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## **Standing Committee on the Status of Women**

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**EVIDENCE**

**Thursday, April 2, 2009**

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**Chair**

**The Honourable Hedy Fry**

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## Standing Committee on the Status of Women

Thursday, April 2, 2009

• (1115)

[English]

**The Chair (Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.)):** Order.

Madam Charette is the Deputy Minister for the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development, and Mr. Thompson is the Associate Assistant Deputy Minister for the Skills and Employment Branch. We want to thank you for coming at such short notice.

We'll begin. You well know the drill. Madam Charette, you have ten minutes to present, and then of course there will be questions.

Thank you.

[Translation]

**Ms. Janice Charette (Deputy Minister, Department of Human Resources and Skills Development):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

[English]

It's nice to see you again, actually. It is a pleasure for me to be with the committee today.

[Translation]

Thank you for inviting me to speak about the status of women in the labour market.

[English]

As you know, I have with me Mr. Thompson, who has appeared before this committee previously on this matter, and together we will do our very best to respond to inquiries and questions from committee members.

As the Deputy Minister of Department of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, I am focused on ensuring that our department is supporting Canadians affected by the economic downturn in the labour market and supporting Canadians who are vulnerable. I see today as an opportunity to discuss with members of this committee how the downturn is affecting certain groups, such as women, and what supports are available.

What I want to start with is giving you a scan of how Canadian women fare in the labour market and sum up how their situation compares internationally.

[Translation]

Canadian women have made remarkable strides forward in both education and the labour market in recent years.

[English]

They are consequently relatively well positioned as Canada begins to experience the effects of the unprecedented global economic recession. With respect to education, Canadian women have the highest rate of post-secondary educational attainment among all of the OECD countries: in 2006, over half, or 51%, of Canadian women ages 25 to 64 had completed post-secondary education.

I know a lot of witnesses have come before the committee quoting statistics to you, so one of the things I asked my officials to do is to mark in my statement the source of the statistics. If there are questions on these, we'd be happy to work with committee staff as well to provide any supporting materials that might be required. Let me continue on post-secondary education.

Post-secondary attainment is even higher among young women. Women represent a clear majority—60%—of recent Canadian university graduates. Among people aged 25 to 34, fully one-third, 33%, of women have a university degree, compared with one-quarter, 25%, of men.

These high levels of educational attainment have positioned the younger generation of Canadian women very strongly to meet the needs of the labour market in a globally competitive, knowledge-based economy. On the labour market side, women's labour market participation and employment rates have risen strongly over time and are now converging towards those of men. Women's unemployment rates have been below those of men since the early 1990s.

Canada's overall labour market performance compares favourably with that of other OECD countries. The proportion of Canadian women aged 15 to 64 who were employed—70%—in 2007 was the highest among G-7 countries and sixth among all OECD countries.

The incidence of long-term unemployment among women in Canada is one of the very lowest in the OECD, at 6.3% for unemployment 12 months and over.

However, there is still room for improvement, particularly, I would say, on the income side. Members of this committee will be familiar with the statistics that women still earn less than men in Canada: on an hourly basis, women now earn 84%, on average, of the hourly earnings of men. However, the hourly earnings gap has narrowed since 2000, in part due to the rising educational attainment among women.

Among young university-educated women working full time, the gap is essentially zero. As women have moved into more highly paid occupations, their earnings have increased relative to those of men, resulting in a narrowing of the gender pay gap.

Nevertheless, the overall gender wage gap for Canada at 21% exceeded the OECD average in 2006. This remains obviously an ongoing source of concern and consideration. The highest rates of part-time work, which I know has been a topic of discussion in this committee, 45%, are found among young people aged 15 to 24, which probably is not a surprise given their stage of life. However, among people over 25, the incidence of part-time work is much higher among women than among men: 22% for women compared with 8% for men in our February statistics. Proportionally, among working adults 25 years of age and over, two-thirds of part-time workers are female.

• (1120)

[Translation]

Adult women are much more highly represented in part-time work than men.

[English]

Let me turn to the economic situation and its impact on women. If past experience is any guide, it shows that recessions of the 1980s and 1990s saw fewer women than men lose their jobs.

[Translation]

This effect was largely related to women's relatively lower representation in the goods-sector industries hardest hit by the recession, such as manufacturing, construction, and primary industries.

[English]

For example, over half of the jobs lost in the 1980s and 1990s recessions were in manufacturing, where women accounted for only 26% and 28% of employment respectively. We are seeing a similar pattern in the current recession to date.

Since October 2008, when employment losses really began, women have accounted for only 15% of net job losses, although they represent fully 47% of employment. This pattern is consistent with the current experience we're seeing in the United States and the European Union.

Older women, 55 years of age and older, have done particularly well so far. They are the only demographic group that has seen an increase in both employment and employment rates since October.

In general, women under 25 were underrepresented amongst cumulative net job losses. This, again, is highly related to women's relatively low representation in the goods sector, where they account for only 22% of total employment and where employment losses to date have been concentrated. Fully 65% of the net job losses in Canada since the onset of the downturn in October 2008 have been in the goods sector.

Now I'd like to outline a few points about the government's response. During this unsettled economic time, employment insurance is the first line of defence for those who have lost their jobs.

[Translation]

Let me first note that EI is an insurance system for the loss of employment income. Access is determined by individual work patterns of contributors, not by gender.

[English]

Allow me to delve a bit more deeply into eligibility for and duration of EI benefits and how those are determined. Through the variable entrance requirement, the current EI program has built-in flexibility specifically designed to respond automatically to changes in local labour markets. As the unemployment rises, entrance requirements ease and the duration of benefits increases.

To be more specific, the eligibility for and duration of employment insurance benefits is based on the number of insured hours worked and the unemployment of the EI economic region in which an individual lives. It's not a province or a territory; it's broken down on the basis of EI economic regions.

[Translation]

This ensures that the amount of assistance provided increases as the unemployment rate rises and that support adjusts to the changing needs of regions and communities.

[English]

Women's access to regular benefits, which are regular benefits associated with paid employment, is high. According to Statistics Canada's employment insurance coverage survey, in 2007, 81% of women who had been paying employment insurance premiums and were then laid off or quit with cause were eligible for regular benefits.

A further finding from this survey may also be of interest to the committee. It showed that of all unemployed individuals, relatively fewer women than men, 9.3% as compared to 9.8%, were unable to qualify for employment insurance due to insufficient insured hours.

As we know, many women must juggle work and family responsibilities. The EI program contains many features of particular importance to women in light of their broader societal role and the unpaid work they do with respect to caregiving. The 50 weeks of EI maternity and parental benefits plays a critical role in supporting Canadian families by providing temporary income replacement for parents of newborn or newly adopted children. These benefits provide flexibility for many women and men to stay home to nurture their child during that important first year.

The 2007 EI Commission's monitoring and assessment report—I know the committee has heard of that report previously—shows that women accounted for more than 86% of claimants receiving parental benefits. Other evidence from that same report demonstrates the many features of the EI program that are a support to women. It indicates that the current replacement rate and the duration of maternity and parental benefits works well for most Canadians. On average, parents use 95% of the 50 weeks of benefits that are available.

The EI program also provides compassionate benefits to take time off work to care for a critically ill family member. Again, the majority of compassionate care claimants, 76%, are women. Women's access to these EI special benefits, as we call them, as distinct from regular benefits, is very high. There are 97% of women working full time who have sufficient hours of work to qualify for special benefits. This is the same level of access as men who are working full time.

• (1125)

[Translation]

The survey also indicates that for women working part time, 66% have sufficient hours to qualify for special benefits, compared with 59% of men.

[English]

It is important to note that individuals working part time for a full year can qualify for EI regular benefits with as few as 8 to 14 hours of work per week, or in the case of special benefits, where we have a flat entry requirement, 12 hours of work per week.

Another important feature of the EI program of benefit to women is when they return to the workforce after an absence to raise their children. We have provisions in the EI program that would require a new entrant or re-entrant into the workforce to accumulate 910 hours of insured work, and that is a provision that we do not apply to women returning to the workforce after an absence to raise their children. The EI Act includes, as I said, a specific provision allowing re-entrant mothers to qualify for benefits with the same number of hours as are needed by other workers in their region under the variable entrance requirement.

Overall, women are net beneficiaries of the EI program. They receive more in benefits than they contribute in premiums.

The government is now looking at how best to provide self-employed individuals with access to EI, maternity, and parental benefits and is in the process of establishing an expert panel to consult with Canadians on this topic.

Let me turn to Canada's economic action plan. I mentioned earlier the flexibility of the EI program in responding to changing economic conditions and the adjustments the government has made to meet the needs of Canadians. Through Budget 2009 the government has introduced Canada's economic action plan, which includes new temporary measures that provide nationally the advantages of an extra five weeks of EI benefits, which were previously offered as part of a pilot project only in specific regions with high unemployment. These measures also increase the maximum number of weeks available, from 45 weeks to 50 weeks in regions of high unemployment.

