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Ms. Marie-Claude Morin

Standing Committee on the Status of Women

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• (1535)

[Translation]

The Chair (Ms. Marie-Claude Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, NDP)): Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the 31st meeting of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women.

Today, we are continuing our study on improving economic prospects for Canadian girls. I am not sure whether our witness has arrived; I saw someone earlier on the screen. If not, I suggest that we take 15 minutes right away to deal with committee business. It's up to you.

If there are no objections, we will deal with committee business for 15 minutes, and then we will hear from our witness. Therefore, the committee will adjourn for 15 minutes.

Ms. Ashton, go ahead.

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill, NDP): As two of our witnesses are not here today, our schedule will be somewhat different. I would like to know why those witnesses have not shown up.

The Chair: Two witnesses cancelled their appearance: the Stella organization and the Native Women Association of Canada.

Stella told us it had nothing specific to say on the topic of study. However, that witness can be summoned for a future study, if the committee is interested.

As for the Native Women Association of Canada, something came up and they had to cancel. We will try to invite them to a future meeting involving the same study on improving economic prospects for Canadian girls.

Ms. Niki Ashton: I understand why the Native Women Association of Canada cancelled, as something came up. Did Stella's representatives submit a letter explaining why they could not appear? If so, could that letter be included in the committee's records?

The Chair: I just asked the clerk about that. The letter will be translated and submitted to the committee. We will then see whether it can be incorporated into the study.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Could the committee members be provided with that letter at the next meeting?

The Chair: Yes, once it has been translated, the letter will be emailed to all members.

Ms. Day, do you have a question?

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP): Are people not obligated to appear when summoned to a committee meeting?

The Chair: Yes, further to the communication, the committee could strongly encourage the organization to appear. We will have to look into that later.

So I will adjourn the meeting for 15 minutes, during which time we will sit in camera to deal with committee business.

• (1620)

The Chair: •

_____ (Pause) _____

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We are continuing our work related to the study on improving economic prospects for Canadian girls.

Our first witness, joining us by videoconference, is Anne-Marie Gammon, President of Femmes Équité Atlantique.

Ms. Gammon, can you hear me?

Ms. Anne-Marie Gammon (President, Femmes Équité Atlantique): I hear you. Can you hear me?

The Chair: Yes, I hear you very well, thank you.

We know that you've had an unexpected hitch today. We have managed to provide you with an additional 15 minutes with the other witness's agreement. So, you will be with us until 4:45 p.m. You will have 10 minutes for your presentation, and then we will move on to questions. Exceptionally, we will have slightly less time than usual.

Go ahead, Ms. Gammon.

Ms. Anne-Marie Gammon: Good afternoon.

The Femmes Équité Atlantique project was about bringing generations together and achieving socio-economic equity for francophone and Acadian women living in minority communities in Atlantic provinces. The project was titled "La rencontre des générations". Girls and women of different ages attended meetings as part that project. Those meetings covered four aspects: girls' participation, skills, self-esteem and critical consciousness.

It is sometimes more difficult to get girls to participate. They often think that all the battles have been won, that everything is going well, but that really doesn't reflect the reality. Currently, when we discuss equality, equal wages and benefits girls may know they are lacking, we realize that, at the secondary and post-secondary levels, girls participate in debates in certain areas. However, their participation is low, if not in-existent, once they are out of university or community college.

I am currently the only woman and the only francophone on the Bathurst city council. If you think that the situation is good and that things are going well for women, I would like to welcome you to today's world. Young women must be given the opportunity to express their concerns and their perception of inequalities. However, depending on their family's economic situation—and in certain areas, the main preoccupation is surviving in this world—young women have difficulty deciding to participate more extensively in collective actions.

Some young women become involved in the Regroupement féministe du Nouveau-Brunswick—the province's feminist organization—but I would not say that, overall, they understand the issues and inequalities in society, especially when it comes to young francophone women. I don't know how those young women will be able to rise to the challenges that lie ahead. I often feel that our school system insufficiently prepares our girls for the future, that they are not educated about the inequalities. I am not sure the school system recognizes the importance of providing girls with the skills they need to succeed in this world.

That brings me to my second point—skills and knowledge development. The Fédération des jeunes francophones du Nouveau-Brunswick, the province's francophone youth federation, contributes to building what is referred to as individual empowerment in girls and young women who become involved. Yet only a small minority of our young people get involved. That is perhaps due to the fact that parents fail to encourage girls and young women to become involved in the community or in issues that are of importance to women. It may also be due to anger.

