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Chair

Ms. Marie-Claude Morin

Standing Committee on the Status of Women

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• (1625)

[Translation]

The Chair (Ms. Marie-Claude Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, NDP)): Good afternoon, and welcome to the 30th meeting of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women. We have lost a bit of time, but we will begin with the future business of the committee. At the last committee meeting, Ms. Sgro said she wanted to table a motion.

Ms. Sgro, you have the floor.

[English]

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak to the motion. The motion, as I think you all know, clearly states:

That, in relation to the study of the role and challenges of women employed by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the Committee schedule additional hearings and invite current and/or former female employees of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police who are prepared to share their personal stories and commentary in this regard, and that the hearings be scheduled as soon as the Committee's work plan permits.

I'm speaking to this at the very beginning. I'm not sure if the committee's intentions are to go in camera or not, but I think it's very important that we discuss this issue publicly. I think it's an important issue for the women of Canada. I think it's also very important for the credibility of our own committee to deal with difficult issues. We have in the past. I would hope that the committee would look at this issue and see the value of our speaking out on behalf of all the women of Canada, but specifically those who are members of the RCMP, and possibly other similar organizations. Some may be suffering in silence because they don't want to destroy their careers or whatever. Clearly, we heard from Commissioner Paulson and we've heard by reading newspaper reports about the many issues and challenges that are faced by many women in the RCMP.

One of the things that has been mentioned is that possibly this is before the courts. I can say that at this particular moment it is not before the courts. A group of lawyers will be asking a judge to certify a class action lawsuit that may take up to two years to even decide. So no court is actively looking at any testimony involving the women who would possibly testify before our committee at the moment.

We have an opportunity as the status of women committee especially. It's an important window right now to try to right these wrongs before hundreds of women may have to wait years before they can get equality, which is what their rights are. They are

guaranteed by section 15 of the charter. I think that's exactly what the committee should be focusing on.

In response to my motion on Monday, the parliamentary secretary asked that we defer the motion until today, and that it would be dealt with today. In good faith, I accepted. I would fully expect that the committee will make a decision today, and that we would do it in an open session and do a recorded vote. I see no reason why we need to be.... If we have issues, I think we should put them on the table. I think it's an important issue that I think we need to move forward. I don't see any other committee that could deal with it quite the same way as the status of women, as we would come from that approach as a group of women.

We heard from Commissioner Paulson about why we should go forward. I asked him about the motion in particular. He felt that yes, we should move forward and give those women an opportunity. The women have indicated to me, as I'm sure they have been in communication with others, that they want an opportunity to have their voices heard. Many are not interested in the legal issues. They just want an opportunity for us to hear what their issues are, and that the changes that need to happen for the modernization, we'll call it, of the RCMP moves forward. That certainly would satisfy them.

I would ask that the committee deal with this issue right away, since we are already behind schedule. Then I would hope that all the committee members will support this. This is a non-partisan issue. I know it's an issue that many of my colleagues around this table care about.

• (1630)

[Translation]

The Chair: The floor is open for debate.

Ms. Truppe, you have the floor.

[English]

Mrs. Susan Truppe (London North Centre, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to request that we be in camera. It's committee business. It's non-debatable.

[Translation]

The Chair: We will have to hold a vote to determine whether we will sit in camera or not. Ms. Sgro and Ms. Ashton have requested a recorded vote.

All those who support debating the motion in camera please say aye.

Ms. Joyce Bateman (Winnipeg South Centre, CPC): Madam Chair, I think the clerk has to ask each committee member whether they are for or against the motion.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mrs. Marlene Sandoval): Since this is a recorded vote, I will proceed accordingly.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 7; nays 4. [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: We will now go in camera to debate Ms. Sgro's motion.

I will ask people to leave the room, except for members and one assistant per member.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

• (1650)

The Chair: We will resume the deliberations of the 30th meeting of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women.

Today we welcome Ms. Carol Stephenson, Dean of the University of Western Ontario, and Ms. Laurel Rothman, National Coordinator, Campaign 2000.