[Translation]

As a result of these adjustments, in just the first year, some 400,000 EI claimants could benefit.

[English]

These are departmental estimates that we have provided.

In addition, the government has introduced a 14-week extension to the duration of work-sharing agreements, one of the provisions in

the employment insurance program. It's designed to help companies facing a temporary shutdown in business to avoid layoffs and preserve jobs by offering EI income support to employees who are willing to reduce the hours in their work week.

Just last week the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development announced \$60 million being invested to improve the delivery of employment insurance, including hiring additional staff, and to support the implementation of these measures. The announcement also included improving the speed of payment to work-sharing claimants by exempting them from submitting the biweekly declarations that we have been asking of these participants in the past, except when they have exceptional conditions to report, such as, for example, other employment.

The government has announced as well a number of other measures, including support for aboriginal peoples, older workers, and communities and training assistance overall, that are helping to prepare women and men for long-term employment.

In conclusion, Madam Chair and members of the committee, much progress has been made to improve economic security for women. The measures I have outlined are helping to achieve this goal, and EI does play a central role in this regard. In addition, solid analysis on a wide range of issues, including gender, is key to fulfilling our departmental mandate. And given this mandate, it's important to emphasize that gender-based analysis is integrated as a matter of course into our policy and program work in the department.

EI is responding to the needs of both women and men in Canada, and we will continue to examine the impact of the EI program and how it is helping Canadian workers adjust to labour market challenges and changes, particularly, I would add here, in the face of pretty unprecedented economic conditions.

I'd like to thank the standing committee on behalf of the department for its reports over the years. The observations and the recommendations and the work of this committee have provided valuable assistance in shaping policy as it relates to women and have been an important input to our policy development process.

• (1130)

[Translation]

Thank you. I would be pleased to respond to your questions, with Mr. Thompson's assistance.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madam Charette, for your testimony.

[English]

Now we begin with Madam Neville, for seven minutes.

I know that Madame Charette is well aware, but the seven minutes includes questions and answers.

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

If I have time, I will share my time with my colleague Madame Zarac.

Let me begin first by thanking you for coming and for a very thoughtful and comprehensive presentation. It's obvious that a lot of work went into it, and I appreciate it.

I have lots of questions, though. Madame Charette, right at the end you referenced gender-based analysis. You or your staff have undoubtedly been following the work of this committee and the various recommendations that have been coming forward.

Let me just back up. We're hearing much in the House right now that this was a program designed by the previous government in 1997, and the response was that times are different and we need to adapt. When you made recommendations, was a gender-based analysis done on the various options, like lowering the accessibility, like a common number of hours across the country? Did you do a thorough gender-based analysis on the various options that were available? Then I'll follow up.

**Ms. Janice Charette:** As members of the committee will know, the advice we provide to ministers is not something we discuss openly. I can tell you the process, and I think that's probably the nature of your question, Ms. Neville.

We look at a wide range of considerations in terms of conducting our policy analysis and providing our best advice. One of the things we rely on is the report of the EI Commission, the monitoring and assessment report, which contains the gender impacts of the EI program as part of that analysis. So that is a consideration. We also look at what's happening in the labour market and the results of the labour force survey; gender is part of that analysis as well.

**Hon. Anita Neville:** So you're telling me that analysis was done on various options.

**Ms. Janice Charette:** It's built into our analysis. I wouldn't say I could produce the gender-based analysis for you; it is one of the many considerations we look at.

In our department we don't have a special unit that just does gender-based analysis. It really is built into the work of the department across all our program and policy branches. So it is one of the lines of analysis as opposed to a distinct piece of how we do our business.

**Hon. Anita Neville:** I'm trying to get at how prevalent it is in the decision-making process. I realize you can't tell us what advice you give to a minister, but cost is clearly a big concern and how it will hit different regions. How prevalent is the issue of gender in making recommendations and decisions?

**Ms. Janice Charette:** It's hard to give a global answer to that because the gender impacts differ across programs. For example, in the employment insurance program and the changes the government

introduced as part of the economic action plan and the Budget Implementation Act, we looked at, exactly as you said, cost impacts, sectoral impacts, regional impacts. Gender impacts were part of that, but they wouldn't necessarily have been as prevalent or as high a priority as in a program that is much more focused on providing direct assistance to families or child care, for instance.

The nature of the EI changes are designed to reflect what's going on in the labour market, so we look at the workers who are being affected by the economic downturn. We look at the forestry sector, what's going on in the manufacturing sector, the construction sector. How that impacts on women, I would say, is built into that analysis, but because of the nature of the work we are doing, the primary focus is really on some of those other factors, just given the changes in EI and the nature of the program. To go to the heart of your question, it was built into the analysis.

**Hon. Anita Neville:** On a totally different line, what are you finding in terms of EI exhaustees? Is there a prevalence among men or women in terms of using their employment insurance?

**Ms. Janice Charette:** Again I'll refer to the monitoring and assessment report, which is a report for 2007. The report for 2008 has now been provided to the minister by the Employment Insurance Commission, and the minister will be tabling that in the House shortly.

I apologize, I can't quite remember the timeframe for your report, Madam Chair, but you and committee members and members of your research staff may also want to look at the 2008 monitoring and assessment report, because it will have an update. Of course, it will be in advance of the economic downturn, so I think we have to take it with a caveat.

It depends on whether we're looking at regular benefits or special benefits. In terms of the special benefits—

• (1135)

**Hon. Anita Neville:** We're only looking at regular benefits right now.

**Ms. Janice Charette:** Under regular benefits we know that on average men used about 19.1 weeks and women used 18.8 weeks.

It is true that a larger proportion of women than men exhaust their benefits: 34.4% of women used up all the weeks of benefits they were entitled to receive in 2005-06 and 26.3% of men.

**Hon. Anita Neville:** And those are the most current figures you have?

**Ms. Janice Charette:** The figures in the updated monitoring and assessment report will update that. They'll have to be tabled in the House before they can be made publicly available.

**Hon. Anita Neville:** Do I have more time, Madam Chair?

**The Chair:** Yes, you have 30 seconds.

**Hon. Anita Neville:** The realities, as we all know, are quite different right now. Can you give us any thoughts in terms of the changing realities that we're dealing with and how government should be responding, what recommendations...?

**Ms. Janice Charette:** You can appreciate, Ms. Neville, the thoughts I have on how government should be reacting would be advice I'd provide to the minister.

**Hon. Anita Neville:** All right, I'll leave it there.

**Ms. Janice Charette:** I can tell you, though, that I think adding the extra five weeks of benefits, the additional duration of employment insurance benefits that was passed with the Budget Implementation Act, is designed to get at your point around exhaustion of benefits. It will be some time—at least five weeks—before we'll see the effects of exhaustion and be in a position to see whether or not any additional steps are required.

**Hon. Anita Neville:** I just want to put it on the record that I'm equally concerned about access to benefits. I think with the realities we're dealing with today, that issue isn't being addressed.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

I don't think we're going to be able to go two rounds again. The time gets eaten up quickly.

Madam Deschamps.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Johanne Deschamps (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ):** Madam Demers.

**The Chair:** Okay.

Madam Demers.

**Ms. Nicole Demers (Laval, BQ):** Madam Charette, I am having a hard time reconciling your numbers with other numbers we have heard, as well as with the reality facing people in my riding. You said that less than 9.3% of women were ineligible for EI benefits because they did not have enough hours of insurable employment. All 9.3% must be in my riding, because I receive many calls from women who are ineligible for EI benefits, even though they worked the number of hours required. I have to wonder about this.

You said you use gender-based analysis as a matter of course. Based on that analysis, how were you able to determine that extending benefits by five weeks was the best solution? According to Statistics Canada, only 10% of people make it to the end of their benefits period. We also know that accessing benefits is much more difficult, and once an individual receives benefits, he or she usually finds a job before the end of the benefits period.

What motivated the decision to add five weeks, rather than eliminate the two week waiting period that comes at the beginning? I also wonder about that.

In the case of women who have a maternity leave, the 910 required hours are not taken into account when they file a second claim for benefits. However, people who have cancer, who are ill and have received 15 weeks of benefits because of their illness, if they go back to work and are then laid off, they must absolutely prove that

they worked enough hours to access benefits again, despite the fact that they are very vulnerable.

I would like you to address those questions.

• (1140)

**Ms. Janice Charette:** I will do my best. I will ask Mr. Thompson to answer the second question, because he is more familiar with the details of the program.

[*English*]

Maybe if I could, though....

