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Friday, January 14, 2011

—
Chair

The Honourable Hedy Fry

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• (1640)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathyssen (London—Fanshawe, NDP)): Order, please.

I want to say thank you to all those who have come to present to us today, folks from Beendigen; the Catholic Family Development Centre; Nishnawbe Aski Nation; the Ontario Native Women's Association, NWAC; and Robinson Superior Treaty Women's Council. We're very grateful that you've agreed to meet with us. I want to thank you for your time and thank you in advance for the good advice and the wisdom that I know we're going to hear today.

I'd also like to say thank you for the kind welcome to the Nishnawbe Aski traditional territory. We're very pleased to be here.

As you can see, this is an all-party committee. We have Madam Michelle Simson, a member of the Liberal Party; Madam Nicole Demers, a member of the Bloc; and my colleague, Bruce Hyer, who is the MP for Thunder Bay—Superior North, a New Democrat; and, of course, Mr. Greg Rickford, who is a member of the Conservative Party.

Our mandate is to look at violence against aboriginal women. We want to know the root causes, what you see as some of the reasons that women and their families suffer from such violence, the nature of that violence, and the extent of the violence. Finally, what we really want is a sense of the solutions, because we firmly believe that the community is the source of solutions to a problem that we've been struggling with for far too long. So I want to thank you again.

Before we begin, I'd like to ask the indulgence of the committee. Since I'm chairing, I would be happy to take the first round, the seven-minute round, but, with your permission, perhaps Mr. Hyer could ask questions in the second five-minute round. That way I won't muddle things as badly as I usually do, and I can focus on chairing.

Is that all right with the committee? Are there any objections?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathyssen): Thank you very much for that.

Presenters, you have five to seven minutes. I know it's not very much time, but there are many people to speak. So that's five to seven minutes per group.

I know that Ms. Brenda Bunting has joined the Nishnawbe Aski Nation and is in the audience. If there are questions that you feel she

would be more adroit at answering, please feel free to call her to the microphone.

With no further ado, we'll begin with Patricia Jurivee, from Beendigen, please.

Ms. Patricia Jurivee (Executive Director, Beendigen Inc.): Thank you very much for asking me to be here; I'm very honoured. I hope I can give you some good recommendations.

As you know, I'm the executive director of a 24-bed crisis home. With the women who come through the shelter, what we see is generational violence. What we see are very vulnerable aboriginal women, and poverty, extreme poverty. Those are just some of the issues that I will speak about, because I'm on such a time limit here.

We see a lot of recidivism—generational, of course. The residential school system of course plays a big role in all of that. There's a lack of parenting skills, but not no parenting skills, and I will never say that; I believe the women have very good parenting skills, considering, so I give them a lot of credit. They're very, very strong women. However, the system certainly needs to be improved in some areas to help the women and children.

One of the first recommendations I want to bring forward is about the disparity in funding dollars between INAC shelters and the provincially funded shelters. There's a huge disparity. I know that the dollars are also funded from the bands or chiefs, and I do know that there are probably administration charges there. I have heard that they can be as high as 30%. I don't know that for sure. That's just some of what I have been told. This means, of course, that those dollars are then taken away from the women and children and the shelters. So what I would like to see and what I recommend is that those dollars be flowed directly to the shelters.

Another issue that concerns me is the low amount or lack of funding dollars for the aboriginal and off-reserve pre- and post-natal program as well as the CAPC program, which is for children zero to six years old. We barely make it: we almost beg, borrow, and steal in order to run those programs. We have people who are very capable of running those programs and want to do a very good job, but they're very limited in what they can afford to do.

The other one is the NADA program and its very low, low funding dollars: \$35,000 a year to run the program. That's supposed to be considered a full-time position. You can't do it. For the worker we have now, we very fortunately were able to swing her into another piece of work so that we can try to pay her a decent wage, yet this program asks for certification for a person to be able to do it. Well, if you want somebody with certification in those types of qualities, then we need to be able to pay a comparable salary or wage, and we also need more dollars to sufficiently run these programs.

On homelessness, I'd like to see forgiveness in the housing arrears. I'd like to see the arrears alleviated in some of the government housing, because it means that if a woman cannot pay her arrears, she is not allowed to go into the housing. Those arrears have to be paid and can be anywhere from \$800 to \$1,500. That means homelessness. Now we get to that issue, because women can't afford to go into homes, or if they can afford to go into private housing, it means their entire cheque goes towards that. Again, that amounts to poverty, and it also can amount to child welfare agencies coming in, because it seems like she is inadequate and is not able to take care of her children: there's no food in the fridge, there's no warm clothing, etc. On it goes.

I would like to see more funding dollars in terms of mental health and addiction training—concurrent disorders—because right now in the shelters that is exactly what we are seeing, with very extreme mental health issues that put the entire shelter at risk.

Homelessness, of course, is another big piece for aboriginal women. They're out on the street. They have no place to go. They don't fit our mandate, unfortunately.

● (1645)

I'm telling you, we coach them sometimes to tell us they've been abused, because we don't want them out on the street. If that means I have to coach her to be able to say what I need to hear to get her in, I will do that. In the meantime, that doesn't solve her issue; it's only for a short period of time.

We need some long-term programs for homelessness. We need single units in particular, because we have some huge difficulties attempting to find apartments for single women. We probably need more funding and ongoing funding dollars for violence prevention work, initiatives for the aboriginal men's programs. I won't attempt to say the aboriginal name; although I am aboriginal, I cannot pronounce it. But "I Am a Kind Man" in particular is a wonderful program. We do run some programs here in Thunder Bay for men, and I would like to see some of the shelter workers and the shelters get involved in that work, which is our work as well. We want to be able to work holistically. Coming from a shelter, we work with the women and children, but we don't have the funding dollars to be able to work with the men, and we would like to do that. So increase the funding dollars for that, more funding dollars for that.

We'd also like support and dollars for the aboriginal women's crisis line. I have attended two meetings so far, and I'm hoping to see the fruits of the labour that went into that.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathysen): I am sorry, that's seven minutes. I thank you, but we do need to move on to the Catholic Family Development Centre.

Is there one spokesperson? If you could divide your time, that would be wonderful.

Ms. Carol Cline (Program Manager, Catholic Family Development Centre): Thank you, Madam Chair, for asking us to appear today. Welcome to Thunder Bay and welcome to all of you. Thank you.

My name is Carol Cline, and I'm the program manager with the Catholic Family Development Centre. This is Robert Barrett, the executive director, and Ron Bourret, the chair of our board of directors.

We are here today to speak about the counselling and education work we do through our centre with aboriginal women who are struggling to heal from the effects of violence. Aboriginal women who present themselves at agencies like ours are victims of violence, as well as perpetrators of violence. They present as women struggling to become better moms, and they present as women struggling to become better partners. Some present as quite quiet and withdrawn, others present as angry and aggressive, and some present as confident and assertive.

We welcome approximately 200 aboriginal women annually through our small agency. Most of these women are mandated to participate in a partner abuse program, or they're mandated to participate in a psycho-educational group while they're incarcerated in a jail. We also see aboriginal women voluntarily through our agency, through the first nations and Inuit health benefit funding. The aboriginal women we see through these various programs are all victims. They've suffered horrendous violence perpetrated overwhelmingly by men in positions of power and authority and/or intimacy. Men who these women thought would love, respect, and protect them instead betrayed them.

From the residential school abuses, to the intimate partner terrorism, to being beaten or raped, or any other manner of horror that these women had to go through, they have been left to make a life without the resources and support required to move beyond poverty, addictions, and violence.

● (1650)

Mr. Ron Bourret (Board of Directors, Catholic Family Development Centre): We've allowed these young aboriginal girls to grow up in a world that continuously places them at risk to any and all imaginable and unimaginable abuses. For many young aboriginal girls, teens, and women, the future is rife with discrimination, victimization, and murder. For a growing number of others, we can only guess at their fate because no one ever hears from them again.

If we are to make any recommendations, Madam Chair, they would begin with seeking out and listening to aboriginal women. Their voices carry not just their stories, but also their strength and their wisdom.

Our next recommendation would include creating safe environments, affordable housing, food, and opportunities. These women could then come forward and know that perhaps for the first time in their lives they could enter a world of trust. We would gladly continue to accompany them on their own individual healing journey.