Welcome to our committee. Each of you has 10 minutes to make a presentation. We will begin with Ms. Stephenson from the University of Western Ontario.

Ms. Stephenson, you have 10 minutes.

[*English*]

Ms. Carol Stephenson (Dean, Richard Ivey School of Business, University of Western Ontario): Thank you very much. I'm privileged and honoured to be here.

Can you hear me okay?

[*Translation*]

The Chair: We hear you very well.

[*English*]

Ms. Carol Stephenson: Good.

I've read some of the evidence from your previous meetings, and I thought I wouldn't repeat a lot of what has been said. You have some very good evidence. I was particularly impressed by the evidence from Coast Capital about education, financial literacy, internships, and business leadership being important to the prosperity of young girls. I agree wholeheartedly with that.

I thought I would share my own personal story about my career, and maybe we can draw some conclusions from that and make some recommendations.

It really was not a slam dunk that I was going to end up having a successful career, but I can think of several things that made a difference to me.

First I'll give you a little bit of background. I was born in Petrolia, Ontario, which is a tiny town of about 3,000 people, an hour southwest of London, Ontario. My father was a teacher and my mother was a nurse. My grandmother was actually the first woman to be elected to the board of education. She and my grandfather worked together in a small business.

When I look at that, I certainly realize I had great role models who were working women. In my entire life growing up I looked to a mother and a grandmother who were working. I had a father who I guess in this day and age would be called gender blind. He certainly believed that we could do anything we wanted to do—and there were two girls in the family.

I nearly didn't go to university, but my father encouraged me to try it for one year, and said if I didn't like it I could do something else. So of course I continued with university. It made me realize that a lot of choices are made by young girls at various points in their lives, and the environment in which you grow up is important. As I said, I was fortunate to have good role models.

I was also raised in a very frugal environment. My parents were products of the Depression, so they grew up during the Depression. I certainly wasn't used to having things handed to me. I worked from the time I was about 15 years old. I always had a summer job and worked to support myself.

So I went to university and thought I wanted to have a career in social work. I decided in my fourth year that I wasn't going to do that. I had been working as a telephone operator part-time while going to university to help pay for my tuition. I was offered a job by Bell Canada in a management training program, so I kind of fell into business. It was back to making choices.

I did that and had quite a wonderful career, but some obstacles were occasionally put in my way. I remember being offered a job, and I was one of the first women to be offered this job. It was a very non-traditional job for women. It was working in a plant. For those of you who aren't familiar with a plant in telecommunications, it's one of those buildings with no windows. That's where all the equipment is, so you can switch calls around the world.

My friends told me, "You have to be out of your mind to take that job. It's a career-ender. You don't have the technical skills." However, I made the choice and decided I would try it. I thought the worst that could happen was that I would get fired, and that was not life-threatening; it would just mean another choice. So I did that job.

My first week was pretty horrendous. My boss wouldn't talk to me. He was one of those crusty old plant managers, if you can picture him, and he did not believe that women belonged in this department. So finally after a week he called me and said, "Well, I guess we'd better talk." He went on to tell me that he did not agree that I should be working there, he was forced to take me, but out of a bad lot I was probably the best. So I saw a little window of opportunity, and we ended up having a great working relationship. In fact, he ended up promoting me. So I think that teaches a lesson about resilience and persistence.

• (1655)

Again, I could have made a choice and said, I'm not going to put up with this, I'm going to go off and do something else, but I didn't. With Bell, I had over 13 moves, so again choices were made. I chose to relocate, which helped my career, but you make sacrifices when you do that. I had friends everywhere, but when you move to another city, you start again.

I found it a great career, but finally I reached a point where I had done just about every job in that company, and I had an opportunity to go to Lucent, which was a global company, another telecommunications company. I was in Ottawa at that time. It meant leaving Ottawa, moving again to Toronto, and I remember debating it, because had I stayed, I would have had a great pension at Bell. I remember a good friend of mine said, "I think it's a case of follow your passion or follow your pension, and knowing you, you're going to follow your passion." So, I did. I moved to Toronto and did that job, and then in 2003 I was called and asked to lead the Richard Ivey School of Business, which again was another move and a totally different direction for me, something that I hadn't contemplated, but I made that move and am tremendously happy that I made it. I hope I can help many young women at the business school make those right choices.