[*Translation*]

I apologize, but I would like to continue in English, because the details are a little technical and—

[*English*]

I don't want to add anything to the confusion around this.

You talked about the reconciliation of the figures. One of Mr. Thompson's requests when he was here previously was around this issue of the percentage of men and women who do not qualify for employment insurance because they don't have enough hours. We're just finalizing that analysis in the department, and it will be on its way to the committee shortly. I think you asked for a historical comparison.

Let me go back to a couple of things. One is about how you qualify for employment insurance benefits. The first thing is that you have to be paying into the employment insurance program, so automatically those folks who don't contribute to EI aren't eligible. That's actually a significant percentage. It includes folks who haven't been in the workforce and people who are in self-employment. It's actually a very significant percentage. Almost 35% of women who don't qualify for EI are in that situation because they are not contributors.

Next, let's say you're in the program and you're a contributor to EI. Then you lose your job. Well, to be eligible for the regular benefits under employment insurance, it would basically have to be an involuntary separation from work. If people voluntarily quit their jobs—if they quit to go back to school, for instance, or because they want to find another job—they are not eligible for employment insurance according to the current legislation. They make up about 16.4%.

Then there are the people who don't have enough hours to qualify. That's the 9.3% of women. In the case of the people who may be coming into your office to ask you why they can't get EI, we have to go back and look at the reason they're not getting EI. Are they contributing to the program? What were their reasons for separation from the workforce? Do they have enough hours?

Because economic conditions have been changing so dramatically, it's important to go over the importance of the variable entrance requirement for having enough hours. For the variable entrance requirement, as I think I said in my remarks, we look at EI economic regions, the number of hours necessary to qualify for EI benefits, and the number of weeks for which you'd be eligible. It depends on the employment situation in the EI economic region you live in.

Over the course of the last...since October, so not very many months, five months of labour force data, 26 of the 58 EI regions in the country have seen the variable entrance requirements adjusted on the basis of changing economic conditions. For the most part, we've seen unemployment going up, although there have been some exceptions there, so 26 of—

• (1145)

[Translation]

**Ms. Nicole Demers:** Excuse me, Madam Charette, you are taking a long time to reply.

**Ms. Janice Charette:** I apologize.

**Ms. Nicole Demers:** Madam Charette, we have already heard the facts you are giving us at this time.

I would like to hear Mr. Thompson talk about the five weeks, because that is important.

**Ms. Janice Charette:** Okay. I will ask Mr. Thompson to answer your questions.

**Mr. Paul Thompson (Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Skills and Employment Branch, Department of Human Resources and Skills Development):** With regard to the five additional weeks versus the two week period, the situation was analyzed based on the unemployment data Madam Charette mentioned earlier. The analysis revealed that the duration of benefits was posing a problem, so it was decided that it would be extended by five weeks to address that.

[English]

It's important to note that on...

*Je vais parler en anglais, à cause des termes techniques.*

The two-week waiting period is not necessarily related to the duration of benefits. For someone who uses his or her entire entitlement, it simply moves the entitlement two weeks earlier, and it would end two weeks earlier.

[Translation]

**Ms. Nicole Demers:** But the length of the period must be taken into account.

[English]

**Mr. Paul Thompson:** Yes. The objective with the five weeks was actually to extend the entitlement by five weeks for everyone, regardless of where they are in terms of the entitlement schedule. If it was a limited entitlement of two weeks, for example, they would add five weeks. If it was the full entitlement, which is up to 45 weeks in some regions—

[Translation]

**Ms. Nicole Demers:** Was a gender-based analysis conducted?

[English]

**Mr. Paul Thompson:** Well, one of the—

[Translation]

**Ms. Nicole Demers:** On that particular measure?

[English]

**Mr. Paul Thompson:** It was only done to the extent that, as Madame Charette noted, the analysis of the unemployment situation was indeed focused on the sectors that were hardest hit by the economic downturn, construction and manufacturing. However, I would also—

[Translation]

**Ms. Nicole Demers:** And therefore not women.

[English]

**Mr. Paul Thompson:** But I would also add that the five weeks were extended to the entire breadth of the entitlement schedule. So people with less attachment to the labour force, at lower ends of entitlement, were granted five weeks as well, which is fairly significant for someone receiving, at the minimum, 14 weeks. They would now receive 19 weeks of—

[Translation]

**Ms. Nicole Demers:** Mr. Thompson, you said that the gender-based analysis was not taken into account to come up with that measure. The employment sectors hardest hit were checked. It is the auto sector has been hit the hardest, and we know that it is primarily men who work in that sector.

**Mr. Paul Thompson:** Generally speaking, labour market analysis was used to come up with that measure.

**Ms. Nicole Demers:** Thank you very much.

[English]

**The Chair:** Madam Hoepfner.

**Ms. Candice Hoepfner (Portage—Lisgar, CPC):** Thank you very much.

I appreciate your being here and I appreciate the work you do. I imagine many times it's not easy, so I appreciate the advice you give to our minister and that you're here and providing us with information.

I think from what you're telling us today, the trends definitely are telling us that women are doing much better than they have in the past. You said 60% of recent Canadian university grads are women. The highest rate of post-secondary education attained among all OECD countries is attained by Canadian women, if that's correct.

You also said, and we've heard this previously, that women are the net benefactors of the EI program. First, could you explain that? Are you saying that women receive more than they pay in? So men pay more and receive less in benefits. Is that correct?

**Ms. Janice Charette:** Yes, basically. In terms of the comparison of the total premiums paid by women compared to the benefits that are drawn, women are net beneficiaries and men are net contributors.

**Ms. Candice Hoepfner:** Men are net contributors. So they are paying more than they're receiving.



**Ms. Janice Charette:** That's right. It's because of the nature of the benefits. Women tend to benefit disproportionately to men from some of the special benefits we see across...obviously, maternity. That's a women's benefit, but even in terms of parental, we're still seeing a very large take-up on the part of women. I think I mentioned the compassionate care benefit, which is disproportionately taken up by women as well. So on the special benefits side, that's where we tend to see a little bit of.... That is the largest contributor, frankly.

**Ms. Candice Hoepfner:** So that's a disproportion—

**Ms. Janice Charette:** That's right.

**Ms. Candice Hoepfner:** —of representation.

**Ms. Janice Charette:** Could I just go back to the OECD, the post-secondary, just to make sure I was clear with the committee members? It's 60% of Canadian women, not 60% of OECD.

**Ms. Candice Hoepfner:** Right. Women represent 60% of recent Canadian university graduates.

**Ms. Janice Charette:** That's right, which is compared to the similar statistic for other countries in the OECD at the highest.

• (1150)

**Ms. Candice Hoepfner:** So back to women being net benefactors. This government is looking at extending maternity and paternity benefits to the self-employed. Would it be correct in anticipating that the current trend is showing women as net benefactors primarily because of special benefits? If the government does extend benefits to the self-employed, would that trend continue, in your estimation?

**Ms. Janice Charette:** That depends very much on the design of the program, but I think we can safely assume, depending on what's contained in the package of special benefits and how it's designed....

**Ms. Candice Hoepfner:** If you look at the past—

**Ms. Janice Charette:** If you extrapolate from the current program and assume the same kind of take-up rates on the part of the self-employed...but it is a hypothetical question at this point. I think it's not unreasonable to assume, with the same kinds of design parameters, that the self-employed population will have similar take-up rates, so yes.

**Ms. Candice Hoepfner:** We've heard some recommendations, things like we need to reduce the number of hours in order to qualify. We still really haven't received a straight answer, but my concern is this. Do we create one system for women and one system for men? If we reduce the number of hours, we have to implement that for all Canadians, not just women.

Am I right in assuming that, or is there a way to create a separate system for women so that women can receive unemployment insurance when they haven't paid into it or they haven't received enough hours? Is that possible, and is it feasible?

**Ms. Janice Charette:** The employment insurance program is designed as an insurance program for workers. I'm not sure it would necessarily lend itself to a different program for women over men. It really is looking at the labour force characteristics primarily.

Could it be done? Parliament can choose to pass legislation. I'm not sure it would necessarily make much difference in how we would deliver the program. We'd still have criteria. We'd still have

eligibility. I think it's more a question of whether we have the design parameters within the program rather than thinking about....

I would suggest to you that a separate program designed solely for women would be a big departure from a program that is labour-market-based, so we'd have to think through the policy foundation for this kind of a departure from the current system and the advantages and disadvantages.

**Ms. Candice Hoepfner:** I think the other group of women who are completely ignored in all these discussions are middle-income women, women who own their own small and medium-sized business, who are paying premiums—families who are paying taxes.

My concern, and we have not discussed it, is the feasibility of some of these suggestions. We've even had suggestions that somehow EI is to provide a minimum guaranteed income for all Canadians.