Our final recommendation would be to educate our country about the history of our first nations people. A greater understanding of the abhorrent mistreatment of our first nations people may help us to forge a brighter future for those who many consider our most vulnerable population.

Mr. Rob Barrett (Executive Director, Catholic Family Development Centre): In our communities we see aboriginal women in lineups for soup kitchens, food banks, or quite often standing on a street corner. We do not see a lot of aboriginal women playing the parts of physicians, lawyers, teachers, or other visible professions, yet we clearly know that these women are intelligent, capable, and strong. The difference for many of us between success and failure and achieving and struggling is quite simply opportunity. Without the opportunity to achieve a higher education, to secure well-paid employment, and to receive appropriate health care we will continue to allow aboriginal women to remain mired in poverty, which not only chains these women to a life laced with stress and subsistence, but which all too often leads to violence.

Within our own community we have a number of aboriginal women who are champions. From Patricia Jurivee and the women you see at this table to Anna Gibbon, to Anne LeSage, Sandi Boucher, Jo Jo Guillet, these are women who are not only aboriginal, but who have somehow managed to overcome all of the barriers that our country and communities have put in place for them to become champions within our community, not only for the work they do, but also for the people they have become.

Could we use more money to support these women and the work they do? Absolutely. But for us at our centre it's more important for us to hear from aboriginal women themselves how they would like their services delivered.

Thank you for listening to us, thank you for inviting us here. But more importantly, listen to the stories of these women and those of other aboriginal women who come to agencies like ours. By listening, perhaps we can better shape our services, communities, and ultimately our country to see aboriginal women for who they truly are: strong, valued, intelligent, honoured people.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathysen): Thank you very much. That was very concise, and we appreciate it.

Now the Nishnawbe Aski Nation. Is there one spokesperson?

• (1655)

Ms. Christine Simard (Director of Women's Development, Nishnawbe Aski Nation): We're going to divide.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathysen): Okay, thank you.

Please go ahead.

Ms. Christine Simard: [*Witness speaks in her native language*]

Madam Chair, honourable members, my name is Christine Simard and I am the director of women's development, Nishnawbe Aski Nation. I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to the committee's study on violence against aboriginal women.

With the Nishnawbe Aski Nation, we represent 49 first nations within the territory of James Bay Treaty 9 and the Ontario portions of Treaty 5. The total approximate population of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation members on and off reserve is 45,000. The people of NAN traditionally speak Ojibway, Cree, and Ojicree.

I want to share a little bit of the historical perspective of violence and how it came to be within our first nation communities.

First nation members of Nishnawbe Aski Nation have been displaced. They've been taken away from homes and forced to attend residential schools. We have gone through radar sites on the coast of James Bay, the sixties scoop, and alcohol, solvent, and prescription drug abuse. A large number of suicides have happened over the past 25 years among our young people, and of course there's domestic violence that ties in with all of this. There are many contributing factors that end up with our women facing violence.

Within Nishnawbe Aski Nation we are fortunate enough to have a policing program called Nishnawbe Aski Police Services, which is also known as NAPS. According to the NAPS statistics, from 2006 to 2009 there were a total of 1,556 calls to domestic disputes. For sexual assaults there were a total of 569 cases reported. That equals 2,125 types of violence against first nation women within Nishnawbe Aski Nation.

Chief Lorraine Crane (Nishnawbe Aski Nation Women's Council member, Thunder Bay Indian Friendship Centre): *Boozhoo.*

I know we don't have very much time. I would like to speak about the general impacts that have a lot to do with the violence against our women and children. I always include children, because they need a voice too.

I myself am a survivor. I was left with four children 25 years ago. I had to fend for them by myself. Some women give up, but some women don't give up. They get on with their lives and do the best they can for their children. We see so many displaced children today because the mothers have given up. That's the sad reality I see with our people.

In terms of some of the problems I see with people needing help, when they need assistance and they ask for assistance, there's no place to go. The waiting lists for any programs or treatment centres are long. Many times they don't accept the family. A mother of three or four can't take the children with them. They can't go into a treatment centre if they have a police record. They can't.... There are just many blocks that mothers face when they're seeking help.

I could go on, but I'm going to let my colleague here take over. I don't want the whole seven minutes.

Thank you.

Ms. Theresa Sutherland (Nishnawbe Aski Nation Women's Council member, Thunder Bay Indian Friendship Centre): *Wachiya.* I am Theresa Sutherland.

[Witness speaks in her native language]

I thank you all for hearing me today in regard to violence against women. I wrote down some stuff here that I quickly want to cover in regard to being born and raised in an isolated community.

I speak on behalf of our women, our young women. I speak on behalf of them because in the isolated communities their first language is the native language. And I speak for them in regard to the fact that when they go through violence, they are unable to leave the community itself because they have no way of communicating with people outside. They don't really have their English language, and therefore, when they're looking for some kind of help for themselves, they have no place to go. They're lost already because they are unable to speak the English language. I speak on behalf of them because they're not able to disclose about themselves, if they should go for counselling, as they don't have a counsellor who speaks the language.

Then, also, they just have no place to go. If they do have a counsellor within their isolated community itself, it could be their grandmother. It could be their aunt. Therefore they have nothing; they have nobody to go to. So I speak on behalf of the families, and if there's a relationship that doesn't work within, and then it comes down to very.... They're just stuck: nothing.

I go from community to community trying to help our people. I speak with them, and relate to them within their language, because I have my language. This one girl I was talking to told me that she had gone through 15 years of abuse. She thought it was normal.

I speak for these women because I think we need more counsellors, more resource workers, within the isolated communities. Our young people, our young women, could start to feel some self-esteem if they had more resource workers, mental health workers, and what have you.

This is what we need within the community. It's hard for them to leave their community, because that's their roots. That's their heart.

Thank you.

• (1700)

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathyssen): Thank you very much.

A voice: *[Inaudible—Editor]*

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathyssen): When it's time for the MPs to ask their questions, it would be wonderful if you included the things that you wish to say. I'm sure there'll be opportunities.

From the Ontario Native Women's Association, Dawn Harvard, please.

Ms. Dawn Harvard (President, Board of Directors, Ontario Native Women's Association): Thank you very much to the House

of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women for inviting me here today.

In our communities, violence—whether it be physical, mental, social, spiritual, or sexual—can cause harm to the individual and the community by diminishing the basic human rights that other women and other citizens of Canada experience freely. This is especially true for aboriginal women in Canada.

The Native Women's Association has worked for years to support and empower aboriginal women and their families. We work to address the needs of aboriginal women in the areas of economics, health, justice, employment, and training. But most importantly, before we can even begin to address those kinds of needs, we are continually focusing on addressing the most important factor in their lives, which is ending the violence against aboriginal women, for without safety and the freedom to live a life without fear of violence, our women cannot pursue their goals in other areas, including education and employment. They cannot find the opportunity to be self-sufficient and support their families in a way that's positive and healthy for their children.

Unfortunately, ending violence against aboriginal women cannot be fixed in a day. There is no way to just overcome the issues plaguing aboriginal women without understanding the root causes of violence. Prior to colonization, our women were proud, strong contributing members of our community. Unfortunately, as a result of the imposition of patriarchal ideologies and the belief that women, whether they be aboriginal or non-aboriginal, were the property of their fathers, of their husbands, or of a man in general, our role as having real and genuine power, economic power, and authority in our communities was stripped from our women. We are still suffering from the legacy of that, having had to fight for years to try to regain access to that ability to function, to be contributing members of our communities, and to have authority and responsibility in our families.

This distorted view of women in general as being the property of their man is still prevalent in Canadian legislation.

Bill C-31 had the important impact in reinstating a number of aboriginal women, after women like my mother, Jeannette Corbière Lavell, and proud women like her, Yvonne Bédard, and Mary Two Axe Early went to court and had the courage to stand up and oppose this kind of violence from the government. We must also recognize that it is not just in our own communities. It's the legislative violence against our women, which leads to their being in vulnerable positions socially and economically, which leads to the violence in the communities.

It was through the work of these women that Bill C-31 came about, but it was not sufficient to address the needs. In a lot of communities, women who were reinstated with a second-class status were in fact subjected to continued persecution because they were seen as contributing to overcrowding and impinging on the already scarce resources in communities. So the most vulnerable members were therefore subjected to increased persecution in our own communities.