So I'm just going to sum up here in terms of my own personal experience. I was thinking about the question you posed to us: what can government do?

I think a lot of what happens is about your own environment as you're growing up. It's about the personal choices you make. It is a balance. You have to make some sacrifices in some of these decisions you make. I think it's about resilience and persistence. Those are all the things that I think government can't help us with—those are the choices we make. But in terms of the things I think government can do, other than the things that you've already talked about around education and financial literacy and whatnot, I think that celebrating some of the successes of girls is really important. When I look back on my career, I do remember times where I was a little shaky in my confidence, and I was fortunate enough to have people who helped me along, or who boosted my confidence.

I think government can play a role in celebrating some of the successes of women, and I think you do. It makes a big difference to young girls to know that their accomplishments are being appreciated, and it helps build their confidence. Scholarships for women is another area. We have some private donors who have provided scholarships for women at the business school. I think that is a great incentive for women—and especially those who have affordability issues—to go on and pursue a business career, which is probably what I'm the most familiar with.

Then I think the last thing—this sounds like trying to solve all the troubles of the world here—government has a huge role to play in keeping the economy strong. When I think back and I think of friends who made choices and decisions, if the economy is strong some of those choices are actually easier to make. Women will have more choices if the economy is strong. We were talking earlier between the two of us, while you were in camera, about entry-level jobs. A strong economy gets young girls into the economy.

So I guess my advice would be keep doing what you're doing around the status of women, and particularly encouraging young girls. Then, secondly, the job of keeping the economy strong is so important I think to the success of young girls. In the business school, at the undergraduate level, we have 50% women. I see a lot of young, bright women, who I think are going to do very well, but it is continual work to keep encouraging them.

Should I end there? I think my 10 minutes might be close to—

• (1700)

[Translation]

The Chair: Ms. Stephenson, I am sorry, but I will have to interrupt you since your time is up. Thank you very much for your testimony.

We will now move on to Ms. Laurel Rothman, who is the coordinator for Campaign 2000. We will then move on to questions.

Ms. Rothman, you have 10 minutes.

[English]

Ms. Laurel Rothman (National Coordinator, Campaign 2000): Thank you.

Thanks very much for the opportunity to meet with you and speak with you. I appreciate it.

You may or may not know that Campaign 2000 is a cross-Canada network of organizations holding the government's feet to the fire on ending child and family poverty. It comes from the November 24, 1989, resolution where the House of Commons unanimously agreed to seek to end child and family poverty.

We're broad. We include low-income women and children, housing, child care, health care providers, as well as food banks, faith communities, women's groups, and labour organizations. You may well be familiar with our annual report card that we do every year, in French and English, marking progress or the lack thereof, and offering our recommendations for what needs to happen in public policies.

I was interested and pleased to hear some of the similarities I share with Carol Stephenson. I won't go on for too long except to say that I too had the role models of a working mother and working grandmother. I had a mother who said, "Get an education if you want to have choices", as she didn't; being a single parent in the 1930s was not very popular.

Today we're here to talk about prospects for girls and women. I just want to open by saying that the prospects for low-income girls and young women in Canada are inextricably related to the status of their mothers, not surprisingly. When mothers struggle to pay the rent and feed the children, then girls often miss opportunities. They may not have the scope to develop a vision for the future, and often don't see those choices. As a few women have told me in different consultations, "I can't imagine taking on the debt I would have to take on to go to post-secondary education." And some of these women have the academic qualifications to do so.

I'll give you a couple of quick facts. We have 639,000 children living in poverty, according to most recent Statistics Canada figures. That's about one in ten, about the size of Regina and Saskatoon together, I believe. And that does not reflect the situation in first nations communities, where about one in four children live in poverty, often in mother-led families.