I'm wondering if you can comment on how that would impact this group of women who are not at all represented in these discussions—women who work hard, pay their taxes, pay their employees, pay the premiums. How would they be affected by some of these suggestions, which could be quite a financial drain on the system as it is right now?

**Ms. Janice Charette:** Clearly we'd have to do a pretty thorough analysis of the nature of the recommendations, but the employment insurance program is a program that is financed by employers and employees.

**Ms. Candice Hoepfner:** Men and women, who are both—

**Ms. Janice Charette:** That's correct.

To the extent that we change the benefit side of the equation, that would have implications for the premiums. I think if you were to have taxation experts before you, they would tell you that payroll-based taxes can actually be a disincentive to employment. One of the things we have certainly looked at as part of our analysis of the employment insurance program in the past is the degree to which we use payroll taxes and this program to deliver benefits that are not strictly labour market related. I know that has been a debate amongst members of Parliament in the past.

But clearly, if you increase benefits, we have to increase premiums, and that is a cost to employers and employees. The government took a decision, in the 2009 budget, to actually freeze the premium rate for the next two years, so there's a cost to the fiscal framework for the next two years as well.

**Ms. Candice Hoepfner:** Ultimately, we want to see all Canadians working and doing a job that they enjoy, that they receive satisfaction from, so I think we want to make sure that the people who create those jobs are also able to continue with their businesses.

•(1155)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madam Hoepfner.

**Ms. Candice Hoepfner:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Ms. Mathysen.

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

I, too, would like to thank you for being here and providing your expertise.

There are some contradictions, though, that I have noted, and I'd like to address that.

First, you say that women are doing very much better. During the last Parliament, we looked at the economic security of women. We had statistics, from CRIAW, that indicated women are better educated and they are earning on par with men, but only up to about age 25 or 26, and then there's a steep decline in terms of their earning power. It was speculated that it was because they were choosing to marry, choosing to leave the labour market, or they were compelled to leave the labour market because they were providing care to children. But there was a steep decline. This, of course, impacts their future employment insurance benefits and their CPP.

All these factors come into play when we're looking at the economic security of women. In light of that, have you looked at that particular reality in your research? Obviously we want to have a complete picture of what happens to women.

**Ms. Janice Charette:** Ms. Mathysen, thank you for your question.

I wouldn't want to leave the committee with the impression that I would declare victory on the economic security of women. Absolutely not. What I am saying, though, is that the situation is improving. As I said, we look at post-secondary education...and we're seeing that younger women, in particular, are doing better. That isn't true across all women, but the gap is narrowing. The situation is improving, but we have to be vigilant and explore policy and program options to continue to close the gap.

The differential in wages is one that I know the committee has looked at in the past. The proxy we use to look at the differential is the average hourly wage. That's a different statistic than looking at an annual wage, for instance, and looking at all women by comparison to all men, because it does take into consideration some of the caregiving and other responsibilities that women do take in our society.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** I'm wondering if you could provide details on this strategic training and transition fund.

Do you have the ability to track by gender who will be able to access this fund? I know it's administered by the provinces, but I wonder if you do any tracking in that regard.

**Ms. Janice Charette:** We are in the process of negotiating agreements with provinces and territories, who, as you said, will deliver the strategic training and transition fund. I know we're going to be tracking clients who benefit. Certainly for the employment benefits and supports to be delivered under part two of the

employment insurance program, the labour market development agreements, LMDAs, we do track by gender.

**Mr. Paul Thompson:** We're still in the process of negotiating the reporting protocols around the fund.

**Ms. Janice Charette:** We'll take a note of that, though, Ms. Mathysen. We'll get back to the committee about this.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** I'm assuming every bit of information you could glean would be of value in terms of all these programs. I appreciate that. We've heard from Statistics Canada that some of the data our committee was looking for is just not available. They've had cutbacks and they simply can't manage to provide all that we were interested in.

We were particularly interested in learning the reasons that Canadian women voluntarily leave their jobs. Do you think this information would help to inform better policy-making? Are there any plans to request that StatsCan begin to keep this? There has been a discussion about voluntary reasons for women leaving work. In my riding women have come to me and said they left their jobs voluntarily but because they were being sexually harassed or they were under a great deal of stress.

I wonder if there are plans to start to collect that kind of data.

•(1200)

**Ms. Janice Charette:** I'll come to the data in just one second. When I say access to regular benefits for individuals who leave their job for a valid reason, anybody in that kind of a situation would be eligible for regular EI benefits. It's a voluntary quit, because they were choosing to go on and do something else.

As to your point about statistics, I think we have an ongoing conversation between HRSDC and StatsCan about how best to invest our data and research dollars in terms of being able to get the kind of information necessary for policy analysis. Our appetite is endless, and our budget is fixed. As in all things, we have to figure out how best to set priorities between us.

I would say that the input of parliamentary committees in terms of the information that is of use to you is an important input into our discussions with StatsCan. So if there is a particular kind of information or data that you think would be helpful to policy analysis, that would be helpful to see as part of your report, we'd take that into consideration in our conversations.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Status of Women Canada told us last year that the department is working on developing indicators to identify trends and gaps that have impacts on gender equality.

I'm wondering if you are involved with the development of those indicators. If so, could you talk about the status of the project?

**Ms. Janice Charette:** We're involved with the Status of Women on a wide variety of topics. I'm not exactly familiar with the indicators work, but we can find out for you if you want, or inquire with Status of Women Canada.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Okay, I see.

**The Chair:** You have about 20 seconds.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** I'll make it really quick.

Did HRSDC make recommendations for improving EI eligibility criteria for Budget 2009? Just a yes or no, as I understand the limitations.

**Ms. Janice Charette:** Yes, we made recommendations.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Thank you.

**Ms. Janice Charette:** We give advice.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We have to end this session and go to the next session. I want to thank Madame Charette and Mr. Thompson for coming.

If there's any data or information that was requested here, or if people want to clarify things, please send it to the clerk. We'd love to use it.

Thank you very much for coming.

**Ms. Janice Charette:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** We're going to suspend until we call in the new witnesses.

• \_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_

•  
• (1205)

**The Chair:** I want to thank our witnesses for coming.

I just want to tell you some of the rules. We have a very short period of time in which to get this done. Normally we allow everyone 10 minutes to present. However, I think if all of you present for 10 minutes, we are never going to be able to get the questions part done. Because of the timelines, and today is the last day for hearings on this report and you all want to be heard, I would like to ask you if you can give us a five-minute presentation, because that will allow for a fulsome discussion with you and questions to you.

So if you can boil—Susan knows how to do this very well—your 10 minutes down to 5, I think we can just move forward.

I'll begin—

**Hon. Navdeep Bains (Mississauga—Brampton South, Lib.):** I would just like to make a suggestion, Chair. If they have written submissions they can submit those. Have they already done so?

**The Chair:** We usually do.

What I'd like to do is start on my right with Colleen Burns for five minutes. If you just look up at me, I'll give you a one-minute signal so you know how to pull your thoughts together to the end. So beginning with Colleen and moving towards Michèle Asselin, we'll begin.

Colleen Burns and Susan Russell are here together from the Canadian Federation of University Women. Which one of you would like to present?

Ms. Russell.

**Ms. Susan Russell (Executive Director, Canadian Federation of University Women):** Thank you very much for the opportunity to

appear before you. This is a very important issue, as far as the Canadian Federation of University Women is concerned.

I have a summary, so I'll work on my summary first in case I don't finish this. We're very concerned that more women than men do not qualify for employment insurance, in part because of part-time work hours; seasonal employment; unstable contract work; time out of the workforce because of child care, elder care, or other care duties; moves due to spousal employment, and so on and so forth. It's harder for women to qualify for employment benefits because it's harder for them to reach the qualifying barrier.

Because women are often in lower-paid work situations, their benefits are lower and the level of benefits are lower, and it makes living on unemployment benefits very difficult. This can lead to falling into a cycle of poverty and being dependent on a spouse for economic stability. That's my summary.

I'll go as far as I can with the rest. We find the EI program is of great importance to all workers in Canada. It provides protection at the time of job loss, and it should provide benefits that support the individuals and their families while they are searching for jobs.

Our current EI program leaves many Canadians, especially women, lower-wage earners, contract workers, and insecure workers with insufficient or no income while they are searching for work. In November 2008, just four out of 10 unemployed workers qualified for benefits. Today's maximum benefit is \$447, more than 25% lower than it was in 1996. The average benefit is \$335 per week. We feel the need to stress gender analysis when looking at this program and how it impacts on women.

Benefits of employment insurance are that it can stabilize family income, and it really does help in periods of high unemployment to get people back in the workforce because it provides them with income while they're doing their search. However, women are unfairly penalized because of their different working patterns compared to men.