Aboriginal women in northern remote communities have a very unique experience, not the same as what we have in Toronto or the experience of a lot of the women around the table, in that we could take a taxi cab to a shelter, but if you have to get an airplane to fly out of your community, the option to just flee violence becomes extremely more complex. And without taking these very real circumstances into consideration, the governments, whether federal, provincial, or municipal, or our first nations governments, and our communities are not addressing the unique situation of aboriginal women or in fact protecting their right to live free from violence and to be safe.

Aboriginal women suffer multiple and varied forms of violence. One of the most important things to remember is that poverty contributes not only to hunger and inadequate housing but also to the level of violence in their lives. Over 40% of aboriginal women live in poverty. As a result, many are forced into situations of having unsafe living conditions in order to try to stay away from homelessness, a state in which they would be even less safe, and into dangerous life-threatening situations, and often the sex-trade industry, in which they're forced to sell their bodies on the street corners to try to feed their families. That's a situation nobody should have to be in, but it makes them extremely vulnerable, and thus contributes to the extremely high rates of violence.

The Native Women's Association of Canada and their Sisters in Spirit project reported this perception across society that a native woman who is pushed into those extremely dangerous circumstances through no fault of her own is somehow less human. Mothers of these women have reported being told by police that a woman who's missing is one less prostitute on their beat and that maybe it's better. She's one less welfare cheque, one less person sucking off the government tits. That's something we cannot allow.

• (1705)

We need to look at how they got into the situation and really understand. Utilizing the gender-based analysis of the Native Women's Association of Canada will help all of the members of our society to understand the unforeseen circumstances and impacts that are created by legislation that unfortunately discriminates and makes aboriginal women more vulnerable in society.

More recently, the Canadian government has taken a positive step by investing \$10 million over a period of two years to address the issue of missing or murdered aboriginal women. We received a great number of e-mails stating how wonderful this was and we are very proud to have had that contribution. Unfortunately, the largest portion of the funding is being directed to justice systems, a generic RCMP missing persons database, and amendments to the Criminal Code. These actions will not address the root causes of violence against aboriginal women, but will provide only a temporary reassurance to a complex issue.

Most important, the work that is being carried on right now by aboriginal grassroots organizations, especially in places like Thunder Bay and communities where the women are living, will suffer. These organizations and these programs are not going to have the resources they need and the women are once again being overlooked when their need is the greatest.

The Ontario Native Women's Association is looking to the federal government for meaningful and timely action in addressing these root causes of violence. We have prepared and worked for a great many years with women at the community level, people on the front lines who are dealing with this violence that they face every day, to develop the strategic framework to end violence against aboriginal women in cooperation with the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres. We strongly recommend that the government look at, understand, implement, and take action on this strategic framework. We don't need to reinvent the wheel. It has been done. We need to start taking action.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathysen): Thank you very much, Ms. Harvard. I'm so sorry that your time is up, but I am very interested in this strategic framework. I hope we can get to it in the course of our discussion.

Finally, Marlene Pierre, for the Robinson Superior Treaty Women's Council.

• (1710)

Ms. Marlene Pierre (Advisor, Robinson Superior Treaty Women's Council): Having appeared before standing committees many times in the past, I know how good it is for us that you have come here to Thunder Bay to hear from us. Nonetheless, I am not very pleased at getting five to seven minutes for this very important occasion, for being able to tell our story in a very real way.

I represent 14 reserve communities in the Robinson Superior Treaty area, and also seven off-reserve communities in our territory, spreading right up to Michipicoten and Collins and all those very isolated places in between.

Now I'm going to show you this Status of Women Canada women's program: I participated in the development of the first program for the Native Women's Association of Canada in developing the elements and principles of that policy. Today, when looking at what you fund now, it's a far, far cry from that: you don't do anything other than provide core funding to some groups.

You've provided us, Robinson Superior, with moneys to meet. Now we go to Canadian Heritage: we can get \$25,000. We just got approved for that. The reason I'm telling you this is that all these things these women have said will be said again for another 40 years.

When the Berger commission came through northwestern Ontario in the late sixties, I went there as the president of the Ontario Native Women's Association to make a presentation on the effect of any pipeline and any of that kind of work in bringing in hordes of men. Soon, impregnation became a way of life for our women in those smaller communities. I was very forthright about what I saw and what I heard, and I told them at that time about what was happening to us.

I can go to any kind of conference, including this one, where each one of these women are saying the same damn thing that we said 50 and 60 years ago. Why? What are you people not doing that will have some meaningful impact?

I'm telling you that one thing is to re-look, to re-examine the Status of Women Canada funding criteria and the projects they will or won't fund. This government, including past Liberal governments, with the participation of the NDP...you people are not really, really recognizing what is needed in those little communities that I talk about. For those women.... You're not even going to get any real participation from our women in the development and implementation of the matrimonial property rights law that's forthcoming, because they're scared. They need people like me and these other women who will come out on the front lines and say: "Look, these women are scared to talk. They can't talk in their communities because they're going to get beat up".

So not only do you have this other kind of physical violence, but you have all your systemic violence that is always directed to us. Who's the first to get locked up? Us. That's what happens to us. I've seen it. I've been there. I started this organization, Beendigen, in the seventies, and it bothers me greatly that these women are still suffering and dealing with inadequate funding resources. That's a shame. It's a shame on all of those people who are associated with these kinds of programs—and not just in Thunder Bay.

The other thing that still behooves me.... Why is there only one aboriginal-led program delivery in the whole of the north? You might have little smatterings of programs here and there, but there's nothing that can be of any real benefit to those women. They need the safe houses. They need all kinds of things.

I have with me three reports. I also have the workshop report from the founding conference of the Robinson Superior Treaty Women's Council that states exactly what the women were saying in that particular workshop. I'm leaving this with you. I'm sure it's going to end up on somebody's desk, but whether it gets read or not is another thing. But I want you to trust me: what I'm telling you, and what these papers say, is the truth.

• (1715)

We as the Robinson Superior Treaty Women's Council cannot rely on somebody to tell our story. We need to be able to be upfront and speak for ourselves, which we did at the gathering of the grandmothers. What a powerful conference. The women came out and cried. The grandmothers were crying because Dilico, the supposedly aboriginal-led child welfare agency, was taking their kids away left and right for money so that they could keep on hiring all these non-native people working—70% of them are non-native—and taking our kids away from us.

We had the aboriginal leadership there, John Beaucage. We had all of them there. They heard what these women were saying. "Oh, yes, we'll help you. We'll help you." Where were they? For the last two years we haven't heard from them. He's now become the child advocate in Ontario. We still haven't heard from him. What is being done? What we see in the paper is that they're helping these child welfare agencies get more money to keep on taking our kids away. They're not hearing us. They're not listening to us. And they ignore us.

Our organization cannot continue to be a volunteer group. That's what we are. I wrote all the proposals to fund these gatherings. I'm retired, but I am called upon because there are no resources for our women out there. Every one of these women will agree the action

has to come from the communities. The women themselves have to gather the tools among them, bring them in, and have discussions in the community about what they want. That's what we did. You have that information here. It's called the kitchen table tour. We went into every one of those communities and heard from those women, and they told us what they wanted. We have spread this around with, of course, our limited funds.

Finally, I know you folks are looking at hopefully revitalizing and whatever you have to do, but please include in your criteria funding for regional groups. Those include the Nishnawbe Aski Nation women's groups and ours—not just ONWA and not just NWAC, because they're mainstream and they hardly even exist in our territory. We exist in our territory. We do the work in our communities. Not just anybody can come in and tell.... I can't even go into Geraldton and say, "Well, you guys, do this". No. Those women—and we've heard from them—told us what they want. We need to help them to develop those action plans into the things they vitally want.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathysen): Thank you very much, Marlene.

I know that the committee welcomes the information that you bring, and we will certainly take the books back with us. I know that the committee will have many questions for you and for everyone. But please know that this committee is determined to go to as many communities as we possibly can. We've been limited in the funding we receive to do that, but we are determined.

We began our journey in the late spring. We've been to western Canada, Iqaluit, Labrador City, and the Maritimes, and now we're determined to talk to as many women and as many groups as we possibly can, because we know that you, the communities, have the real solutions, and we're very grateful that you agreed to come and speak with us.

