only in the last few months, but also going back to when I owned my own small business back in early 1990s.

I don't believe I've answered every one of your questions, but is there another comment that you have for me?

• (1130)

The Chair: Your time is up.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: You are strict, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: For the next round, Madame.

Ms. Boucher.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher (Beauport—Limoilou, CPC): Good morning, Madam Minister.

I am pleased that you took the time to come and see us today. It is a very important day for the committee. As your parliamentary secretary, I very much appreciate your open mind.

There were a lot of changes at Status of Women Canada last year. Since our government was elected, we have made changes to the women's support program so that more women can take advantage of it and have access to services and information.

Can you describe the changes that have been made, and especially, how they have affected women?

[*English*]

Hon. Helena Guergis: Let me do the best I can on that.

A lot of the changes you can read in the department report. I know it's been tabled, and if you haven't had an opportunity to have a look at it, I would encourage you to, because there is a lot of good news within that departmental review.

Of course, in Budget 2007 we did announce an additional \$10 million a year for Status of Women Canada, so now we do have a higher level of funding.

I talked earlier about the increase in the number of organizations receiving money. It's allowed us to widen our reach across the country. It's an open and competitive funding program now, with a significant uptick in the number of organizations applying for funding. Of the 69% I noted in saying that we've seen an increase in the number of organizations, 41% of those are actually new first-time people coming in and receiving funding and opportunities. Some of the organizations have been quoted in the paper saying they had projects sitting on their desks for ten years and it was under the leadership of this government that they were finally given the resources to deliver them, implement them, and see some real action on the ground.

I hear that a lot, and I think that's very positive. Because we did a lot of research for a lot of years—a lot of studies telling us what we needed to do, what was wrong—our government has taken the very positive approach of giving the resources to some of these organizations who said “I know what to do; just give me the tools to be able to deliver this directly to women on the ground”. So we are seeing that.

For 2007 and 2008, there were 181 new projects funded. And we're seeing beyond just simply funding more projects. The performance report talked about the results these programs are

getting. Clare could speak in more detail to some of those results and the measurements we use to see those results.

On the community fund and the partnership fund, the community fund is more of a granting side, where we've seen the funding substantially increase. But then we have the partnership fund, where we work with community organizations and find donations. And sometimes provincial levels of government are a part of that process, where we develop a partnership and it can go for two and three years to help an organization develop a program, but at the same time with the hopes that maybe it could be something that could be taken up by the province at a later date if it were viewed as somewhat of a pilot project.

And I'm happy to provide the committee with a list of organizations that have received funding. Perhaps the committee could sit at another time and we could walk you through some of the specific projects that have received funding: what they were attempting to do, what they have achieved, and the time they have been operating. I know that many of you around the table would probably be very interested to see some of those results.

• (1135)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Hon. Helena Guergis: Do you have another question on that side?

The Chair: You've got another three minutes.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: Three minutes.

I'll split my time with another member. I don't have a question in my mind.

The Chair: Ms. Davidson.

Mrs. Patricia Davidson (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Minister, thank you very much for appearing here this morning. We certainly appreciate the perspective that, as a former member of this committee, you bring to this portfolio. I think that can only be a plus for all of us. You've seen the struggles we've had in some instances in trying to move the issues forward, so hopefully we will see a bit more sympathy and support because of that.

I know you told us you had done community consultations. I'm guessing it was across the country—I'm not really sure—but maybe you could comment on that a little bit, too.

Could you tell us some of the things you heard when you were out there and how we can address them? I know we've talked a bit about employment insurance and, rightly so, you have said you're not the minister responsible for that. But I know that the minister who is has told us that 80% of the people who pay into that insurance fund are able to collect from it. So, I mean, that leaves 20%. And I think we all know that there are some of us who pay into it who can never collect, such as all of us sitting at this table. So you know, there is a reason why there is a 20% there.

I know there have been changes too, that the eligibility criteria for the number of weeks can change, as well, because of area issues and unemployment issues.