• (1625)

At the secondary level, student councils are often chaired by young women. There are some young women even at the FAECUM, in Moncton. However, research shows that, once women leave the Université de Moncton—regardless of whether they become lawyers or pursue another career—they do not reach their full community potential. How can we help young women develop the inner passion that will drive them to become involved and to want to contribute to their community? That issue is a bit more specific and more difficult because the community does not provide those women with support.

I can share my own story with you. Had I not been a woman of character who was used to being on the city council, I don't know whether I would have decided to run again in the next election, simply because it's a man's world. We, the women, may be present in the media, but when it comes to day-to-day activities, it is very much a male-dominated and anglophone world. I apologize, but I am going through a difficult time, and my vision of the issue may be a bit subjective. If that is the case, I apologize.

Young women need the community and the people they know, especially boys and young men, to encourage them to reach their leadership potential and to show the community that they have something to contribute and the will to do it. However, that interest must be kindled.

That is somewhat similar to the seniors project I managed for a few months, which has two aspects. Women of all ages are encouraged to participate, but also to develop their desire to hold positions of responsibility and decision-making. That's very important. Women account for 50% of the population, but they do not occupy 50% of those positions. We must continue encouraging the work Status of Women Canada does to develop young women's desire to participate, to have enough confidence and self-esteem to tell themselves they can contribute and change things.

To do that, we need people like Aldéa Landry and Brigitte Sivret, who are not only making their voices heard, but are also remaining very visible in their community. That gives young women models to follow. They can say to themselves that, if Anne-Marie Gammon and Aldéa Landry can do it, so can they. That self-esteem must be built up, and we must set up more projects that help young women develop their understanding of the community and their desire to contribute to change. Those young women's internal locus of control must provide them with enough confidence to make changes in their community and their own lives.

In a 2008 article, Mr. Ninacs often mentions young women and—
• (1630)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gammon. Unfortunately, your time is up.

We have about 15 minutes for questions. We will begin with the government side.

Ms. Truppe, you have seven minutes.

[English]

Mrs. Susan Truppe (London North Centre, CPC): Thank you, Madame Gammon. I appreciate your time and your comments on what you think should be done for young girls.

I visited your website, and it lists the Public Health Agency of Canada, Status of Women Canada, and Canadian Heritage as partner organizations.

How do you partner with Status of Women Canada, and how have they supported your efforts?

[Translation]

Ms. Anne-Marie Gammon: Currently, about \$600,000 is set aside for the Femmes Équité Atlantique project. We have organized interprovincial meetings for young women of all ages. That project was supported by Status of Women Canada and sponsored by the Association acadienne et francophone des aînées et aînés du Nouveau-Brunswick, New Brunswick's Acadian and francophone seniors association.

[English]

Mrs. Susan Truppe: What does this funding do for your organization? You mentioned \$600,000 for the interprovincial encounters. How could that help you?

[Translation]

Ms. Anne-Marie Gammon: That funding has enabled us to organize interprovincial meetings with girls and women of all ages. At those meetings, participants have an opportunity to discuss and establish the possibility of implementing interprovincial mentorship projects for young women, girls and older women. The funding has also enabled us to provide young women with tools and consolidate the whole francophone and Acadian women's community in its power to act.

[English]

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Great. Thank you very much.

You published a document in 2010 called a guide for girls and young women. My understanding—and I'm not sure if it's correct—is that Status of Women Canada funded the publication.

Is that correct, or was that a different funding?

[Translation]

Ms. Anne-Marie Gammon: Yes, exactly. That guide is still in demand today. We published a second edition sold mostly in New Brunswick. We actually have no books left. We have been receiving very positive feedback, not only from young girls, but also from teachers who tell us about the positive aspect of that guide, which helps young women take control of their future.

• (1635)

[English]

Mrs. Susan Truppe: That's great to hear. Thank you for that.

It's my understanding that the guide speaks to us about money management and community participation, amongst other things. Can you tell us what it says to the girls on those subjects? Why is it in such demand? What is in there that is so great for them?

[Translation]

Ms. Anne-Marie Gammon: That's because we have published four guides—one per province. The guides provide young girls with practical examples and references they can use to find information that contributes to their efforts to become much more autonomous, and to develop positive attitudes regarding sexual abuse or any other kind of abuse. Teachers use the guides in their classroom, as part of self-development courses. Other stakeholders, in schools, also help girls make sense of the guide. When they need to provide young girls with references, they have access to this practical and specific information.

[English]

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Thank you.

As you know, the focus of our committee study is prospects for Canadian girls with regard to economic prosperity, participation, and economic leadership, and what changes can be made by Status of Women to its approach in improving them.

Could you tell us, from your experience, what you think the focus of Status of Women Canada should be when trying to directly improve the economic participation, prosperity, and leadership of girls in Canada?