Without further ado, for seven minutes, we'll begin with Ms. Simson, from the Liberal Party.

Mrs. Michelle Simson (Scarborough Southwest, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd also like to thank each and every witness who agreed to appear here.

I'd just like to pick up on what our chair had to say in terms of the time limitations we were given. This is something that was extremely important to the Status of Women committee, and the reality is.... I want to touch on something Mr. Bourret had to say about educating Canadians: I think that has to start with our own government officials. When I say "government", I'm not referring just to Conservatives; I mean all sitting members. Because the reality is that to get this done.... It's something we wanted to do, and on behalf of my party I would like to apologize sincerely for the five to seven minutes, because this is a huge issue.

I think we need to be educated. In order to get this done.... We were declined the money to even go on the road; we thought it was important not to do it by teleconference. We thought the visuals were important, very important: we had to see and hear. It's a lot easier for us to get here than for a lot of people.... I was particularly interested in wanting to speak to the women, not just to the groups that do speak for them. That was of great interest to me, because that's where we learn.

Now, Mr. Bourret, with respect to what you had to say about educating Canadians, I couldn't agree with you more. In what form do you see that education coming?

We need to know what has happened in the past. I do commend the Conservative government for the apology that was recently given; it was very touching. But we have to build on that and we have to change it and quit talking. We've talked about this for decades, so could you give me an idea of what you see as a good educational start for the rest of us?

● (1720)

Mr. Ron Bourret: Yes. I'm fortunate to have worked for the federal government, the provincial government, and now for the municipal government, and I certainly have to praise the provincial government. When I worked for that government in corrections up north, in Fort Hope and Lansdowne and many of these places we're talking about, we in corrections were all required as an obligation to take some native sensitivity courses to get rid of the racism that was going on.

I find it incredible, after coming to work at the municipality, that I'm working with colleagues who are educated but who still use derogatory terms towards native people. I'm shocked that they have no idea that a single mom living in a basement apartment with water running through it won't come forward and complain, being a native woman. They're not understanding the whole issue. We did the same with the judges in the province. We've brought them aside so they understand that someone standing before them and being charged.... Perhaps that young girl standing before them and laughing is not actually laughing; she's fearful, and that's perhaps her way of expressing herself.

So to answer you in brief, we have to start in the classrooms, in grades four and five, to let people know who we're sharing this country with—or even younger. It has to start at a very young age. I'm a strong proponent of this. The City of Thunder Bay has hired a native liaison person, Anna Gibbon, and she's working really hard already at getting everybody on board.

That's what we have to change: the attitude we have. It's a bad attitude.

Mrs. Michelle Simson: I'm going to throw this out to whoever would like to answer, and very briefly, because I'd like as many responses as possible.

Again you've touched on something that I'm a big proponent of. I believe the days of the levels of government working in silos should be over. I see that as a huge obstacle. I think there can always be more funding, but there are so many different pockets...this is federal and that is provincial. I understand the sensitivities of stepping on one another's toes, but there has to be a way that we can do something in an integrated manner, because all levels of government are affected.

So all of them should be at the table, including the leadership of the aboriginal community. Do you see this as something that would be very positive if we could change that and work in an integrated manner?

Who would like to start?

● (1725)

Ms. Christine Simard: Yes, it needs to happen. Working in silos really sucks. Working at NAN, we undertook a major NAN women's development project, and we had four different funders to do what we had to do. We achieved our goals and what not. However, the report writing and the travelling to get to the communities and reporting back to the women's council and the chiefs and assembly was absolutely crazy. I was stuck in the bureaucracy most of the time, instead of spending my time in the communities working with the women. So integration, working together—all levels of government really need to do that.

Mrs. Michelle Simson: Dawn?

Ms. Dawn Harvard: One of the things we had been proposing when we were at the announcement in Ontario for Jordan's Principle and the understanding that the needs of the child come first was that you can do your jurisdictional wrangling later, after the fact, but make sure the needs are met immediately and that nobody should be sitting waiting while the levels of government decide who is going to be responsible. Something along those lines needs to be put in place in these situations for addressing violence against aboriginal women and aboriginal women's services. We must stop fighting about who will be responsible, and make sure they get the needs met immediately; then we can discuss the issues afterwards. The model is out there. It's something we can certainly look to as a first step.

Mrs. Michelle Simson: Thank you. I really appreciate it.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathysen): Thank you.

Madame Demers, for seven minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Nicole Demers (Laval, BQ): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I would like to thank the witnesses for being here today. I am quite moved by their testimonies.

Marlene, I, too, am angry. And I am very happy that you are angry. I like it when women get angry because that's when things get moving. It's important that women get angry in the communities.

We're here today because some of you are angry. In fact, Status of Women Canada isn't making progress on the aboriginal women file. We've decided that this must change. There is no progress when it comes to missing or murdered women or when it comes to programs. Despite everything that's happened, nothing is being done.

We wanted to see, on the ground, how we—you and us—could make sure that things change. As always, we alone cannot change things. The solutions cannot come from us. When we decide to implement certain solutions, they are not the right ones. Take for example the aboriginal matrimonial properties bill, Bill C-31. Solutions that come from us aren't good because our solutions are the solutions of white people, not the solutions of the aboriginal communities. Once again, as it was during colonization, it's white men and women thinking like white men and women. But this isn't what we want to do. For once, we want to give you the opportunity to make suggestions, share your ideas. It's up to you to tell us how we can help you. That's the only way to do it.

We must return to Ottawa and try to convince our colleagues, both from our respective parties and from the government, which is what you said needs to be done. We must take the solutions you're proposing and run with them. So far, everyone we have met has proposed solutions, like the I'm a Kind Man program. This program works. We must set aside funds for these kinds of programs, holistic programs that heal the family, both the originators of the abuse and the victims, who might be children. This is what we want to hear about.

• (1730)

[*English*]

Ms. Marlene Pierre: Thank you. Thank you very much for your understanding of what we were trying impart here.

I think we have to look at the political reality when it comes to the government who was ruling at that time.

Someone thinks sometimes we're ordinary Joes, but we're not. We listen to what is happening in the government with a steady ear and when is the best time to approach government. This is clearly not the right time to approach government when you want to refurbish and get a little bit more into your idea and support for it if the federal government is changed, and if even one or two people who were proponents for our cause are not there. We've learned very well that the bureaucracy has to also be changed. They have to be convinced that we are important too, and not just their high-paying jobs.

I know that you are collecting some very valid information. Nothing that I will say can add to that information about what the realities are out there, out on the street, and in behind the closed doors. But my reality is how do I help the women come together to make their ideas come and grow so that they can do the work in their own communities? That's the only way it's going to work. Having had almost 40 years of political experience in advocacy and a whole bunch of other things, I know that is the only answer. You could go and talk to all kinds of people—you need that element—but for your policies to be successful you need our people.

We can't always rely on our own leadership. Our own leadership denies us access. I'm lucky to be here. I found about this the day before yesterday. So we don't even have access of information and all of these things.

It's very important for a little group in the northern part of Ontario to know what is going on, when we need people who are going to work for that. I can't do it volunteering, as the other women are doing. We need to have resources. And I'm going to keep pressing that, no matter where I go, because without that we're not going to be as successful in saying what's wrong with the matrimonial property law, saying what's wrong, and how can we work together with the chiefs to make something real and good for our families.

I appreciate what is happening today. I know it may change in a few months—who knows. But I would like to see what we have said here today, all of us, go forward to become reality. And what is the percentage of that happening?

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathysen): Thank you.

Mr. Rickford, please, for seven minutes.

Mr. Greg Rickford (Kenora, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and to my colleagues.

To the witnesses, thank you for your words today.

Just by way of a brief introduction, I've had an opportunity to interact with some of the witnesses here today to some degree, and just so my colleagues know, we have Christine from Lac Seul First Nation, whose territory we acknowledge being on today in Sioux Lookout.