• (1210)

**The Chair:** You have one minute and a half.

**Ms. Susan Russell:** In that case I think I had better go to our recommendations.

We would like to see a cut-off requirement of 360 hours of work across the country to enable more workers to qualify if they are laid off, and we see more and more people falling into unemployment as a result of the current economic downturn; benefits for up to 50 weeks so fewer unemployed workers exhaust their claim; higher weekly benefits so the best 12 weeks of earnings before a layoff are used; and a replacement rate of 60% of insured earnings. These proposals would assist women. A reduction of the entrance requirement is particularly important in terms of closing the employment insurance gender gap.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Russell.

Next is the Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action. Who is going to speak? Is it Ms. Diamond?

**Ms. Bonnie Diamond (Co-Chair, Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action):** Nancy and I are both going to speak. CRIAW and FAFIA have come together. Our recommendations were remarkably similar, our analyses were similar, so from the get-go we said we were going to present together.

**The Chair:** Okay. So you can have five minutes and you can have five, CRIAW. You will decide how you do that. You can take seven minutes, Ms. Diamond, and CRIAW can take three minutes, if you wish. What I would like to do, if you'll just kindly look at me now and then, if I put up three fingers, it means you have three minutes left, and so on.

**Ms. Bonnie Diamond:** So we're going to dispense with all the introductory niceties and get straight to the point.

**The Chair:** Yes.

**Ms. Bonnie Diamond:** We're very happy to address you from a FAFIA perspective. CEDAW has urged Canada to address income support so women can have sufficient income to attain an adequate standard of living. Of course, that would mean not only benefits such as EI, which are very important in that, but also looking at other forms of income support for women that fall outside EI, such as social assistance.

I've already told you that CRIAW and we are presenting together. I just wanted to make a note before we start that is not directly relevant to EI, but is, and that is that the research capacity of women's organizations like FAFIA and CRIAW is being compromised by the changes to Status of Women Canada. The change I'm talking about specifically is that research is not a funded activity in many cases anymore, and we have lost the community research fund. It means that today we're sitting here with work we have done in the recent past on EI and whatever, but the capacity of contributing community research by women to this type of discussion will be eroded more and more.

If you look at the presentation that has just been set before us, you will see why it is critical to add community research done by women to that piece. We take an intersectional approach. We put women directly at the centre, so you would never be looking at a situation where you're saying women are net EI recipients, and if you do the women-centred analysis, that's because women are into the special program of maternity leave almost exclusively, and it is a contribution not only to their own pockets but to their families and to the other partners in the family who are not taking that benefit. I think it only underscores why we have to look to this type of community-centred research by women to continue.

As we still have access to the materials that are created by CRIAW and other women's organizations, I'm going to pass over to Jane to do the analysis, and then we'll come back to Nancy, who will put forward our joint recommendations.

•(1215)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Ms. Stinson.

**Ms. Jane Stinson (President, Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women):** I'm currently the president of

CRIAW, and I want to acknowledge our coordinator, Fathiya Wais, who's here with me.

Some of you are familiar with CRIAW. We're a research institute that's been around for over 30 years and is dedicated to doing research to help organizations take action to address social justice and equality for all women. We really have been focusing on that "all women" perspective, to see women not as one universal, homogeneous group, but to recognize the diversity of women's experiences.

We want to emphasize how the EI system has failed women. We've investigated data in other research studies. As Bonnie has mentioned, the cuts to our research funding have meant we can't do primary research on this at this time, but we know you've received a lot of evidence that shows that many women do not qualify for EI benefits, especially if you take out the compassionate care and the parental leave.

As you've heard, it's a system that works best for men. It was modelled on a traditional male breadwinner system, and women's participation in the labour force, as Ms. Russell has just talked about, is vastly different. It's a system not geared to meeting the needs of women in the labour force.

Things have changed. Women are working for pay in record numbers, and the EI system needs to address the reality for women. Right now, we believe EI punishes women, especially those who try to combine family responsibilities and work outside the home. It's not flexible. Women are in and out of the labour force more often because of family responsibilities. EI does not adequately take that into consideration. We believe it needs to be revamped to address that different reality.

As I'm sure you're aware, unless women have adequate income, of which EI is an important part, they're often forced to stay in very difficult, if not abusive and violent, relationships. Not only for economic equality, but for other forms of freedom, it's important that women have an EI system that meets their needs.

We also wanted to say it's not just a gender-based analysis that's important. It's absolutely important to have that, but it's not sufficient. We would argue that we need to go beyond gender and look more at what we call an intersectional feminist analysis that recognizes women as a diverse group. We need to take that diversity into account in our analysis. We need to understand especially what's happening with the most marginalized women. What's happening to aboriginal women, who I would argue probably rarely qualify for employment insurance because they're not often employed? What's happening to other disadvantaged women, whether they are disabled or not? What's happening to immigrant and refugee women? How are they being affected by this program? To what extent are they benefiting or not from this program?

We urge you not only to continue to call for gender analysis, as you are, but also to try to ensure that it's an even more diverse analysis, more of an intersectional analysis that gets at the reality for many different groups of women.

As well as understanding EI, we urge that more research be done on social assistance because we know that more women will have to rely on that. There have been tremendous changes and tremendous hardships for people who are relying on those benefits.

During this period of recession and economic restructuring, we ask that you also push for good gender and intersectional analysis to understand better what's happening to women and to different groups of women as this economy is being restructured and as this recession bites deeper.

Nancy is going to talk about specific recommendations.

• (1220)

**Ms. Nancy Baroni (Coordinator, Gender Budget, Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action):** EI was supposed to put money in the pockets of the unemployed so that they could continue buying to counter the effects of the downturn in the economy, as we all know. FAFIA submits that increasing women's access to EI benefits and increasing EI benefit rates will promote women's equality and their ability to contribute to their communities and local economies through increased purchasing power.

In 2008, the 52nd UN Commission on the Status of Women concluded that “investing in women and girls has a multiplier effect on productivity, efficiency, and sustained economic growth”.

FAFIA is also concerned about women's access to Service Canada. This is a pretty practical concern. In order to submit an EI claim when filing for the first time, claimants must either file in person at a Service Canada office or apply online. While we recognize that Minister Finley has recently announced a commitment of \$60 million to increase administrative capacity of the EI program, we would also ask that consideration be taken to serve those who do not have Internet access or do not live near a Service Canada centre. Since most rural and remote communities do not have public transit, it can be very difficult to get to the nearest Service Canada centre. Those people who do not have access to a vehicle—in most cases women, because of their traditionally lower incomes—have to rely on others for transportation; as well, if they don't have Internet access, then of course they can't make their initial claim online.

I take as an example a woman I know well from my home community in rural Nova Scotia. She had no Internet access at home. Also—and I don't want to be ageist—she is an older woman and did not know how to file her claim online. In order to file her EI claim, she had to drive 40 kilometres to the nearest Service Canada centre. Luckily she had her own car. If she hadn't, she would have had to rely on the goodwill of others, because there is no public transit in her community, and normally taxis can be very costly in rural communities, if they're available.

Once she arrived at the Service Canada centre, she was directed to their computers. The agents there offered her no assistance because everything has to be done online. Luckily a fellow claimant offered assistance. This was a stranger.

This is not a system that should be based on goodwill; rather, it should be based on service, as the name of the program would imply. The services must be made more accessible to claimants. The woman in Nova Scotia, as well as many others in her community and in communities across Canada, can be better served by taking a more proactive approach in reaching them. This is as basic as having part-time people working in communities to help people file their claims. It is taking a more practical approach to ensure more people are reached.

As well, I want to underline the fact that access to affordable, accessible child care is a real benefit to women's economic security, as well as to their ability to participate fully in the paid workforce and to be eligible for EI benefits should they lose their jobs.

The five recommendations that we'd like to put forward are joint recommendations from FAFIA and CRIAW.

We would like to see an elimination of the two-week waiting period before people receive their benefits.

We would like to lower the eligibility requirement to 360 hours, regardless of region, and I understand that other witnesses before the committee have made the same recommendation, as our sister organizations have.

As a starting step, we would like to see the benefit level increased. We recommend 60% of wages over the best 12 weeks of employment; however, some of our sister organizations are recommending higher replacement rates, and we would certainly agree with that.

We would like to see the number of weeks for recipients to receive EI increased to 50 weeks. This increase would reduce the number of the exhaustees who may have to turn to social assistance for support should they not find replacement employment, which is very likely in this economic downturn.

As well, as per CEDAW recommendations delivered in November 2008 to Canada, we would like to see social assistance rates increased across the country to adequately meet the needs of low-income Canadians, namely women, to meet the real costs of their food, housing, and clothing.

Thank you very much.

• (1225)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Baroni.

Now we have the Fédération des femmes du Québec.