So let's say that mothers carry a disproportionately high burden of child and family poverty. As you may know, women raising children alone are almost five times more likely to live in poverty than those in two-parent families. More than half of female lone-parent families with young children under six live in poverty.

As Monica Townson sometimes says—you may know her, as she's a well-known economist—"Gender creates a cleavage of vulnerability that cuts across all other groups", including others who are in vulnerable populations; our aboriginal peoples; people in racialized communities; recent immigrants, about three-quarters of whom are from racialized communities; and persons with disabilities.

I want to talk a little bit about two critical perspectives on girls and women in poverty—how they're treated when they're in paid employment and the situation they find themselves in when they're not—and offer a few recommendations.

As you probably know, women who work full time throughout the year still only earn about 71% of the average earnings of men working full time. The gap's even greater when we look at hourly wages. Of course, since women's wages are on average lower, it's much harder for them to save for retirement. Few women have pensions to rely on.

One result is that one in three children living in poverty in Canada—unfortunately, that's pretty steady, going up or down a little bit over the years—lives in a family where at least one parent is working full time. So clearly the labour market has an important role to play, as do public policies.

Women account for 60% of minimum wage workers, yet among minimum wages across the country, I think the highest is \$10.25, in Ontario. It's very difficult to make a decent living. Women are less likely to get EI benefits if they're out of work.

I want to talk about the three critical public policies that low-income women told us they need. I should say that our Ontario campaign did a project in 11 communities across the province, everywhere from Pembroke to Windsor, Ottawa, Toronto, the suburbs, Sault Ste. Marie, including aboriginal communities, and many of our newcomer communities in the GTA.

• (1705)

They were all low-income women. Some relied mostly on social assistance, and some on a combination of that and work. Some were in various stages of paid employment. They said they needed three things. They needed income security. They needed to know that they were somehow going to be able to balance that budget each month, pay the rent, feed the children, and if they were lucky have some choices.

I want to emphasize that public programs play an extremely important role, because as we know, the labour market does not distinguish between women who are parents and women who are not. Programs like the Canada child tax benefit, the GST credit, the UCCB, and employment insurance help prevent families from falling into poverty. They help give some support during periods of economic instability. There's a chart in our report card—perhaps you'll refer to it at some point—showing that our child and family

poverty rate would be much higher if we didn't have a number of the programs I just mentioned.

But a pathway out of poverty for a lone parent today has to include a higher child benefit. Ideally our "back of the envelope" statistics show that a lone parent with one child needs full-time work of somewhere between 32 and 35 hours a week, at least \$12 an hour, and a full child benefit of \$5,400. So that's a little more than \$400 a month, which for some people would help balance off the tax and payroll contributions they make. Right now our benefits are about \$3,485 as a maximum for the first child, and we want to see that go up.

We know that low- and modest-income women need that money to live on. That money goes back into communities in the form of rent; high child care fees, if they're lucky enough to have child care; food; if they can, maybe some recreation expenses; and of course, clothing. So we're going to recommend that the enhanced child benefit for low-income families go up to \$5,400. Of course, that's a progressive benefit, where if you have less, you get more. Yet it would cover about 90% of all children. If you have a higher income you would get less benefit, but it does recognize parenting.

Parents and mothers also told us they needed more and better affordable, high-quality child care. Despite some growth in regulated services over the last couple of decades, and Canada's shrinking number of children, the gap between the level of service and the number of children remains far too wide. As you all know, we have one of the highest rates of women in the labour force in the OECD, in the industrialized world, yet we have no well-developed public child care program to respond to that. We have some good examples. We have some important development in Quebec and Manitoba, and some movement in other provinces.

Campaign 2000 partners across the country believe there is an important federal role in early childhood education and care services to set the policy framework and fund some of it. It's in our social development interest. It's in the interest of women's equality, and it's in our economic interest.

You probably saw there was another study last week from Quebec economists showing that the system of *les centres de la petite enfance* for preschool children in Quebec more than pays for itself as a result of 14 or 15 years of development of the program. A higher rate of women are in the labour force paying more taxes and contributing more actively to the economy, and the child care program has a lot to do with it.