Dawn, I appreciated your words with respect to the unique challenges that are faced by isolated communities. Very briefly, I spent the better part of eight years, Mrs. Pierre, as a nurse working in isolated first nations communities across Canada. Six of those years were spent in more than 20 communities in the riding of Kenora. I can assure you that I have a rich understanding of the issues structurally, the superordinate drivers of these unfortunate events, but also the more recent literature and the initiatives by a couple of governments, as Mrs. Simson pointed out, and you, Mrs. Pierre, and that this transcends or goes beyond political stripes. Like a number of other large first nations files, including the Indian residential schools file, which I was an associate lawyer for, representing more than 900 people in the Kenora riding—it was high time that it was dealt with, irrespective of who actually gave the apology.

That said, I also share your concern that seven minutes could never be enough. You're not alone in that regard. We've heard that from our colleagues. I'll try to start with some higher-level questions and maybe drill down to some problematic stuff in a second.

Mr. Barrett, you and Mrs. Pierre talked about a listening exercise that you felt was needed. I've made a thoughtful review of the literature, certainly with respect to the Sisters in Spirit recommendations, and more precisely what their stories tell us in *Voices of our Sisters in Spirit*. Perhaps in the second round I'll talk about their two-stream approach and get your thoughts on that.

I'll just ask you both very briefly, how do you envision that listening process taking place, outside of what's already occurred, for example, in the Sisters in Spirit recommendations that came from those literature sources?

• (1735)

Mr. Rob Barrett: Thank you.

Again, I'll go very quickly, because I think it's much more important to hear the voices of the women to my left than anything I have to say.

My exercise or experience in listening is just to begin with an open mind and listen. Although everybody is unique, and their own individual journey is unique, there's a lot of commonality here. The stories I hear are absolutely heartbreaking. Even preparing our presentation, the emotions that we felt ranged from complete sadness to shamefulness that we are a part of this society, to absolute anger and outrage. But I don't walk in their shoes. The role of our centre is to accompany people in their journey, and—

Mr. Greg Rickford: I appreciate that, Mr. Barrett. I want you to understand that I think we're at the point where we understand everybody's voice is going to be important in this. You can't talk about the education of white people structurally in our education system and in our penal institutions without saying that all voices need to be at the table here to a certain extent. I see Dawn maybe grappling with that concept a little bit, and that's fair enough.

Before I get to you, I want to acknowledge, and perhaps you can build on this, Mrs. Jurivee's comments earlier about two important things: the disparity in funding between INAC shelters and provincial shelters, and I think we gained an appreciation for that in Sioux Lookout and the tremendous demands on that specific shelter for a catchment area that the province simply wasn't able to recognize. I'm not trying to slip out of anything as the federal government and the government of the day, as Mrs. Pierre referred to us earlier, but that is an important issue.

Mrs. Pierre, you mentioned in your speech that we seem to have a lot of different places where people can go. It's a bit fractious. There's a bit of "apply to this program, apply to that program". There's a myriad of provincial and federal programs. The family violence initiative that we introduced is going to make an attempt to coordinate those approaches, but I'm concerned that we're missing organizations that don't have access to that funding.

Go ahead, Mrs. Pierre.

Ms. Marlene Pierre: There are not only organizations like ours, but it's in the smaller communities where this happens. I can think of Marathon. I can think of Longlac and Geraldton. They all have higher populations. There is so much going on with infrastructure. Towns are having to revitalize because of the economics. All these kinds of things impact on what people get to know about, to access,

or to even organize themselves around. And most of them are organizing themselves around finding a job or relocating.

So we have all these little one-industry towns that are no longer one-industry towns, because there's nothing there. And I don't like generalizing, but I am sure there is now an increase in violence. At one point there was less family violence, but now that has increased. You have the employment. You have all these different organizations that exist out there. But again, the incrementalism from both the federal and the provincial... Their approach is to look at a community to see what's needed—and you've probably heard the word so much now—holistically. We've heard it—

A voice: Collaboration.

Ms. Marlene Pierre: Yes, exactly. Let's just say that we must not just say we're going to work together. We have to work together. That's all there is to it. And whether or not I like you doesn't matter. Whether you're that government or this government or whichever level it is doesn't matter. We have to be able to say to you, and to you collectively, this is what's going on, and this is what we need.

I think I could end it there.

• (1740)

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathysen): Thank you very much. That was more than seven minutes.

I have some questions for you, Ms. Pierre. You've touched on a number of things, and they keep coming back to funding. We were very concerned, profoundly concerned, with the changes Status of Women Canada made to the funding formula in 2006 and with the deterioration, or what we see as the deterioration, in support and appropriate support.

My question, essentially, is that we keep hearing that there must be core funding. We also keep hearing that the problem with the current situation is that there will be needs, very clear needs, in the community. But it doesn't quite fit the description you see on the website or the program that might be offered. So there is this effort made to try to make a square peg fit into a round hole. And in the ensuing effort, there's also the reality that a lot of time is being devoted to creating proposals that have to be re-created 12 or 18 months later, and the real work that has to happen isn't being done.

Certainly I'd like to hear from everyone. Is that a fair assessment? Is that an accurate reality for the community?

Ms. Marlene Pierre: Absolutely. Getting that information out into the community is another big problem.

My own experience is that we got the notification that Canadian Heritage was going to do.... They made their announcement. We had to have the proposal in by December, or we had to work on it in December and have it submitted by February. This is January. We just got approval in December. Why is it taking so long to get from the beginning of the process to the end of the process? We still have lots of work to do to organize ourselves to have this leadership forum for aboriginal women in our territory.

The criteria are just not real.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathysen): You're dealing with things that are very real and very important. Thank you.

I want to go to Nishnawbe Aski Nation. I believe, Madame Simard, you were the one talking about treatment and the fact that—no, it was Chief Crane, actually—women can't go into treatment if they have a criminal record. This seems very strange to me. These are precisely the women who need treatment. Where did that policy come from? What's the rationale?

Chief Lorraine Crane: I wish I had the answer. I know that's what happens. I've heard that's one of the criteria they have to meet. If you have an outstanding court case, upcoming court case, you're not accepted. I don't think I'm making that up. I know that I've heard that.

• (1745)

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathysen): It's not unlike what we heard in a number of places, that women cannot come into a shelter if they are intoxicated—

Chief Lorraine Crane: Did I say shelter? I didn't mean shelter.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathysen): No, no, I understand. It's just sort of the same irrational kind of policy. People who need are denied for what seem to be rather arbitrary rules in some regards.

I have another question in regard to your policing. You have your own Nishnawbe Aski police force, and one of the things that we heard in the process of our study is that for a lot of aboriginal women, social services and police services are not very helpful. In fact, they're very often judgmental and they re-victimize the women and families that they're supposed to help.

I wonder, in terms of the experience here in the Thunder Bay area, how your approach with your own police force helps the people involved.

Ms. Christine Simard: I'm going to speak before Chief Crane.

The Nishnawbe Aski police service is just a police service. They're like peace officers. They're not a fully designated police force. Second of all, her community, Slate Falls First Nation, has about 260 members on reserve and they have two police officers who work full-time, 24 hours a day. They try to do shift work. Meanwhile, in the town of Upsala, you might have three or four OPP officers policing a hundred residents.

When you look at the disparity between population and policing, and NAPS being underfunded...they're often overworked. They're unable to participate within the community and really do their job thoroughly. There's a high burnout rate with our police officers as well.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathysen): My final question is for the Catholic Family Development Centre. You talked about incarceration rates, 200 aboriginal women yearly. You see 200 women, some of them mandated by the judicial system. I'm wondering about incarceration, in terms of these women. You described them as abused, battered, demeaned, and in terrible, terrible situations.

Is incarceration the answer? We have a reality in this country where we're building more prisons and financing more cells. Is that the direction we should be taking?

Mr. Rob Barrett: Absolutely not. It's absolutely backwards. We should be taking that money and reaching out to these women and giving them a chance. I think what we've heard, what I've heard, certainly, is that every time these women take a step forward, the rug's pulled out from underneath them, time and time again.

When we see them behind bars, it's the same stories we hear, and it doesn't matter whether they come from remote communities or right here in Thunder Bay or from southern Ontario. They have been battered and beaten. It just keeps going on and on again, and at a certain point some of them are even charged with domestic violence themselves because they're just so sick and tired of it. I'm sick and tired of it, so I could imagine how they feel.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathysen): Thank you very much.

Now to our five-minute round. With the indulgence of the committee, Chief Crane wanted to get a word in, I think.