Can you comment on any of those things, as to how they might impact women, and just some of the issues you've talked about with women, with economic security and prosperity and what Status of Women Canada might be doing to encourage that?

Hon. Helena Guergis: With respect to economic security, we all know that women are at different stages in their lives and we all have different levels of skills. Sometimes we've come from abusive situations where we haven't had an opportunity to even manage our own finances in our home. Then there are those who have a higher level of financial literacy. A lot of the funding is supporting programs for women at those many different stages throughout their lives—those who have come out of abusive situations who need the basic skills, those small-business women who are looking to expand their businesses.

Putting political stripes aside, there are a couple of great opportunities that I can't share at this table, but I think you'll all be pleased. In the coming weeks we'll be announcing some really exciting opportunities for small-business women to create greater market access. But what I heard was that women are at different levels and there is not one size fits all. We have to address that. We have to ensure that there's something available for women at the different stages and the different literacy levels.

I wish I had more time.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Mathysen.

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

Thank you, Minister, for being here. I certainly appreciate both your time and Ms. Beckton's time.

I have a number of questions. I'm going to go one at a time.

First of all, Ms. Neville raised the issue of gender-based budget analysis. You indicated it's sort of a pre-training. Is there any plan for the status of women department to do a post-analysis in regard to impact of the 2009 budget. If so, how do you plan to do it without the policy research branch?

• (1140)

Hon. Helena Guergis: I will definitely let Clare address some of this, but on gender-based analysis, our role is clearly for training. When the ministries ask us, officials will support them in training on how to do that. I have been told that it has been done since 2006 for the Department of Finance.

I will have Clare answer more on the technical question you asked.

Ms. Clare Beckton (Coordinator, Office of the Coordinator, Status of Women Canada): We always look at budgets and the impact of them on women.

In terms of our research and our capabilities, we have access to a lot of statistics, which are really what is important. There's a lot of research being done, both internationally and nationally, with other

departments we have access to, as well as the tremendous research that Statistics Canada does. But we don't do gender-based analysis for other departments. We help them build their capacity, and we also help them with the training so they can actually do the gender-based analysis.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: I understand that, but my concern in looking at this budget is that its negative impact on women is quite significant. For example, if you look at page 110, there's a chart and this discussion about changing and modifying the child tax credit and child benefits. Families earning less than \$20,000 receive nothing. Families in the \$35,000 range get something like \$35 a month. It's not until you get into the \$150,000 range where you see anything substantive, and it's something in the neighbourhood of \$800.

That would seem to be something we should be very, very concerned about. It has a profoundly negative impact on women and their families. Why on earth wouldn't the department be concerned about that?

Also, I'm very concerned about the impact of the so-called pay equity legislation that's embedded in the budget implementation act. It's going to be a collective bargaining process, and the Human Rights Tribunal is excluded. Now any complaints go to the Public Service Labour Relations Board, which has no expertise in regard to pay equity, unlike a human rights tribunal.

I come back to the concern that pay equity is a human right that cannot be bargained away. It should never be a bargaining chip. And the fact that there is no commissioner...

The fact that this has been very clearly part of the budget process brings me back to a concern that this committee should have, and I think the department should have, despite the technicalities about training. It seems to me we have an obligation to women in this country, and we're failing.

Hon. Helena Guergis: I'll first address the issue of pay equity. I know that the honourable member knows that I am not the lead on pay equity. You are more than welcome to invite Minister Toews to have a conversation about that. He is in charge of the collective bargaining process, and he is the lead on the legislation.

What I think is really important to point out is that it's time for a more modern approach. It is time for a proactive approach, and that is exactly what we intend to do. As to any suggestion that we don't have women and their best interests at heart in this process, I dare someone to suggest that, because we do have women's best interests at heart.