• (1710)

What we're saying in this time of very tight funding—

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you Ms. Rothman. Unfortunately, your time is up. We will now move to questions by committee members.

Ms. Truppe, you have seven minutes.

[English]

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you both, Laurel and Carol, for being with us today via teleconference. It's really important to have you both. Carol, I would like to say that you're certainly being humble given all your qualifications. I know you've served on several male-dominated boards. You're an excellent role model for many young girls.

As you know, the focus of our committee study is improving economic prospects for Canadian girls with regard to economic prosperity, participation, and economic leadership, and the changes that can be made by Status of Women to its approach in improving them. I loved your quote about how a strong economy gives young girls more choices.

Can you tell us, in your experience, what the focus should be for Status of Women when trying to directly improve the economic participation, prosperity, or leadership of girls in Canada? I know you had mentioned some of the obvious ones that had already been mentioned, financial literacy and education, and you have scholarships for women.

Ms. Carol Stephenson: I think it's a global question that applies to everyone. The better our economy is in Canada, the better it's going to be in terms of participation of young girls and young boys.

I don't know that there's anything in particular that would impact the young girls and their participation in the economy, other than a good, vibrant economy. Entry-level jobs are so important, internships that companies can provide are important, the ability to be able to get that first job and then progress I think is really important for young girls.

I don't have any specific public policy recommendations for you in that area, other than what everyone is trying to do to improve the economy I think is going to make a huge difference overall.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Thank you.

What unique challenges are girls likely to face in certain situations with economic participation or prosperity, since I think you said that 50% of the students at the Ivey business school are women? Are there certain challenges they faced when they were younger to even get there because that's a very difficult school to get into?

Ms. Carol Stephenson: It reminds me of a story. I was trying to recruit in the high schools. I decided I would get a group of 10 smart young girls together. I went around the table and I asked what they wanted to be when they were older. I heard doctor, I heard lawyer, I heard all sorts of things. Only one girl said she wanted to be in business. I asked them why. They said they wanted to do something that would make a difference in the world, and business is all about competition and laying people off.

I thought this is telling me that we, as business people, have not done a very good job explaining that business improves the quality of life for everyone because all of a sudden the standard of living goes up if you have a job and you're making money.

To answer your question, I think girls sometimes automatically discount certain careers based on stereotypes around careers.

The second thing I would say is that I sometimes see girls not having the same amount of confidence as I see young boys having. The boys are throwing their hands up, contributing. The girls are sometimes holding back a little, and when they do speak they're thoughtful and they're smart. I'm always encouraging them to take a leadership role. Don't just be on a committee, lead the committee. Chair something. Sometimes I see some hesitancy and I don't know where that lack of confidence comes from early in their lives.

● (1715)

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Thank you.

You also mentioned where you came from, so I know it's a very small rural area. Do you find the challenges for girls are different in the urban and rural areas, and if so, what might they be?

Ms. Carol Stephenson: Yes and no. I think sometimes in a large urban centre you can get lost. You can be anonymous and not necessarily get the help you need.

In a small town or small community, certainly when I grew up in a small community, everyone helped each other in the community. People weren't ostracized. The community was very supportive. That's the positive side about a rural community. The negative side about a rural community is whether the opportunities are even there.

I know in London, Ontario, we are always trying to keep our graduates in London. We do keep some, but others go because they go where the opportunities are. So for rural areas, if there aren't a lot of opportunities for young girls, I think they feel they have to leave to find a job.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Thank you. How much time do I have, Madam Chair?

[Translation]

The Chair: You have 1 minute and 20 seconds left.

[English]

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Great.

We have heard from industries, such as finance and insurance, that they have a greater number of women in their workforce, generally. According to the Canadian Board Diversity Council, these industries also have the greatest number of women sitting on their boards. What impact would a focus on encouraging girls to enter non-traditional industries have on their future economic prosperity or on their leadership?