Chief Lorraine Crane: I'm sorry. You beat me before. I wanted to add on to what Christine was saying about NAPS. Is that okay?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathysen): Well, perhaps one of the other committee members can ask that.

Madam Simson, perhaps in your five minutes.

Mrs. Michelle Simson: Well, it isn't a question. It's a request.

Please continue.

Chief Lorraine Crane: Thank you.

I'll give you an example of what we face in our communities. For the Christmas holidays, we are supposed to have 24/7 coverage. Our officer left without notice. I had two domestic incidents and I was just beside myself. I didn't know what to do. I had to call the head office in Kenora. That's the best I can do to get help, and they're two and a half hours if you go by road. It's domestic violence I'm talking about, and that's a problem we have with NAPS. They tell us we have 24/7 coverage, but many times we're caught and there's no officer.

I just wanted to add that. Thank you.

• (1750)

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathysen): That's an important addition. Thank you.

Mrs. Simson, please.

Mrs. Michelle Simson: In the course of our travels, we've heard testimony from other witnesses. You touched on it, Marlene, with respect to these women who are victimized and living in extreme poverty.

Also, we're still hearing stories about the children being taken from their homes. Do you see this as a rather bizarre mutation of the residential school system, so that in about 25 or 30 years the government of the day will be issuing yet another apology, and that if we somehow don't change the way we look at and fund this, we're just not getting anywhere? Would that be fair? Would anyone like to comment?

Ms. Dawn Harvard: In fact, when you read our full presentation, you will see that the comments have been out there on that. The statistics show there are more children now in the care of children's aid than were ever in the residential schools, so absolutely, an apology will have to be issued 20 or 30 years from now. This is one of the reasons why aboriginal women are concerned about full-day kindergarten in Ontario: it's often in contact with the school system—because their children are showing up without proper coats, without lunch—that they're being identified to children's aid.

It's not that the mothers are walking around at home eating flet mignon and wearing fur coats. When your family doesn't have enough food for two weeks out of the month, you can't send your child with a lunch. If the solution is to come in and tear that family apart and rip those children away because the mother doesn't have the money for lunch, it's a completely backwards thought process.

Not only is it further victimizing the women, but it's violence against those children. We will all be held accountable for that in 30 years when they are further populating the prison systems because of that injustice, and because of having their families torn apart that way at such a young age, for no reason other than the fact their families couldn't afford to provide a decent meal for them to take for lunch.

Mrs. Michelle Simson: So for governments, if we don't break our own stupid cycle, we have no hope of breaking the cycle of what the first nations and aboriginal women have been going through. Would that be fair to say?

Ms. Marlene Pierre: I want to come at your question from a different angle.

Having thought that Indian self-government was going to resolve all our problems, I still hear out in the communities that they're scared to even entertain the idea that we can really govern ourselves. Consequently, organizations such as Dilico still have their clutches on our children, because our leadership, those 14 chiefs, maybe not all of them, won't entertain the idea that, for instance, we were the ones who said we could get rid of a lot of problems if we transferred responsibility and jurisdiction of child care to right within our community.

Why do we need a big structure that requires so much money just to keep the structure going? Rather, we should get that money into the communities, so that the four of us in here could come up with the idea of how we want to take care of our children.

What about custom adoption? What about all those things that we know how to do from our own people, from our own way of life from before? We didn't have all you people here to take care of us or our children. We took care of ourselves, and we had a way to do it. Why can't we do that again? If you get four or five women sitting around talking about that, you're going to get something going in the community, and that's what I think our vision is as an organization.

We want to take all that responsibility from them and give it to ourselves. Within a framework of self-government, we should be able to do it, shouldn't we?

● (1755)

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathysen): Thank you. I did give you some extra time.

We'll now go to Mr. Rickford for five minutes.

Mr. Greg Rickford: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I use a stopwatch, not because I don't trust your timing. I use it to guide the flow of my own questions and answers. So I apologize if it seems as though I cut you off.

I have a particular interest following on my questions earlier, and I'm going to ask a few of your questions along those lines. I made reference to the Sisters in Spirit recommendation flowing from two literature sources. One in particular was what your stories tell us, and there was a two-stream approach recommended there, a proactive or preventive stream that would increase safety and decrease vulnerability, and the second was the needs of the families and communities. I'm going to try to get to the needs of families and communities. Specifically, I'll speak to Ron perhaps about his work in corrections, for some recommendations with the perpetrators of this.

I'm going to go to you, Christine, and I'll try to get to Dawn as well. Unfortunately today we didn't hear from Sunset Women's Aboriginal Circle in Sioux Lookout, which is running a project right now to empower aboriginal women through economic and social development. My friend Millie in Dryden runs a great program. I did an announcement there not too long ago. The program is looking at the participation of Métis women in governance, and I spoke a little earlier about this at the committee meeting in Sioux Lookout.

I'm going to go to you and then to Dawn to talk about specific projects and programs—and perhaps the need for benchmarks, if they already exist—that deal with social, economic, and particularly governance-empowerment processes.

I'll stop there. We have three minutes and 12 seconds.

Ms. Christine Simard: The NAN women's council undertook a major NAN women's development project. We went to the communities. We did personal capacity workshops and leadership development. Personal capacity workshops were about empowering women, building self-esteem, getting women confident and upright, to know what their rights are and to talk about violence, talk about residential schools, start developing leadership, so that they're able to go out and run for chief and council or apply for jobs in the band office, and that sort of thing.

Our funding came to an end. We're in the evaluation process, but there are so many different recommendations that came out from that project, because it's a pilot project. Government is famous for funding pilot projects, but the recommendations afterwards don't get followed up on.

Mr. Greg Rickford: Could you make sure that the committee gets a copy of those recommendations? Thank you.

Ms. Christine Simard: I will, for sure.

Yes, our development project, that was really important.

Mr. Greg Rickford: What are some weaknesses and barriers? Very briefly, please.

Ms. Christine Simard: The remoteness and the high cost of travel.

I don't speak Oji-Cree or Cree. I had some of my facilitators who did speak Cree. They helped us out. The language is a big issue. When it comes down to legislation like matrimonial real property, a lot of the women in the community, the elders, have no clue what's coming down the line. And language, remoteness, and the housing factor—

Mr. Greg Rickford: We appreciate that.

For my purposes, and it's been raised before, regarding governance, social and economic, I'll go to you, Dawn, and hear from you, with a national organization.

Ms. Dawn Harvard: With regard to governance?

Mr. Greg Rickford: Yes, those exercises, the need for benchmarks, do they exist, and what are the barriers that you see there?

Ms. Dawn Harvard: Certainly within the Native Women's Association of Canada I would have to allow you to go and I would not dare usurp the speaker's position over there. But certainly here in Ontario, one of the biggest barriers, as Christine has mentioned, is language, remoteness, and bringing our women who very often can't afford a taxicab or bus fare to get to your workshop. Especially in unique gender situations, let's look at child care. That's something that I know all of these women always have to look at when you're looking at aboriginal women's programming. They can't come forward to access services, to access treatment, and to access any of the programs you're offering if they're worried about who's taking care of their children while they're trying to do this, so often they don't.

• (1800)

Mr. Greg Rickford: We heard earlier today, Dawn, about early childhood development as one of the approaches from one of the witnesses, the Equay-wuk Women's Group, out of Sioux Lookout. I'm cognizant of that.

Just very briefly, what are some real strengths about these governance exercises, some positive strengths?

Ms. Dawn Harvard: Some of the real strengths, absolutely. We are working to reach women at the community level. Often people are not seeing them as women who are looking at governance or looking at what we see as higher-level issues, but it's those women at the community level who need to be reached, who need to have the information, so that they can understand and have meaningful.... We talk about informed consent. If we talk about consultation, we should have informed consultation, because if you can't understand what people are coming forward and talking to you about, how do you provide meaningful input? There are a lot of well-educated people with degrees who can't foresee impacts or understand effect, so how is that possible without real education?

That's one of the things that groups like all of the women around this table here have been working on, which is to make sure that our women are coming forward, that they have the understanding or at least a basic idea of what they're going to be asked to talk about, so that they're not being used to support something that may not be in their best interests through a lack of understanding. That's what's fundamentally important about empowerment. It is having the knowledge to act in your own best interest.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathysen): Thank you.