The last settlement took 15 years, and it was in 1999. Women are waiting 15 years, 10 years, to receive pay equity. I think it's important to note that the Supreme Court ruled and said that the fundamental right to collective bargaining is a fundamental human right, as well. Why wouldn't we negotiate at the front end as to what women should be paid from the very beginning going forward?

What I heard from women is that they want a more modern approach, and they'd like us to proceed with this, and we will proceed with this. If you want further conversations about this piece of legislation, I strongly urge you to speak with Minister Toews. I know that he'd be more than happy to talk to you about the progress we will be making on that.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Thank you, Minister.

I have spoken with women's groups, and of course pay equity took 15 years because the Government of Canada kept appealing the decisions.

My last question is in regard to applications, specifically an application that was made by the Elizabeth Fry Society of Thunder Bay, I believe. They faxed and mailed their application. It's a very important application, inasmuch as this is the only E. Fry organization in northwestern Ontario, and they want to address the issue of young women and girls and their problems with the law. It's preventative. They received information that the application was lost or never received. I'm wondering if we could follow up on this, since it's a very important application.

• (1145)

Hon. Helena Guergis: Absolutely, Irene, we're happy to follow up on that. But I can confirm for you, with respect to the Elizabeth Fry Society, that I did support and approve I think it was two or three applications across the country on that one. We're happy to look into that and see what the status is. If you give a few more details, that would be appreciated.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: We'll send that along.

The Chair: You have a little less than a minute to go. You have about 30 seconds.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Thank you.

I wonder about the progress being made on the action plan and about who you consulted with. You indicated that you consulted with about 30 groups. I would like very much to know who you talked to. If a list of that consultation could be provided to the committee, I would appreciate that.

Hon. Helena Guergis: I have it somewhere here, and I am happy to provide it, but it's by no means complete.

Madam Chair, you have to let me do this one. They want to hear this.

The Chair: I haven't allowed other members.

Hon. Helena Guergis: I'll stay another couple of minutes if I can answer. Is that fair?

The Chair: Could you answer this when Madam Mathysen comes back in another round?

I want to present a problem we're facing to the committee. We only have about 15 minutes left in the minister's time. The next round should be five minutes each. That means that we will never be able to do it. Did you want to decide that you'd rather ask more questions in less time, or will the minister wish to stay an extra 15 minutes?

Hon. Helena Guergis: I don't know about fifteen, but I could probably get in an extra five minutes.

The Chair: You can stay an extra five minutes, but still, the committee needs to decide if it wants to go with the five, because if you do, only three people can go, or you may want to cut it down. I'm at your pleasure.

Do you want three minutes each?

[Translation]

Ms. Nicole Demers (Laval, BQ): Madam Chair, first of all, I would like to know if Ms. Beckton will be staying with us.

[English]

Hon. Helena Guergis: She's actually going to the meeting with me next.

The Chair: Ms. Beckton cannot stay.

So you only have an extra five minutes, and that means that we only have 20 minutes left.

Would you go for three minutes each?

[Translation]

Ms. Nicole Demers: No, five minutes.

[English]

The Chair: You want to go for five minutes.

We'll go to Madam Zarac.

[Translation]

Mrs. Lise Zarac (LaSalle—Émard, Lib.): Thank you for being here with us today, Madam Minister. As you were a founding member of the Committee on the Status of Women, I am sure that the matters that we have to deal with are close to your heart.

Turning to important values, an important value for women is surely the family. Although Employment Insurance is not directly under your department, what role could you play there? Women returning to work need daycare spaces for their children. That is where you could be involved. How would you respond to that?

You also mentioned that there was a much greater demand on your programs, 69% greater, in fact, and the supplementary estimates provide \$773,000 for human resources. This funding is supposedly for women employees who are affected by restructuring in their organizations; it takes the form of salaries, training, counselling or relocation. On April 1, 2007, the staffing level at Status of Women Canada went from 131 to 70 full time equivalents. Can you tell us about the effect of this restructuring on the employees of Status of Women Canada? Can you tell us if Status of Women Canada plans to increase its number of employees and in which areas the new employees will work?