Ms. Carol Stephenson: I think it makes a huge difference. I encourage them all the time to go into non-traditional industries. The reason is that first, you get noticed, and chances are that you will do well. If you get noticed, your opportunities tend to increase.

I am a huge promoter of doing something that is not necessarily what everybody is telling you that you must do and that might be a little bit different.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Thank you.

[Translation]

The Chair: We will now move to the representative for the official opposition.

Ms. Ashton, you have seven minutes.

[English]

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill, NDP): Thank you.

I'd like to thank Ms. Stephenson and Ms. Rothman for your very interesting presentations today and for the scope you shared with us. I think it is absolutely critical.

Ms. Rothman, I'd like to pick up on some of the points you raised. First off, I wanted to note that I thought your initial point about the well-being of girls being inextricably linked to that of their mothers is a critical piece. I believe that in some ways in society we have this tendency to think that you can make it on your own. All you need is yourself, basically, when in fact, we're not always looking at the facts and the factors that determine who we end up being and what we end up doing.

The title of what we are doing is focusing on girls. But I think it's important to remember the connection with the women around us and the fact that we end up being women and facing challenges that are similar to those who have gone before us.

I wanted to ask you a bit about a point you touched on. I'd like to ask you about the trend you might be seeing in Canadian society.

Canada was known as a country that was at the top of the world when it came to gender equality in so many ways. The reality is that we have fallen in many of these ways as well. We have seen cuts to housing, child care, and legislation, such as pay equity. We continue to see violence against women, particularly targeted against marginalized women. We are seeing factors continue in our society that, of course, set women back.

I would be interested to hear about your work from Campaign 2000. To what extent might you be seeing a trend in terms of women's equality and the kind of equality girls are facing going forward?

• (1720)

Ms. Laurel Rothman: What I would start with is that my most recent experience was doing this cross-Ontario project where I did go to all 11 communities, and we met with more than 250 low-income women. I think what I heard.... It was before the Occupy movement, but let me say that these women very much saw themselves as part of the 99%, and maybe even further. They really didn't have some of those basic skills, or if they had the skills, they didn't have the time and the opportunity to use them to move out of poverty.

So, what does that mean? It means that for the women in Pembroke, for example—a rural community an hour and a half from Ottawa—who are in crises around violence, there's no family shelter there. What happens when you're in a real crisis? You actually get driven, or whatever, to Ottawa for some kind of emergency measure. So, to get that woman and her family to get things together to then get settled, to find affordable housing, to get her resumé together to try to move out of social assistance into work, the other barrier that someone like that faces.... I'll tell you another example is lack of child care.

So here we have communities, in particular some of the outlying communities, where there are few opportunities, period.

I did want to make sure I said the third thing I didn't get a chance to mention earlier that women told us they needed: safe, appropriate, affordable housing. I guess that's one of our other recommendations. Canada is still the only industrialized nation without a national housing program that looks to the future, period. I think we need that.

Let me also tell you about a woman in Orangeville—a country-suburban community that is part of the greater Toronto area—with two young children, lone parent, divorced, who somehow got herself into a position where she was able to go back to post-secondary for a college degree. One year, she actually had to leave school because she couldn't get child care arrangements. By the time I met her, she had figured something out and was back in school but worried what would happen when she finished and tried to get a job, especially if it were not a nine-to-five job.

So, we have some serious holes in what used to be a robust, or a more robust, social safety net for women and children, and we're not making enough progress on it.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you.

The other question I wanted to ask is with respect to advocacy. We've seen severe cuts when it comes to women's advocacy organizations across the front. In recent days, we've heard of cuts with respect to research programs focusing on women's health and aboriginal health, which we know provide tools to people to say where we need to be going in the future and where the gaps are. I'd be interested to hear your thoughts with respect to what impact Canadian girls and women will see in the years to come as result of the cuts we've seen to advocacy.