Which one of you will present, or would you like to split it? It's only five minutes, *cinq minutes*.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Michèle Asselin (President, Fédération des femmes du Québec):** Two organizations have been grouped together, CIAFT and the Fédération des femmes du Québec.

I will now address the crux of the matter.

**Ms. Ruth Rose-Lizée (Economist, Fédération des femmes du Québec):** We prepared a written submission, but since it has not yet been translated into English, we cannot distribute it.

We will need 10 minutes to talk about the two organizations.

**Ms. Michèle Asselin:** That said, the paper we presented has six themes. We will begin by looking at the eligibility criteria, the average weekly income and the NERE rule, which, we think, contains measures that discriminate against women. We will then present some recommendations. We would also like to make some suggestions concerning maternity and parental benefits, as well as compassionate benefits. Lastly, we will conclude by addressing income supplements for low income families.

I will now ask my colleague, Ruth Rose-Lizée, to speak.

**Ms. Ruth Rose-Lizée:** Hello.

In our report, we presented a brief history of all the measures within the employee insurance system since 1940 that have discriminated against women, either directly or indirectly.

I will spare you the details, but we would like to focus on the last measure, namely, from the 1996 reform, a measure that determined eligibility for benefits based on the number of hours of work, rather than the number of weeks worked. In our view, this measure discriminates against women directly and represents a continuation of all the other measures that have discriminated against women, including the first, whereby, until 1957, in order to access benefits, married women had to prove they had a permanent attachment to the labour force. The new rule does exactly the same thing.

The 1957 reform established admissibility based on hours. I have put together some numbers to serve as examples, which you can look at later when you have a written document. The last example available in the document was from Montreal, where the employment rate was 7.5% in March 2007. To qualify, 630 hours of work are needed.

Let us compare a woman who works part time, 15 hours a week, and a man who works 40 hours a week. In order to qualify, the woman needs to have worked for 42 weeks; the man, 16 weeks. If

they earn the same hourly wage, they will each be entitled to 17 weeks of wages. However, for the same number of work hours over a much longer period, which therefore means a greater effort and more consistent presence in the labour force, the woman will receive \$124 in benefits while the man will receive \$264. They accumulated the same number of hours to qualify, but the man's benefits are more than double what the woman receives. If we compare the benefits received during the 17 weeks, we see that the woman will have received \$3.34 in benefits for each hour of contribution, while the man will have received \$7.12.

No matter what example we look at, and no matter what region, people who work part time—and 68% of part-time workers are still women—will be eligible for benefits to a lesser degree than people who work long hours for a shorter period. For that reason, we recommend returning to an eligibility system based on the number of weeks.

When the government introduced that measure, it claimed it would be beneficial for people who work part time. The reality is quite the opposite. In fact, people who work less than 15 hours a week, and who were excluded under the old rule, may never qualify.

Another problem is how the average weekly earnings are calculated. The divisor system is used. The income earned in the last 26 weeks is divided by the number of weeks worked, or else a denominator is determined and that denominator is usually two weeks more than the number of weeks of 35 hours that must be worked. In our example, with an unemployment rate between 7% and 8%, 18 weeks would be the denominator. This particularly affects women who work in precarious jobs, especially in industries like food service, hospitality and retail, which are seasonal, but not necessarily in regions of seasonal employment, where the unemployment rate is generally high.

• (1230)

Women work a lot more in casual jobs. The 26 weeks that are taken into account could include many breaks, which could also lower the average weekly earnings.

The third aspect of the reform, which dates back to 1979 and also discriminates against women—and deliberately, from its inception—is the rule known as the NERE rule, concerning new entrants or re-entrants to the labour force. Let us suppose that in 2007, an individual worked less than 490 hours, but met the requirements in relation to the unemployment rate in her region in 2008, and she finds herself unemployed in 2009. If she has not accumulated 910 hours, she will still not be eligible.

That rule was introduced in 1979 specifically to prevent people who are entering the labour force from being eligible for employment insurance, specifically young people who are working their first job and older women who are returning to the labour force after raising their children. It was partially modified in 2001, for people who received maternity or parental benefits. However, this still affects women who have three children, for example, and whose absence is longer or who, upon the arrival of their second child, were not eligible for benefits.

We therefore recommend that the NERE rule be eliminated altogether. We also recommend that we return to a system based on the number of weeks worked, taking into account all weeks of seven hours or more.

We have other recommendations, but perhaps during the question and answer period we could—

• (1235)

[English]

**The Chair:** We're going to have to move very quickly, because we need to have a question period, and if you continue, we won't be able to ask questions.

[Translation]

**Ms. Michèle Asselin:** Okay. I would simply like to point out that maternity or parental benefits are certainly a step forward for Canadians. As you know, we have had a parental insurance plan in Quebec since 2006. We recommend that the current system be improved and modelled after what Quebec is doing, because we believe that all Canadians should benefit from the same advantages and the same support when they have a child. I have a long list of those advantages, but I will spare you the details. Perhaps during the question and answer period I could tell you a little more about these advantages.

I would, however, like to take a few moments to talk about compassionate benefits, which are paid over six weeks when an individual must be away from work to care for a sick family member with a significant risk of death. We know that in 2006-07, out of the 5,676 people who took this leave, 4,262 were women. That is certainly a laudable initiative, but it is not enough.

Consider the example of Quebec's Act Respecting Labour Standards. It provides for 12 weeks of unpaid leave to take care of a family member who is ill, but without the restriction that that individual faces a risk of death. When that individual is a child, the worker can take leave for up to 104 weeks. We must think carefully about how that measure can be improved. We believe that 12 weeks of compassionate benefits should be offered with no waiting period, with a 70% income replacement rate in order to allow those workers, who incidentally, are mostly women...

As for the family supplement, I would simply like to say that it has not been indexed since 1997.

[English]

**The Chair:** *Merci*, Madam.

I'm very sorry to have to rush you, but we have until one o'clock, and we have other business to do and can go only one round.

What I'm going to ask members to do is take a five-minute round, because we cannot go with seven. If we are to deal with Madam Boucher's question from earlier on, we need to go with five minutes.

I'll begin right away, cut to the chase, with Madame Zarac.

[Translation]

**Mrs. Lise Zarac (LaSalle—Émard, Lib.):** Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you very much to the witnesses for coming. We have before us a number of specialists who are very knowledgeable about women's needs. We very much appreciate your comments.

In 1997, the Liberals created research programs, but it is disappointing to hear about the cuts that have been made to research, even though it is very important. It is easy to give numbers and statistics, but we must look even closer, dissect them and explain them, because they can be misleading.

Someone asked earlier if women were not the net benefactors, if they did not receive more benefits even though they pay less into the EI system. In response to that question, I would say that it depends on the nature of the benefits. It is very important to call witnesses who can dissect all this for us.

The government is telling us that consultations were held before the changes were made. You are experts in the area of the needs of women. Were your organizations consulted?

[English]

**Ms. Bonnie Diamond:** We weren't. FAFIA wasn't.

[Translation]

**Mrs. Lise Zarac:** Thank you.

My next question is specifically for Madam Stinson. How will these cuts to research affect your organizations and the needs of women?

[English]

**Ms. Jane Stinson:** Thank you.

The impact has been great on our organization. We've had to reduce our staff level. As well, it's been very, very hard to get access to funds to do research.

It's not only the quantitative analysis. As you're saying, it's really important to analyze the numbers closely, but it's the voices that Bonnie spoke of earlier. It's also that qualitative research to really get the community voices, the voices of women, about what the impact has been on their lives.

So that's what is at risk.

**Mrs. Lise Zarac:** And that's the information we need to know here and the committee appreciates having.

My second question will still be to you. Could you give us some data on intersectional barriers?

•(1240)

**Ms. Jane Stinson:** It's not about data so much, I suppose, as just being aware that there are barriers based on different identities for women. I can't say specifically what the impact has been, say, for disabled women, or the impact on refugee or immigrant women. So it's about the importance of looking at different identities in addition to their being women; looking at the effects of systemic discrimination based on those identities, and having a more comprehensive analysis of the reality for women.

**Mrs. Lise Zarac:** So I guess without funding you can't go into depth on that.

**Ms. Jane Stinson:** That's correct.

**Mrs. Lise Zarac:** Previous witnesses have told us that the further down you go in the data for aboriginal women and minority women, the more discrepancies you'll find.

**Ms. Jane Stinson:** Definitely. And you'll often find much more hardship, right? There's much more hardship.

**Mrs. Lise Zarac:** Do I have more time?

**The Chair:** You have two minutes.

[Translation]

**Mrs. Lise Zarac:** Over five minutes?

[English]

**The Chair:** Actually, it's a little under two minutes.

**Mrs. Lise Zarac:** I would like to end this here.

To either person, what are the best recommendations you can give us for a program that would really represent and be *équitable, finalement, autant pour les femmes que les hommes*?