Security remains very important for women. The supplementary estimates allocate a significant amount of money to operating costs. This funding is supposed to improve women's economic security and to eliminate violence against women. Can you explain to us in detail how Status of Women Canada will go about improving women's economic security and eliminating violence against women and girls?

•(1150)

[English]

Hon. Helena Guergis: There were a lot of questions in there, and I'm trying to figure out which one I want to go with first.

With respect to the day care issue, I think you understand that it is not federal jurisdiction, it is provincial jurisdiction. Some of the areas you have touched on are not my areas as a lead minister. I am not the lead minister for them.

But back to the action plan. My responsibility is to work with all of my senior colleagues to develop an action plan, a whole-of-government approach, and to work with them to establish what in their departments we can do that can be a part of an action for advancing the equality of women.

There are two things on this. I came into this as the sole minister, and there's a minimal amount of work that's been done on the action plan. There's good and bad in that. I think that it's good because it gives me an opportunity to dedicate myself to developing an action plan and taking the time I need so that I can make my mark on it, so that I can consult with more women, which I intend to do. To Irene's point, there have been some consultations, but they are by no means even close to being where I would like it to be in order to come up with the plan that I want.

I would like to come back to this committee and actually have you be a part of the facilitation process that I have almost completed developing, and I want to talk about where we want to see women in five, ten, fifteen years. Where do we want to see Status of Women Canada in that same time? What is our vision, and what is it that we're looking for to ensure that we can achieve that equality for women? To Johanne's point, we don't have it the way we should have it right now, and we need to work harder and we need to develop a concrete action plan that we can point to, that we can measure to ensure that it's accountable, that we're actually seeing some results on the ground.

I will be coming back. I intend on being here as often as you need me. There's an open door policy that we can engage in a regular conversation with all of us at the table to ensure that we can develop this action plan together, in consultation with all of the women stakeholders groups that we have.

[Translation]

Mrs. Lise Zarac: Thank you very much. I am very pleased that you will be meeting women. It is important to want to identify the real needs.

You mentioned earlier that you had heard a lot of talk about infrastructure. I would be curious to know what women find interesting in infrastructure. It is not really an area that benefits them.

As well, I would like to know why your department is not involved with daycare places. It is education, I believe, that is in provincial jurisdiction.

[English]

Hon. Helena Guergis: With respect to infrastructure, dare I say that in Canada today, in a more modern approach where women are concerned, I've heard a great deal from women who are interested in being employed in the non-traditional trade roles and are being

trained to participate in that. That being said, 53% of the population being women, we benefit from infrastructure. We benefit from roads, bridges, and water and sewer mains as Canadians, and our children benefit from recreation centres. So on the non-traditional trades, women are becoming employed in that, are having great careers, and they do want them on the infrastructure side.

That is some of the—

The Chair: Minister, I would ask you to wrap it up, please, because other members are waiting to ask questions.

Ms. Davidson.

Mrs. Patricia Davidson: I'll defer to Ms. McLeod.

The Chair: Good.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Minister, thank you, through the chair, for coming and attending this meeting today.

As a new member on the committee, I'm particularly heartened to hear about the increase in resources, the \$10 million of additional money provided to the department. The other piece is that, through the conversations you've shared, I'm also heartened. I like to talk about a coal-face approach. To me, the coal face is programs directed to women. You've articulated some very good examples of where resources are going directly to help women. I appreciate those comments.

My question is this. An important part of achieving gender equality is ensuring that women are in positions of leadership throughout society, from government to the private sector. Have you taken any initiatives to encourage leadership among girls and women?

Thank you.

Hon. Helena Guergis: Absolutely.

I keep getting caught on my earring.