Madame Demers, for five minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Nicole Demers: Thank you, Madam Chair.

A little earlier, you talked about children who are taken out of school or from their family because they don't have a lunch. I would like to know if social services lacks some vision or if it's simply racism. Is it because of ignorance, a lack of knowledge or a lack of education?

I find it very unusual that children are being taken from their family because they don't have enough to eat. I have difficulty understanding that. These kinds of situations exist elsewhere, mainly in cities, but campaigns are organized to collect food so that children can eat at school. Religious organizations make sure that children have breakfast and lunch at school. Children aren't taken from their family; instead, they're given something to eat.

I don't understand. Can you explain this to me?

[English]

Ms. Dawn Harvard: I think it is all three things that you've said. It absolutely is ignorance, a lack of understanding of the situation that many of our native women are in—the extreme poverty they're facing, the barriers they face in getting education and getting access to a real means of providing for their families.

Absolutely it's racism. When a social worker looks at a native child in a classroom who doesn't have lunch, the automatic thought is that this is neglect, not that this is a family in crisis.

It also is the perspective that we have child welfare to protect children from their parents, and we have Status of Women over here to improve the circumstances of women. We're not looking at things as a holistic perspective, as a whole unit.

The best interest of the child is to support the family they're in, not to pluck them out and put them in a group home or in temporary foster care. It's to support that family to do what they can to support, because they're going to be the best advocates, the best support, for that child.

There's this automatic perception that it's neglect rather than a family in crisis. Rather than looking at how we support the family, we tear the family apart to save the child. It's completely backwards thinking. We pull families apart when what we need is what a lot of our communities have talked about, a wraparound approach, whether it be treatment for the mothers, if they need treatment, but also moving that family into a place of safety and food security as a whole family unit, not as fragmented members who are put in different places in the hope that they'll have a better outcome.

• (1805)

[Translation]

Ms. Nicole Demers: Can someone tell me why there is no communication between social services, police services and organizations that work with aboriginal communities to provide education and understanding about the situation? I don't understand.

[English]

Ms. Dawn Harvard: I would ask the same question.

[Translation]

Ms. Nicole Demers: What do you think, Christine?

[English]

Ms. Patricia Jurivee: I'd like to speak in part to that.

We have attempted many times to get into the educational system to be able to talk to the teachers and the principals about these situations, about poverty and what this may look like. Just because you're at poverty level it doesn't mean you're a bad parent. It just means there's not enough money to be able to send a sandwich with your child.

She won't ask. She has so much pride that she won't ask her next-door neighbour if she can make a sandwich. She's not going to do that. She doesn't realize, I think, either, that she's looked at differently. She knows it, but on some level also she doesn't understand that child welfare is going to be called in.

[Translation]

Ms. Nicole Demers: I'm talking about another level. I'm not talking about the mother or relative, but all the organizations like yours and band councils, for example. I don't understand why there is no desire to work together and make the link.

Can you give me an answer on this, Christine?

[English]

Ms. Christine Simard: I think it comes back down to policy. When you look at funding of education, policing, and social services, they're all provincially or federally funded. They all have different criteria to follow. Part of the issue is that they'll say, well, that's social services, that's not a policing issue; I don't want to talk to them about that kid. It's not my problem. That kid hasn't committed a crime, he's just hungry.

In regard to food security, maybe having regulations in place so that kids can eat.... LCBO can sell a bottle of vodka for \$26 here in Thunder Bay. It costs the same in Moosonee. Why can't they do that for food as well? Milk costs \$2.30 here. Up in Moose Factory it's \$14.

So when you think about domestic violence and about providing for the family and stuff, those are some of the policies, etc., that the government really needs to examine and take a closer look at.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathysen): I'm sorry, it's past time.

At the end, I intend to give folks a couple of minutes to say the things they need to say.

Go ahead, Mr. Hyer, for five minutes.

Mr. Bruce Hyer (Thunder Bay—Superior North, NDP): Thank you, Ms. Mathysen.

Thank you all very much for coming today on such short notice and for giving up your suppertime on a Friday night. That's really appreciated.

You've heard apologies before. I'd like to add my own. I apologize on behalf of past governments, although I wasn't part of them. I apologize on behalf of present governments, although I'm a little marginalized in them. And I apologize particularly on behalf of men, who have not done an adequate job to help solve these problems.

I don't think most men or most of the white community are uncaring about this, and I don't think that most of us are racists, but unfortunately the opposite of helping is not usually overt discrimination, it's lack of action. And unfortunately, the opposite of love is not hatred, it's indifference, and we've been far too indifferent for far too long. And I include myself to some extent in that.

It's clear to me what some of the problems are here. You've talked about some of them: the huge poverty gap, education, educating the public, but also educating women so they can crawl out of poverty. One problem is changing attitudes, but a big one is funding. I have what I call Bruce Hyer's rule of funding, and that is that vision.... And I think all of us share a vision of a Canada in which neither women nor their children are hungry or discriminated against, and in which they feel secure and happy and look forward to equal opportunity. But vision without funding is hallucination. And we're just not funding these programs. It's so clear.

Ms. Harvard said not only do we have \$10 million worth of funding, but it's going to the wrong places. Well, \$10 million for the kinds of problems we have here—these endemic problems of racism and discrimination against women in Canada—is a bad joke. We're spending \$5 billion to \$6 billion a year in Afghanistan, allegedly to help women in Afghanistan, and we're spending \$10 million to help women in Canada? We're spending \$17 billion for jet fighter planes to protect us from what I'm not quite sure, when our real problems are internal, not external. We're spending \$60 billion on tax cuts to our largest and most profitable corporations in Canada, and we don't have a few tens or hundreds of millions of dollars to help women? That's worse than criminal.

So this is my quick question, and I can follow up later, and please follow up with me later. Could each of you—Ms. Pierre and Ms. Harvard and Ms. Simard—give me one answer?

I'm a man. I'm white. I'm privileged. I'm a successful business person. I'm lucky. I'm very lucky, and my family is very lucky. It's not my file in Parliament. I have six other critic areas, and Jean Crowder of the NDP, the aboriginal critic, and Irene Mathysen, the women's critic, do a great job. But despite that, how can I help as a person? How can I help as a man? How can I help as a white person who cares? And particularly, how can I help as an MP to help my people and my caucus and my government? Can you boil down to one or two bullet points how I, wearing all of those hats, can be most helpful?

•(1810)

Ms. Marlene Pierre: I would really love for you to attend our gathering—because it's all Nishnawbe Aski from this area where you're going to get voted in from—and to listen to them in their deliberations. And besides listening, when you leave you could pick what you could do. Only you know what buttons you can push over there and how successfully. I think if you want to become an advocate for us, you should come and listen to us.

We'll invite you. Thank you.

Mr. Bruce Hyer: Ms. Harvard or Ms. Simard, does either of you have a quick response to my very broad question?

Ms. Christine Simard: I agree with Marlene's comments about meeting with the women of Nishnawbe Aski. Our MP is Mr. Greg Rickford. It would be really great for Mr. Rickford to also attend the women's conferences that we have. I think it's also important that regular meetings occur so that you can take our information back to the House, do what you have to do, and help us lobby for funding for preventive and interventionist projects for domestic violence.

Ms. Dawn Harvard: If I could just add to that, there was something you brought up earlier in terms of education.

The average Canadian citizen—either immigrant or born, raised, and educated in this country—has no idea of the situation of aboriginal peoples. Everything they know comes from Walt Disney movies: the Indians were conquered and they all live on reserves somewhere in the north in teepees. That's the basis of most people's education and understanding. A lot of well-educated people are still functioning under those kinds of misunderstandings, so that's the important first step: to really start having an understanding.

Second of all, even if I put all the native women and all the native people I know on a contact list and we put all of our resources together, the few bake sales we could have still wouldn't be much. But somebody like you, you have access to a number of, as you said, other privileged people who have the resources, the contacts, and the networks, and to people who have the education and the skills to be able to contribute to what we're doing, not to take it over, but to say they want to support our vision and ask how can they do that. Absolutely, then, that kind of help would be welcomed.

I'm sure there are people out there who have resources and would be willing to start funding some of these important programs, such as the "I Am a Kind Man" program, to get it to all of the communities.