[Translation]

Ms. Anne-Marie Gammon: You are talking about something that's very close to my heart. We have a youth centre here, in Bathurst. Two years ago, I participated in the activities of the Girls Action Foundation and other similar organizations. Status of women has improved owing to three elements.

First, entities such as the Bathurst Youth Centre develop projects. Those centres are bilingual. They can provide training and organize activities for young people in order to develop their self-esteem and create a positive attitude with regard to young women's participation.

Second, we must develop the skills of the adults involved with those young women—be they teachers or women working in the community—so that they can also inflame that passion in young women.

Third, there is a movement in Bathurst called “Synergies” for young adults between the ages of 18 and 35. Its goal is to work with those groups on facilitating the training of the young women involved.

I was disappointed because I thought some of the young women from “Synergies” would run in the election. Unfortunately, none of them did, but it was not for lack of trying. As there is not enough funding, there is no one to kindle, fuel and maintain the passion in young women.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gammon.

We will now go to the official opposition side.

Ms. Ashton, you have about five minutes remaining before we hear from the other witness.

Ms. Niki Ashton: I want to thank Ms. Gammon. I really appreciated your comments. You talked about the lack of confidence in young women, and confidence is a must for running in an election. I really enjoyed your analysis.

I would first like to yield the floor to my colleague Anne-Marie Day, who has a question for you.

• (1640)

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day: Good afternoon, madam. I am very interested in hearing what you have to say. Among the programs you are promoting for girls and women, are there any about guidance, management, the female enterprising spirit and the integration of women in non-traditional lines of work, where there are more jobs in the regions for men than women? Does anyone help them with integration? I am talking about guidance, management, the female enterprising spirit and jobs traditionally reserved for men.

Ms. Anne-Marie Gammon: Yes, those programs exist, but there are problems. We need to train those providing the guidance, those providing decision-making support to girls to ensure they are well-advised when they finish high school.

All girls do not have the same type of intelligence. As you know, there are seven or eight types of intelligence. Formal education is not for everyone. Some girls are incredibly skilled with their hands and see the world in a different way. It is important to steer them towards non-traditional occupations. Women who are re-entering the workforce often choose non-traditional occupations, but there are far fewer female high school graduates opting for those fields.

In New Brunswick, there are a number of things happening. We have a program aimed at narrowing the wage gap. Young women wanting to enter non-traditional occupations receive scholarships. Scholarships are also available to young men choosing to enter non-traditional occupations. The REDDI project endeavours to support young female entrepreneurs, in partnership with local businesses. There are entrepreneurial networks for young women. I have to hand it to the federal government; they've done a good job in terms of funding projects that help young women start their own businesses, but it is usually more mature young women who go that route. Today, more women are starting their own small or medium-sized businesses and becoming entrepreneurs.

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day: Earlier, you shared a bit about your own experience. I believe you work for the city council. Do you offer any programs, in cooperation with Status of Women Canada, aimed at increasing the number of women who sit on boards of directors, whether it be for hospitals, banks or schools?

Ms. Anne-Marie Gammon: Yes, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities had a program. When their officials came to New Brunswick, I attended a few of their presentations. I even helped organize some with Lise Ouellette, who was the director general of the Association francophone des municipalités du Nouveau-Brunswick.

In the French-speaking part of the province, three sessions were held, each attracting 20 or so participants, who were very appreciative. A project was also established together with the Association acadienne et francophone des aînées et aînés du Nouveau-Brunswick called "Éveil à la citoyenneté des femmes et comment l'exercer". The project targets not just women 50 and older, but also women of all ages, who were invited to participate. Equal Voice also hosted meetings. Unfortunately, however, of the organization's 76 or so participants, only 7 or 8 were French-speaking. We must find ways to encourage young—

The Chair: Forgive me, Ms. Gammon, but I must stop you there, as we have another witness waiting for us at this very moment.

Ms. Gammon, if the committee members have more questions, would you be amenable to having the clerk send them to you in writing? Would that be okay with you?

• (1645)

Ms. Anne-Marie Gammon: Absolutely, I would be more than happy to answer any such questions. This is something that is very close to my heart. If we want our general community, our sons and our husbands to have a better understanding of what women face and a clearer idea of what we can contribute, it is paramount that someone answer your questions. You are the agents of change, you are the decision makers.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Gammon. We were delighted to have you here today.

As I mentioned, we had less time than usual for our first witness. Consequently, the committee members can send any questions in writing to the clerk, who will forward them to Ms. Gammon.

Ms. Gammon, enjoy the rest of your day.