There's Equal Voice. I know a number of you were at the announcement just last week that we have developed a partnership, with \$1.2 million, to work with Equal Voice, which is an organization that wants to see more women elected. It's a multi-partisan approach with all levels of government, working to see more women elected and working with young girls at that early age where they're making decisions on what direction they may want to head in their lives. There's a mentorship side to it, and I'm very proud of it. I know that Equal Voice will be working with all of my colleagues around this table, because that's their approach: to have a speaker series and include women from all political stripes to promote that opportunity.

For our part as a government, Prime Minister Stephen Harper has in fact appointed the highest number of women to cabinet in Canada's history. I think that needs to be recognized. I'm really honoured and proud to be working with a significant number of talented women from all parties in the House of Commons. I think that having 69 members there is impressive, but we have still a long way to go. I know that each of us in our own individual capacity works within our own political affiliation and party to see that we support there being more women sitting with us in the House.

There's a northern component with the Equal Voice announcement, which is something that is new as well, to work up into the north and with the francophone community to reach out to girls from across the country to give them more opportunities.

Right here in Ottawa, there's a "City For All Women" initiative in collaboration with the Lowertown Community Resource Centre. It has received a grant as well, to address equity and inclusion in the municipal decision-making process. It's a very interesting and exciting one that wants to empower and promote equity and inclusion while recognizing that there's diversity among women. This is something I thought was important: including aboriginals, women with disabilities, the visible minorities, immigrants, and marginalized groups. That program is one of the things we're doing through Status of Women Canada.

In Thunder Bay, there's the Volunteer Action Centre of Thunder Bay. It received a grant for aboriginal women and volunteer initiatives throughout the Thunder Bay area, to give participants some work experience and build a resume by volunteering at local non-profit organizations, and to see them develop leadership skills and move into some of those positions on their own as they gain more experience and more confidence.

That's just a bit of some of the things we're trying to do. We have a great deal more, though.

• (1155)

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: I would like to share my time with Candice.

Ms. Candice Hoepfner (Portage—Lisgar, CPC): How much time do I have?

The Chair: You only have one minute.

Ms. Candice Hoepfner: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here. It's good to be able to ask you some specific questions.

I have very little time, but I would like you to address a little more specifically what you're doing and what Status of Women Canada is doing to address violence against women. With the economic downturn, I think we're going to see more violence against women and against children. I'm wondering what we are doing to specifically protect women and children.

Hon. Helena Guergis: In the short time I have.... I think most of you know my history when it comes to the violence-against-women issues. You know some of the things we've done with Joy Smith, and about her receiving international recognition on the human trafficking side. I know this committee has done a great deal of work.

Sisters in Spirit, if I can just touch on that quickly, is a program of \$1 million per year over five years, so \$5 million in total. It's coming to a close in 2010, and I want you all to know that I have already engaged in the process of what Sisters in Spirit 2 would look like. I'm working with the Native Women's Association—of course, this is a program that is spearheaded by them—to identify the number of women who have been victims of racialized, sexualized violence, to promote the need for us to pay more attention to it, and to develop a

plan on how we'll get to the root causes, so that we can see an end to this violence.

Coming into this with the extensive experience I had had on sexual assault in working as a crisis intervention volunteer, I can't even put into words how I felt to learn and realize the violent situation that aboriginal women are dealing with—

The Chair: Please wrap up, Minister.

Hon. Helena Guergis: —in Canada and in Canadian society. We have to do a lot better than we are. We can talk about the great initiatives we've taken, but we need to do more, and I look to you for some advice on how we can improve.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madame Demers.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nicole Demers: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for being here, Ms. Beckton. I will not get into long thank you's, because we do not have much time.

Madam Minister, in your speech, I was very impressed when you talked about the opportunities provided to women in construction. As my colleague Ms. Neville said earlier, the Conseil d'intervention pour l'accès des femmes au travail submitted a proposal to Status of Women Canada that met the criteria perfectly and that would have been very effective for women wanting to work in non-traditional trades in Quebec. The proposal had previously almost been accepted by Status of Women Canada, but then it was rejected. I would like you to take another look at it, Madam Minister.