**Ms. Jane Stinson:** I think all of the recommendations you've heard from us have been very comprehensive and would make a big difference.

[Translation]

**Mrs. Lise Zarac:** But if we had to choose, what would the priorities be?

**Ms. Ruth Rose-Lizée:** To answer one of your questions, one study I found, which was produced for Human Resource Development Canada, shows that recent immigrants, that is, people who have been in Canada for under 10 years, have an EI accessibility rate that is 10 points lower compared to people who have been here longer.

Furthermore, the rule that should be prioritized is the one dealing with hours. Given that salary is determined on a weekly basis, the eligibility criteria should be determined in the same way. At present, there is a correlation between how much one contributes, the amount of work performed and the benefits received. I think this would help everyone across the board, all groups that are disadvantaged at this time.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Madame Deschamps.

[Translation]

**Ms. Johanne Deschamps:** Concerning your recommendations, you no doubt know that the Bloc Québécois has already taken steps

in that direction, by introducing Bill C-269. In any case, there is a general consensus regarding the recommendations made to improve the system.

I brought the bill to the human resources committee for debate...

I remember taking the bill to the human resources committee, where it was introduced and debated, and I remember being stunned and shocked by the response we heard from the government, a response I had also heard in the House of Commons, namely, that changing or improving the system would encourage idleness and laziness. I wanted to share that with you.

Your recommendations are in line with that bill. As you know, we are raising the issue again with Bill C-308.

That being said, will the five weeks added by the government make the system more equitable for women?

**Ms. Michèle Asselin:** We have been trying to show, although with too little time, that women are being discriminated against. Many women cannot access to the system, even if they have paid into it. All the better for those who can access it, but with regard to the five additional weeks, they do not solve the problem for many groups of women who are being discriminated against. This measure does not allow all those who pay into the system to access income if they experience a period of unemployment. The measure is not in line with our recommendations, because it does nothing to address discrimination against women.

•(1245)

[English]

**Ms. Jane Stinson:** *Absolument.* I agree, it just doesn't go far enough. It's an important change, but it doesn't go nearly far enough.

Back to the question of priorities, maybe it really is about addressing the qualifications, as the sisters from Quebec have been saying. That's what we really need to look at. Make sure that women can actually get these benefits in the first place, and of course raise them as well.

[Translation]

**Ms. Johanne Deschamps:** You may continue.

[English]

**Ms. Jane Stinson:** Maybe I could add one other thing. It's something we meant to mention before.

You need to look beyond the EI system as well. Look at, say, a child care program. The absence of a national, universally accessible, or affordable child care program is another major deterrent making it harder for women to be able to work. It impacts on their ability to qualify for employment insurance as well.



[Translation]

**Ms. Johanne Deschamps:** In my opinion, Quebec's child care and parental leave programs represent a very important way to facilitate women's access to the labour market. In terms of economic security, it establishes some degree of equity or equality.

In its current form, the employment insurance system does not really correspond to the type of jobs that women generally occupy. In my opinion, it should be updated in order to take into account the nature of their employment.

**Ms. Michèle Asselin:** As statistics show, women are unfortunately the champions of part-time employment, even in Quebec. We must apply cross-cutting measures, but it must also be recognized that the program contains measures that discriminate against women because of their employment situation. This deficiency must be corrected. That must be a priority.

**Ms. Johanne Deschamps:** Would anyone like to add anything?

**Ms. Ruth Rose-Lizée:** As for your first question, I would say that it is harder for women to qualify, but in addition, they also receive less in benefits. That is due to the fact that, even today, they still earn less and the system penalizes them because of the precarious, casual nature of the employment they occupy. The five week extension will, once again, be more beneficial to men, who tend to earn more money and whose previous employment was in sectors that tended to be relatively stable.

This measure will not be particularly beneficial for women, who have a harder time qualifying and whose salaries and benefits tend to be lower.

**Ms. Johanne Deschamps:** In closing, I have just a few words to say, since we have so little time left. I think it is very unfortunate that your funding has been cut. Expert opinions, reports and research are crucial to helping governments establish their policies. Your funding was cut because your research focuses on defending the rights of women. I think that is very sad.

Thank you.

[English]

**The Chair:** We have to move on now.

Madam O'Neill-Gordon.

**Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon (Miramichi, CPC):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for being with us this afternoon.

I know our government has made changes, and we are listening to the needs and requests of women. As the lady said before, we certainly haven't accomplished all that needs to be accomplished, but we are making positive changes. I know for sure that we have increased funding to women's groups for research and that women are looking forward to receiving more funds, which is what we are listening to when working. Also, our government's pre-consultation was a fine example of our government listening to Canadians, to men and women, not just men, when they went out into the communities. Everyone was invited to come out and say what they had to offer. As a result, that was a fine example of our research that led us to add the five weeks onto the end.

So when bringing our afternoon to an end, I'd like to leave on a more positive note. I'm wondering if any of you can give me some ideas and some suggestions of how this five weeks is going to help women. It can't hurt them. There have to be some ways it's going to help us.

Nancy Baroni, you mentioned adding additional weeks. How is that going to help women?

• (1250)

**Ms. Nancy Baroni:** Certainly it's a step in the right direction.

**Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon:** I asked about help. Can you name some ways it will help them?

**Ms. Nancy Baroni:** Simply because you'd be receiving benefits for a longer period of time and you wouldn't be exhausting them so quickly. The problem is the eligibility requirement. The main concern is that—

**Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon:** Yes, I'm looking at that, so that's another step in the right direction.

**Ms. Nancy Baroni:** Right. The five weeks, as I believe Jane Stinson has said, is a step in the right direction, but much more work needs to be done, and that is why we brought forward these recommendations. Of course, receiving benefits for a longer period of time is a benefit to those who are eligible to receive them, but—

**Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon:** That is what I said; it's a result of our consultation in the communities, so we are listening and trying to give more time for you to bring your thoughts forward.

I appreciate the fact that you are here today and you say we are listening, and as part of the government I'm happy to listen and to pass on your thoughts.

**The Chair:** You have two more minutes.

**Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon:** No, that's fine.

**The Chair:** My goodness.

**Mrs. Tilly O'Neill-Gordon:** I have to go.

**The Chair:** Patricia, do you want to pick up the time?

**Mrs. Patricia Davidson (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC):** Yes, thanks.

Just very briefly, Ms. Russell, I was wondering if you could give me some clarification. In your handout, you talked about how just four in 10 unemployed workers qualified for benefits—only 40%? Where would you get that statistic?

**Ms. Susan Russell:** I've seen that figure around. Again, because we have not got as much access to research as we would like, I could only go on figures I've seen.

**Mrs. Patricia Davidson:** Would it have been from Stats Canada or...?

**Ms. Susan Russell:** Those kinds of figures, yes.

**Mrs. Patricia Davidson:** But probably not from them, because it's certainly different from the figures they gave us.

**Ms. Susan Russell:** The most recent figure I saw was that 1.4 million were unemployed and the number is growing, and only about 800,000 had benefits, so I deduced from this that a significant number are not getting benefits.

**Mrs. Patricia Davidson:** Then your statement isn't referring to those who pay into it? It's referring to total unemployment across the board?

**Ms. Susan Russell:** Correct.

**Mrs. Patricia Davidson:** Okay. Thank you.

Ms. Baroni, I was interested in your statement about the woman in your community who had to travel 40 kilometres, and thank goodness she had a vehicle to get there. She wasn't computer-literate and she didn't have a computer at home from which to access it. That's certainly not an anomaly across this huge country.

You also made the statement that it should be a service. Are concerns raised about the amount of help given to people who are applying?

**Ms. Nancy Baroni:** Yes.

Actually, the woman with whom I was speaking on this issue said.... The people had been laid off from the school. They were school techs, such library techs or teacher assistants in an elementary school, and somebody had the phone number for the Service Canada office, so they thought that was great, because they wouldn't have to go through the 1-800 system and could actually talk to a person. We've all done that. We try to avoid the teleprompters—

**The Chair:** Right now we're out of time. I'll cut it here, because Madam Mathysen has five minutes.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank you for coming and bringing your expertise. I would like particularly to comment on how impressed I am when you refer to each other as sisters, because knowing that we are indeed sisters is ultimately how we're going to get the kinds of results we want.

Ms. Baroni, when you were talking about investment in women, you said that investment in women and girls has a multiplier effect on the economy and on economic growth. We heard the same thing from Madame Asselin and Ms. Diamond. This sounds like intelligent policy to me. I wonder if you could expand and explain that more fully.