The committee will now take a quick break, so we can we bring in our next witness.

The Chair: •

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We are resuming our meeting. Joining us now, via videoconference, is Angelina Weenie, Department Head of Professional Programs at the First Nations University of Canada.

Good afternoon, Ms. Weenie. Thank you kindly for indulging us and waiting an extra 15 minutes. Your patience is greatly appreciated. Can you hear me clearly?

[English]

Dr. Angelina Weenie (Department Head, Professional Programs, First Nations University of Canada): Yes, I can hear you.

[Translation]

The Chair: Ms. Weenie, welcome to our committee. I won't take any more time except to say that you have 10 minutes for your statement, after which we will move on to questions.

[English]

Dr. Angelina Weenie: Good afternoon, everybody. Thank you for the opportunity to share with you.

I'm going to talk briefly about my background. I have a Ph.D. in education, and my presentation will focus particularly on aboriginal girls. Part of my presentation will be from my own lived experience and observations from my visits to first nations communities. I'm a Plains Cree, a fluent Cree speaker, and I have been an educator for 35 years. This is my 15th year in a university setting.

What I see as the main issue for improving the economic prospects of aboriginal girls is education. Currently we are experiencing a number of funding cuts in education and health. They will have serious implications for improving the situation of aboriginal girls.

When I visit first nations communities I always say that I believe I'm visiting a third world country. Poverty and inadequate housing are some of the barriers to improving economic prospects for aboriginal girls. The most serious issue is related to the quality of water in the communities. That in turn affects nutrition and the general health and well-being of girls.

Those are some of the observations I would like to make.

On the positive side, as a department head of professional programs that include the school of business, the nursing education program of Saskatchewan, indigenous education, and the Indian social work program, the majority of our students are female. That is really positive, in terms of improving economic situations.

I welcome any questions you have for me. I generally come from a background in education. I have been a teacher for a long time, so I welcome any questions.

• (1650)

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Weenie.

Mr. Albas, you have seven minutes.

[English]

Mr. Dan Albas (Okanagan—Coquihalla, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I appreciate that our guests have taken the time to come before us today so we can ask for and hopefully get some good information for our study.

From your experience, what should the focus of Status of Women Canada be when we are trying to directly improve the economic participation, prosperity, and leadership of aboriginal girls in Canada? If you wouldn't mind, please give us a couple of ideas and some examples of things that have worked at other levels or in other areas.

Dr. Angelina Weenie: Education has always been the key. The funding cuts that are currently in place for post-secondary education need to be addressed. It's certainly getting harder and harder for girls and women to access post-secondary training that is so critical to improving their lives. That is my experience. I've always seen the need to improve ourselves through education, and I continue to carry that message. I've carried it throughout my career.

Mr. Dan Albas: I can appreciate that. In our notes prepared by the Library of Parliament, it does mention that recent data has shown some improvement in post-secondary attainment between the ages of 25 and 54. Obviously that's not the bracket we're studying here, but to go from 41% in 2001 to 47% in 2006 I think is a good sign.

You said that education is key. Is there another way for us to try to set a vision that would allow girls to consider skilled trades or post-secondary education if they want that? Is there a way we can connect with aboriginal girls at an earlier stage to try to bring up that percentage point?

Dr. Angelina Weenie: Some of the practices that are in the schools already...for instance, Oskayak High School, in Saskatoon, has day care facilities for young mothers. I think that's a big support for them.

Another issue is the high rate of teen pregnancies. That changes the school culture altogether when we have to be thinking differently about how to support these young mothers and young girls.

That's just one of the observations I have on the issue.

• (1655)

Mr. Dan Albas: So it's about having the community encourage them and try to come together behind certain programs that are oriented towards them. Okay.

Can you provide any insight into what unique challenges aboriginal girls are likely to face with regard to economic participation, leadership, and prosperity? What are some of the obstacles as well?

Dr. Angelina Weenie: I think a big obstacle is racism. We deal with that on a daily basis. We have to generally have a strong mind about overcoming racist attitudes about the place of women in general, and aboriginal women face a higher degree of obstacles and challenges. Racism is generally a big barrier.

Mr. Dan Albas: Okay, so it's both racism and also gender discrimination in general.

Are these challenges different for aboriginal girls living in urban areas and rural communities? What has been your experience? Is there a different sense of the obstacles for the rural-urban divide?

Dr. Angelina Weenie: I received my education in an urban setting. I only spent about two years on my reserve going to school. I was able to succeed with the support of my parents and my grandparents.

We have a vision that we want to be successful. We understand the need to have a good education. That has always been the message for me, for our children, and for our grandchildren. We continue that message. We see a need to prove ourselves in education.