I would also like to ask if you are familiar with the analysis of gender budgeting published by the Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action.

I also have a question about social concerns. Traditionally, in recent years—except the last two—we were invited, by the minister or by the person representing the status of women in cabinet, to take part in an important United Nations conference on what had been done for women in the past year. Do you intend to re-establish this tradition and invite members of the committee to take part in that conference?

I know that you are not the person responsible for pay equity. I also know that you are not the person responsible for Employment Insurance and health. However, I do expect that the Minister of State for the Status of Women has the leadership required to influence her cabinet colleagues and to take concrete action on the advancement of women in all areas. Even if you are not the person responsible, you are an influential woman capable of making your colleagues understand how important these matters are.

For example, Gardasil worries me greatly. We are getting reports from the United States that are more and more troubling. Girls get very sick after receiving that vaccine. I trust you, Madam Minister. As Minister of State for the Status of Women, you will provide the leadership that has been missing until now, so that the status of women will be markedly improved.

Thank you.

•(1200)

[English]

Hon. Helena Guergis: Thank you.

On the non-traditional trades, I would really love to see the committee, if it has the time, do some more significant work on that, on the jurisdictional responsibilities and where the federal government can play more of a role. If you have some recommendations, I would appreciate that.

On the UN conference, I have requested an agenda on that. I have also requested that we have a leaner team, lean and mean is what I'm calling it, and we have had in the past. But with respect to who will be attending with me in terms of political representation, it will be up to the whips to make that decision. So that conversation will be going on as to who will, through your whip.

On pay equity, EI, all the women's issues, rest assured I am extremely vocal at the table in my role. I have what I call a little big stick now around the table when I'm talking with my colleagues.

On pay equity, I have relayed what I have heard, and I do support the initiatives that Minister Toews is taking, because it does reflect what I have heard from the women I have spoken with.

With respect to EI, some women's organizations have written to me praising the budget, saying it is in the best interests, it will help small-business women weather these tough economic times and that they appreciate the extension of five weeks, they like the fact that there are going to be more training opportunities. So of course there are differing opinions out there. We're not always going to address everybody's issue, but I do support the initiatives we are going forward with. I think they are reflective of what I have heard in my consultations, and I support them.

[Translation]

Ms. Nicole Demers: If I understand you correctly, Madam Minister, it is going to be up to us to convince you that the government may not necessarily be going about solving problems the right way. In the FAIA document, we really see that there are significant disparities that prevent women from benefiting fully at least from the economic stimulus that has been introduced. At the moment, they are not benefiting, with the exception of a few who would benefit anyway.

[English]

The Chair: I think we have no time left.

Hon. Helena Guergis: But I do make the offer of giving you the breakdown that I received from Clare as to the benefits of the budget for women.

The Chair: Good. Thank you.

Now, Minister, it's five after. You said you would stay an extra five minutes. Madame Demers is the last person. Could she have her five, or must you leave?

•(1205)

Ms. Irene Mathysen: You mean Madam Mathysen.

The Chair: Sorry. Could Madam Mathysen, or do you have to leave?

Hon. Helena Guergis: We could split it. Two and a half.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: I'd like to give my time to Ms. Ashton.

The Chair: No, no. If the committee wishes to have two members of the New Democratic Party at these committee hearings, both of whom have status, then this does not follow the rules of committee. I'm sorry. There is only one person with status at any one time at this committee.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: We checked with the whip, and Ms. Ashton is able to—

The Chair: It would all depend on whether the committee agrees to this or not.

Does the committee agree to this?

No, the committee does not agree.

Ms. Mathysen, you've just managed to spend almost a minute of your time, but go ahead.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Thank you, Madam Chair.