**Ms. Nancy Baroni:** Absolutely. I know you've had Armine Yalnizyan and Kathleen Lahey come in, and they gave their testimonies about women's contribution to the economy, either through caregiving, unpaid labour, or paid labour.

To cut it down to brass tacks, if you give funds to people who have low incomes, whether they're women or men, they aren't going to be investing it overseas. The money probably won't find itself in a tax haven in the Cayman Islands. It will be spent on necessities in their communities and in their local economies. That has a multiplier effect, because if you're spending in your home communities, then you're supporting local economies and supporting jobs in your own communities. That's the multiplier effect.

If you give the money to people who are going to spend it on necessities, it's going to stay in their communities.

• (1255)

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Would there be a health benefit too? We know that people who have lower incomes are more reliant on the health care system. Would there be savings in terms of health care too, and just general social—

**Ms. Nancy Baroni:** Absolutely.

I'll give you a basic example in terms of food costs, food security, and childhood obesity. They're saying that low-income children actually have a higher rate of obesity, because the food that's cheaper to put on the table is often high in calories and high in fat. Fruits and vegetables are simply more expensive. Milk is more expensive than pop. That's one simple example of the health differences in economic classes when it comes to investment.

There is also simple dental care. If you don't have access to a dentist because it costs a lot of money and you don't have coverage, then there's an increased risk of gum disease. The multiplier effect just continues.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Thank you.

I'm glad there's been reference to the need for research. You'll be glad to know that you had a respondent, the witness in earlier this week, Madam Heinrichs. She supported not only research but also advocacy and lobbying, so that call is out there.

I want to come to the CEDAW report on Canada. It indicated an alarming concern about women's access to social assistance. How does EI fit into the picture that we saw painted by CEDAW?

**Ms. Jane Stinson:** Well, if you don't qualify for employment insurance benefits or if you exhaust them for the reasons that have been described, then your next alternative may be social assistance. I think that as we see fewer and fewer women qualifying for employment insurance, we're going to see more women needing to turn to social assistance, and we know that the cuts there have been drastic. It's very hard to survive. Many women are also supporting children, so I think it highlights the importance of looking at our social assistance program and ensuring that it can provide an adequate standard of living.

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Ms. Rose-Lizée.

**Ms. Ruth Rose-Lizée:** I'd also like to note that in order to qualify for social assistance, you usually have to get rid of almost all of your assets. If you have a home, you may have to remortgage it and use that money to live on until the equity you have in your own home is below the level set by the province. You may have to sell a second car or other things.

We know that once you get to that level of poverty, it is increasingly difficult to get out. We also know that for an adult, being two to three years on social assistance is traumatic; for children, it may change the whole direction of their lives.

**Ms. Irene Mathysen:** Another investment.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. I would like to thank the witnesses for their patience and understanding because we did have to cut you short. Today is the last day or else we would have asked you to come back another day, but it was a 12-week study and this is the last week of the study. I think you gave us a lot of valuable information in a short time and I want to congratulate you. Whoever said that women can't cut to the chase? You did cut to the chase very well.

Thanks very much. We will now suspend this part of the meeting to deal with Madame Boucher's options. It should only take about three minutes.

- \_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_
- 
- (1300)

**The Chair:** Madame Boucher could bring forward a recommendation or a motion that will recommend we make a recommendation to the House of Commons on this issue as a committee, if we can get unanimous agreement. Or she could also decide that one of the things the motion could ask for is that we call a press conference at which a member of each party, if we all agree to this, can speak to this issue.

Because of the timeline, she'll have to give us 48 hours' notice either way, whatever it is you choose to do. So that is fine.

At the next meeting we will also deal with Madame Demers' motion.

[Translation]

**Ms. Nicole Demers:** Excuse me, Madam Chair, but I think she wanted to move an emergency motion, so she did not need to wait 48 hours. It was an event that happened yesterday and an article was published. I think we can deal with this immediately, since it is a current event. It is an emergency motion. It is in the news right now.

[English]

**The Chair:** Yes, I realize that, but it would have to be because two people from this committee have already left. We'll have to discuss this no matter what we do. It means we're going to stay overtime to do that. I need your sense of what you want to do.

Given that today is Thursday and tomorrow is Friday...many people are leaving. I don't know if we can put this forward in the House tomorrow, and because of the two weeks off we could lose all this impetus if we choose to do something about it. We'll all be gone, so there won't be that impetus. I'm just making some suggestions. Obviously Madame Boucher is free to do what she wishes, but before Madame Boucher speaks, I would like to get the sense from everyone if they wish to stay and discuss this as an emergency motion. Is there assent to that?

No one is in agreement.

Madame Boucher.

[Translation]

**Mrs. Sylvie Boucher (Beauport—Limoilou, CPC):** I have another idea. I will put the motion down on paper and send it to you before 5 p.m., so that we can write a letter tomorrow on behalf of the committee to ensure that these things—

**Ms. Nicole Demers:** We do not need a motion for that.

**Mrs. Sylvie Boucher:** So I will write a letter, I will send it to you, and we will sign it and forward it to the appropriate people, so that this never happens again, out of respect for women.

[English]

**Mrs. Patricia Davidson:** Not on behalf of the committee.

[Translation]

**Mrs. Sylvie Boucher:** That is not possible.

[English]

**Mrs. Patricia Davidson:** No.

[Translation]

**Mrs. Sylvie Boucher:** No.

[English]

**The Chair:** I think we need to discuss the best options to deal with this issue. I don't think we have committee agreement that we need to send a letter. I don't think we have committee agreement. We're not discussing it because everyone wants to leave. What are we going to do with this issue?

Ms. Mathyssen.

**Ms. Irene Mathyssen:** Since this pertains to something we'll be looking at later, perhaps Madame Boucher could bring the article to the committee when we look at the way women are represented in the media and ads.

[Translation]

**Mrs. Sylvie Boucher:** That is fine.

[English]

Good idea.

**The Chair:** Next week we're going to have to decide what we do next. In any case, on April 21, when we come back, one of the first things we're going to have to deal with is a report. I would like to suggest that during the two weeks off Ms. Morgan will pull together the elements of a draft report, and we can receive that on the 21st. Because you will only get it on the 21st, we won't be prepared to discuss it, and I thought we could use the 21st to have the discussion on the report of the Status of Women departmental performance review. We could do that on the 21st and we could deal with Madame Boucher's issue and Madame Demers' issue. We have a full meeting on the 21st. You will all receive the report, and then we can discuss the report on the Thursday at the following meeting.

Is everyone in agreement with that?

**Some hon members:** Agreed.

- (1305)

**The Chair:** I believe Ms. Boucher's point is so very important and it deserves full discussion and a really effective method of dealing with it, as opposed to just sending out a letter that no one will pay attention to, etc.

Go ahead, Nicole.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Nicole Demers:** I understand, Madam Chair, but I think it is really unfortunate that no one wants to discuss the issue at this time. It is in the news right now, but it will no longer be news in two weeks or a month's time.

We could have taken advantage of the fact that, for once, we all share the same view regarding the fact that such things simply should not be said. We were all shocked. Personally, I was very shocked by this advertisement.

During parliamentary breaks, the media does not cover any issues related to Parliament. So, as woman and parliamentarians, we could have used the media to communicate our position on this advertisement, which is not being well received, but will continue to be broadcast this week and next.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** I understand, but I think most people are suggesting that they may not have the time. They may have other things to do, and I think this deserves good discussion, because we are all upset with it.

Go ahead, Ms. McLeod.

**Mrs. Cathy McLeod:** Madam Chair, I think there are two things.

One, I really appreciated your comment that perhaps there could be a press conference with an all-party denunciation, and we could do that before the break.

**The Chair:** Those are options.

**Mrs. Cathy McLeod:** Then it becomes a critical element of our study. We can take a more thoughtful approach, but I think as Ms. Demers mentioned, we lose the timeliness. I like your idea, so perhaps we could do both.

**The Chair:** When would you suggest we do the press conference? Would it be when we get back?

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Sylvie Boucher:** Yes.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** If we're not here, none of the national media will give it the full attention it deserves, because nobody will be in the House for the next two weeks. When we get back, the first thing we will deal with is Madame Boucher's motion of options that we have. We can deal with it, and then, depending on what we decide, we can deal with it on that day.

**An hon. member:** Is anyone here tomorrow?

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Sylvie Boucher:** Tomorrow?

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Most people are not here tomorrow either.

**Mrs. Sylvie Boucher:** We'll talk.

**The Chair:** I think Madame Mathysen is not here tomorrow, so that's how we would go.

**Mrs. Sylvie Boucher:** Okay, tomorrow—

**The Chair:** Is there a motion to adjourn?

**Mrs. Sylvie Boucher:** I talked with the—

[*Translation*]

We will try to do that tomorrow.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** *Merci beaucoup.*

The meeting is adjourned.







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