Ms. Laurel Rothman: Well, the cuts to advocacy and research, and if you will, civic engagement are of serious concern to lots of the groups we work with. I guess we were particularly upset to see the cuts to the national statistical agency working with first nations communities and the National Aboriginal Health Organization, as well as the National Council of Welfare. For 40 years that has been a major, unique organization with access to all kinds of data telling us about how women are doing or not doing in terms of moving out of poverty. You probably know it by an annual publication around welfare rates, "Welfare Incomes", helping us understand where we're making progress and not.

The loss of that kind of information means that we really don't know how to plan well for the future—I should say we don't have the facts to plan. If we were a business, we sure would be upset if we didn't have some solid numbers to go on and we would wish—

• (1725)

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Rothman.

Ms. Ashton's time is up. We will now move on to a member from the government.

Ms. O'Neill Gordon, you have about five minutes.

[English]

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill Gordon (Miramichi, CPC): Five minutes?

The Chair: Yes.

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill Gordon: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for being with us today.

First of all, I want to say that I was glad to hear you say that about your role models. I feel strongly about that. Your role models were definitely a factor.

Coming from a classroom, I see every day how the role models affect these young girls. When you are shown early the fact that you can make choices.... And you did make choices: your early experiences made you choose, while your persistence made you hang in there. Along the way, you show the importance of choices and sacrifices.

We, too, need to get that message out to young girls today. Many of them do not have this role model. I'm wondering how we can go about making sure that girls have more of a role model. What things can we, as a government, put out there that would help our young girls?

I think that's a very strong factor in our world today. They do need role models. I do know that Girl Guides and things like that can be a big factor for them, but are there other things that the government should be looking at in arranging to help parents have their girls see real role models and in giving them the encouragement and the factors they need?

Ms. Carol Stephenson: I'll jump in on that one.

First of all, I think that as elected members of Parliament, you are also role models. I would encourage you to do everything to encourage young women to follow in your footsteps, because they do look at you and see the leadership you provide in government.

On the mentorship programs, I think there are a lot of organizations that do quite a good job, such as Junior Achievement, and I'm sure you've talked about the financial literacy programs they have in schools. Also, a group of women who have been friends for 30 to 40 years all have young girls who we mentor.

I'm not so sure that a government-sponsored mentor program is the way to go. I think mentorships are so much about relationships and people clicking together. If you try to mandate it, sometimes the chemistry is not there and it doesn't work. I've had experience with that, where it has been mandated that everyone must have a mentor, and about 20% of them work.

So I think the encouragement that government can give is to the organizations that are providing this kind of support, and maybe again I'll go back to my point about recognizing and celebrating

these organizations. But I would not recommend some sort of wholesale government-led mentorship program.

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill Gordon: Is there any comment from our other speaker?

Ms. Laurel Rothman: I would agree with what Carol Stephenson said about mentorships. In work I've done in newcomer communities, I think it is important that it's a good fit between people.

But I would say that the other important role government could play is just to support some kind of career entry—I don't know what we want to call it these days—or first job opportunity. I don't even know whether to call it that. Maybe it's a one-year program, or maybe a little more than that, to help young people get some experience under their belts in their fields. Those fields could be everything from science, technology, or social services to—I don't know—forestry or high tech. Some fields may need it more than others, but getting that first job and supporting organizations to be able to offer that.... Some are probably in more of a position to do it than others.

● (1730)

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill Gordon: I am, of course, an MP from New Brunswick, and I am the only woman elected there. Very often I am invited to career days, or to speak to Girl Guides, or to go to a school and speak.

I assure you that I always take the opportunity, and I'm very happy to do it, because I think, as you say, that we are a role model in ourselves regardless of whether we realize it or not. It is great for girls to see women in politics and to see women holding different opportunities and different careers than just the regular ones.... I do enjoy that.

I usually have staff with me, and when I go back to my office, the comment is, "I don't know who enjoyed it more—the girls or Mrs. Gordon". So yes, I do agree that we should be jumping into those opportunities.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

I see that it is 5:30, which marks the end of our meeting.

I would like to thank our two witnesses for having been with us today via videoconference. Your testimony was greatly appreciated by the committee.

The meeting is adjourned.

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