There's been a great deal of talk about infrastructure and how women are not able to avail themselves. I'm more concerned about social infrastructure, because social infrastructure creates more jobs and more economic security than any other kind of infrastructure. Then of course there is the question of child care and the fact that women are kept out of many of the traditional jobs that were discussed earlier because they cannot access child care. I was wondering if the minister could see her way clear to using her influence in cabinet to promote the need for a national child care policy to ensure that women have access to employment and education and training.

Hon. Helena Guergis: I think the member is aware that the minister has said a number of times that the transfer of payments to the provinces is increasing at 3% a year, and day care programs are under the jurisdiction of the provinces. I'm not the lead minister on that, and what I've been hearing from Canadian women is that they actually like the universal child care tax benefit. They like it; they want it. They believe in choice, and they like the decisions that our government has made. I support that, obviously, or I wouldn't have run on this campaign.

But also with respect to the budget, we will be seeing some personal income tax relief, and that will benefit low-income families, low-income women. We'll also see an increase in the child tax benefit, and we'll be enhancing the working income tax benefit for women. These are initiatives that low-income women will benefit from, and they will ensure that they can have a better standard of life. They're not the answer to every problem, but there are good measures in there. I would just like to say that if we have criticisms of the budget, we have to also recognize when there are some good measures, and those are good measures.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Unfortunately there is no choice if there are no child care spaces, Minister, and I think that's key to the need for a national program.

The Chair: There are two minutes left, Ms. Mathysen.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I actually did have a chance to go through this document, and I'm very pleased to have it, and I'll be coming back with lots more questions. I hope the minister will be able to attend further sessions.

In looking at the estimates, it's already been indicated that there is \$773,000 for human resources. The resources were for staff—the 60 or so employees who sought retraining—and I wondered what kind of training was available. Were the jobs available in other areas of government? And it also mentions money made available for counselling. I wondered about the nature of the counselling, how long it was available to employees, and how many people were able to actually avail themselves of the counselling.

The Chair: The minister has one minute to respond.

Hon. Helena Guergis: I'll ask Clare.

Ms. Clare Beckton: I think what you're talking about there is the reference to the workforce adjustment measures that were in place. We made counselling available to all of our people affected by workforce adjustment so that they were able to seek other employment. We were very effective, actually, in having people find other jobs very quickly. We looked for other places within our organization when people were free to move, and a number did so. So in fact I think we were highly successful with respect to workforce adjustment, and we did keep a number of people and find different employment for them within the organization. For those who wished to move on, we gave them all the services that were available to help them do so. In fact we had one person who took education leave and is now coming back into another position with us.

• (1210)

Hon. Helena Guergis: It is 89 staff right now?

Ms. Clare Beckton: We now have 89 staff.

The Chair: Thank you very much for coming, Minister.

Hon. Anita Neville: Can we have confirmation that we will receive the materials the minister has indicated? If any questions were not answered, can we have them answered in writing, please?

The Chair: Minister, can you confirm that the materials you promised will be sent to the clerk?

Hon. Helena Guergis: Yes.

The Chair: If there were questions not answered, will you answer them in writing?

Hon. Helena Guergis: I will be more than happy to do that. I'd be even more happy to come back—

The Chair: No, thank you.

I want to clarify for Ms. Mathysen that according to the committee rule, based on the number of members in a political party within the House, the New Democratic Party is entitled to one person. Obviously, according to the rules, any member of Parliament can come to a meeting to sit as an observer. If they wish to participate, they must do so on the agreement of the members of the committee.

The members of the committee did not agree to that.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Thank you, Madam Chair.

It is my understanding, however, that the whips have an agreement that an additional New Democrat can sit on a committee. I sit on the public safety committee. I don't have voting rights, but I can sit on the committee and ask questions. It is my understanding that agreement is in place.

The Chair: As chair of this committee, I know of no such agreement being in place. The whip does not have the ability to make that agreement. It has to be agreed to by the committee, which is the author of its own decision-making.

The committee said they did not agree to this particular behaviour. I'm sorry.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'll seek further clarification.

The Chair: We are suspended.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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