•(1815)

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathysen): Thank you very much. Unfortunately, there's not enough time for another round, but there is some time, and what I would like to do is to give that time back to the witnesses.

There are five groups, so you have two minutes for each group. Tell us what you weren't able to say and what you really want to communicate.

I'm going to be very strict about the two minutes.

We'll start with Ron.

Mr. Ron Bourret: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Me, too. I'm furious. I understand. I've had enough.

[*English*]

I have to say that a question was asked about how you could deal with this and get away from the silos. In Armstrong, Ontario, years ago when I was going up there for the corrections department, I formed something called a Comsac team, a community services advisory committee. We had the Métis on it and we had the Whitesand representative on it.

We had all the ministries on it, provincial and federal, because I got sick and tired of going to Armstrong and missing the mental health worker who had just given somebody money—or hadn't—or missing another provincial or federal government worker who had just been up there, be it a juvenile probation officer or something, or someone from the corrections department. We formed these teams. Then it went up to Fort Hope. We did the same in Lansdowne House and Fort Hope.

The thing is, that is the way to do it, because.... Not only that, the people aren't stupid. They're going to skive you. They get \$200 from someone from the province, from Comsac and then they turn around and ask you for the same \$200. You don't know if Comsac just gave them \$200; they're not going to tell you. So there are also checks and balances in place. That's one way how that would solve it.

The other way is that we have a northwestern Ontario intergovernmental committee. This is something launched by the Ministry of Labour of the province. We have the federal government representatives, the provincial government, and me. I sit on it representing the Municipality of the City of Thunder Bay with Greg Alexander.

Again, we talk about social issues. In our community, we talked about, somewhat touch-on only, and even though that isn't a mandate.... But the mandates of those committees could be turned into dealing with the issues we deal with, the people on the street. These are the people, our first nations people in this community, and that's really growing, and growing big. I just want to leave you with that.

Those are solutions I'm seeing that are working. They have worked somewhat, but again, when I left corrections, who knows? Maybe it all fell apart.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathysen): Thank you. You were perfect with your two minutes.

Dawn, please.

Ms. Dawn Harvard: There are a few things I wanted to mention.

Number one is that it's important that we remember—and from everybody around, I kind of heard inklings—that not all aboriginal women and not all aboriginal people live on reserves. In fact, in Ontario it's arguable that over 80% live off reserves. A lot of those, especially aboriginal women, are not leaving for education, or for jobs, or for a life in the big city; they're leaving their communities because of violence, because of the situation they're in.

So it's really critically important to remember that it's not only first nations that need support. It's also the communities in Thunder Bay, and Toronto, and Ottawa, and Kenora that are working to help those women who need that support.

Also, looking at the number of women when we questioned on the responses.... It's because of those kind of racist responses that a lot of native women are afraid to go and ask for help. It's not always about pride; it's about knowing that in the past, and in their experience, and in the last 100 years, the automatic response has been to take away their children.

They don't want to go to social services or to food banks, where they write down your name and address. There's this fear that somebody's going to know that you can't feed your kids, and your kids will be taken away.

They don't want to tell the cops that their boyfriend is beating them, because the CAS will think their children are in danger and will take them away. Taking the children away seems to be the end outcome of any reaching out, so there tends to be, "I will deal with it; I will put up with the abuse to try to keep my family, to try to keep my children with me."

Also, we talked about capacity, about the website, about the programs. People say, well, there are all these funding sources. But the difficulty has always been for groups like the women at the table, for groups like the Ontario Native Women's Association, even

though we've been around for 30 years. The strong groups get stronger. Those who write good proposals get all the money, and those who have the really good ideas and a real connection to the community needs don't have the great proposal writers. There's a fundamental disconnect there. Human resources within your organizations can help support those people when they come to you with ideas that are workable. How do we put it in a way that government can understand and see it as fundable?

● (1820)

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathysen): Thank you.

Patricia.

Ms. Patricia Jurivee: I heard you asking, "What can I do as a white, privileged male?"

Go to some of the shelters. Come down and visit my shelter. See what it looks like. Then step into a shelter on a reserve: find the difference, see the difference, see the buildings, see the conditions they're in. I've known of federally funded shelters that were going to food banks to get food for their clients in the shelter. What is that?

I mean, go in. Really go in and get a view of what's really happening inside those shelters. Come and see the work we do. It's very difficult work. It's hard, hard work.

I'm one of those, and I'm very grateful for it, who has a 24-bed shelter. I have a place where aboriginal women can come to. I have the number of workers I have. I'm very well supported. Also, in this community I have good community partners, and I'm very grateful for that. Rob is one of those. I have a sister shelter in Faye Peterson, and we work very closely together. She also has a high level of aboriginal women who go to her shelter.

It shows you the need in this community: two 24-bed shelters are full to capacity at most times. It just tells you the level of violence that's happening here in this community.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathysen): Thank you very much.

Marlene.

Ms. Marlene Pierre: I have one request, and that is as you develop the criteria for funding women's groups in Ontario or federally, I will make myself available for any of those people who are involved in that process and I will welcome the opportunity to get very specific about what kinds of financial needs there are in our territory here. So I offer myself for that.

I would like to thank you very much for all that you've encountered here in the north.

Just as a slight correction, Madam Chair, you are in the territory of the Robinson Superior Treaty people and others. I am from Fort William, so I am very pleased that you chose to come to our community.

Have a safe journey.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathysen): Thank you very much, Marlene, and thank you for that. I am honoured to be in the Robinson Superior Treaty territory.

I hope you will make sure that our clerk has your contact information, because I know a number of people who would be very happy to hear from you and converse with you with regard to your suggestions.

Mrs. Michelle Simson: I just wanted to add, quite seriously, a point about the invitations to these conferences. You'd be surprised—if we don't know specifically, we can't be there. I think it's very important that communication be both ways. We're trying to learn, and as part of the education process, especially when you're a politician these days, you can't foist yourself on anyone, never mind other communities. An invitation would be wonderful. I think you'd be amazed at the response you ultimately would get with respect to these conferences. So, again, the contact information is very important.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathysen): Thank you for adding that, Ms. Simson. I think that's very important.

Finally, to the women from NAN, I'll leave it to you to decide who will speak for two minutes.

Ms. Christine Simard: I'm just going to say three quick things.

Funding allocations need to reflect the high cost of remoteness for the Nishnawbe Aski Nation. Capital funding regarding housing shortages also needs to be acknowledged, especially with the INAC formulas. One thing, though, with the funding last year, and I forget what it's called—not CMHC, but it's economic development or economic boost—

A voice: It was Canada's economic action plan.

Ms. Christine Simard: Anyway, we had only six weeks of ice roads or maybe less last year. MP Greg Rickford was very instrumental in helping some of our communities get funding flowing so they were able to get some of their housing supplies, diesel, and that sort of stuff up to the community. If we didn't have contact with him, I don't know if we would have received what we needed.

●(1825)

Chief Lorraine Crane: I lost my train of thought, but I'm really thankful to be here today and honoured to have met this group. I have lots of things I can talk about, but I know we keep hearing about “minutes” here.

Thank you for listening to us.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathysen): I would like to say *meegwetch* and thank you very much. We're truly grateful for a very good and informed dialogue. I hope, as Ms. Simson has indicated, that we can continue that dialogue. So again, *meegwetch*.

Ms. Marlene Pierre: Can you tell us what is going to happen with your report, and some of the timing and that sort of thing, and where it goes?

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathysen): When we're finished all of our hearings, then our dear analysts will put together a draft report. The committee will review that report; then we will present it to the House of Commons and await a response from the government. That usually takes about 30 to 45 days. The report will be available on the website for the status of women committee. If there's difficulty with regard to accessing the website, please let us know, and we'll make every effort to make sure that you have that report.

Ms. Marlene Pierre: So it will be quite a long time.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathysen): It probably won't be terribly long—probably by March 1. It will be before the summer. We want it to be a very good report. We are absolutely determined that this be a full and very clear and hard-hitting report. We want to deliver the message that you have delivered to us.

Ms. Dawn Harvard: We have copies of the other half-hour of our presentation.

The Vice-Chair (Ms. Irene Mathysen): That would be most welcome. Thank you, Dawn.

The meeting is adjourned.

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