Primarily it has been support from my parents and grandparents, who wanted me to be successful.

Mr. Dan Albas: So you would say that support has...

Pardon me. Go ahead, please.

Dr. Angelina Weenie: The programming that I see in the other areas—for instance, you have Aboriginal Head Start, which has those six areas, including parental and community engagement, language and culture development, and the kids first—are all aimed at early intervention.

In communities you have parenting programs. Another area that is generally lacking is sports. One of the things that I recall in my community was that even though we were poor, we were active in sports. Every Sunday, for instance, the different reserves would get together and there would be a soccer tournament. We understand the need for—

[Translation]

The Chair: I apologize, Ms. Weenie, but I must cut you off as Mr. Albas is out of time.

We now move on to a member of the official opposition.

Ms. Ashton, you have seven minutes. Go ahead.

[English]

Ms. Niki Ashton: Hello, Ms. Weenie.

Thank you very much for joining us today. Besides being the Status of Women critic for the NDP, I'm also the member of Parliament for Churchill, in Manitoba, which is, of course, next door to where you are. A lot of what you just shared about the reality on reserve and the challenges aboriginal young people face, particularly aboriginal girls, certainly resonates with me. That very much could describe exactly the same situation in first nations in Manitoba as well. Thank you for sharing that.

Ms. Weenie, I want to refer to a report that came out a short while ago, actually from the University of Saskatchewan, by Eric Howe. It talked a bit about the kinds of benefits Saskatchewan and Canada would see if we bridged the educational gap between aboriginal people and non-aboriginal people. I believe he noted that the total social benefit, if that were to be done, could accrue to \$90 billion, which of course is no small number, by any means.

There is no doubt that the limit on post-secondary funding, perhaps particularly the 2% cap in funding that exists, is a huge obstacle in getting to that point and bridging that gap. I was wondering if you could share with us a bit about where you see the funding, specifically for post-secondary education, that could inspire young girls and all young aboriginal people to take it to the next step. What kinds of supports do we need to see when it comes to funding for post-secondary education?

• (1700)

Dr. Angelina Weenie: First of all, we have to look at the funding differences between band schools and schools in the cities. There is a huge difference in the amount of funding given to the band schools. The facilities for schools on reserve are poor. They lack the resources to provide quality programming. They generally suffer from a lack, to begin with, in their communities. That issue has been talked about before in terms of the disparity between funding for band schools and for urban centres. That's one aspect of it.

What the report says is true. If we improve the education of aboriginal people, that will alleviate the number of aboriginal people who are incarcerated. You can spend that amount of money incarcerating aboriginal people, but you can certainly turn that around and spend more money in a more proactive and positive way by supporting them in education.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you.

My next question refers to the institution you work at, which is obviously an institution that I know many aboriginal people across the country look to as a model. I was wondering, given the work you do with the communities, if you could elaborate on the importance of sustainable funding when it comes to the First Nations University. What is the status right now?

Dr. Angelina Weenie: A lot of the work I do.... Just to go back, in terms of the beginning of the First Nations University of Canada, it actually started in the communities, with community-based programming. It was established in 1976. In 1988, with core education, especially, it moved on campus.

Today, a lot of our students are commuting from their home reserves to our university here in Regina, in Prince Albert, and in Saskatoon, because there's a lack of housing. They live on maybe \$1,000 a month and rent is \$900. It's impossible for them to live in

the city, based on their allowances. Right now, a lot of them still prefer to commute and live in their communities.

We need to strengthen what we do within the communities. That's the message I get from our students, that we need to support them.

• (1705)

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you.

Just as a clarification, I know there was a recent plan—about two years ago—an intermediate plan in terms of overall funding for First Nations University. I'm wondering if there is long-term funding right now, or is it short-term? What is the situation?

Dr. Angelina Weenie: The situation is that we are under an administrative service agreement with the University of Regina until 2014. We've experienced a number of setbacks, but I think overall our commitment is strong. We maintain our programs, in spite of all the external issues that come about.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Weenie. Ms. Ashton's time is up.

Are you still there, Ms. Weenie? We can't see you on the screen.

[English]

Dr. Angelina Weenie: Yes, I am. The lights went out here.

There they are.

[Translation]

The Chair: It's over to Mr. Holder.

Go ahead for seven minutes.

[English]

Mr. Ed Holder (London West, CPC): Thank you very much.

I'd like to thank our guest for returning. I appreciate the responses you've given. I wonder if you might help me, please.

In my city of London, Ontario, in southwestern Ontario, we're the home of the University of Western Ontario, where we have a program to support first nations students. I don't think this came up as clearly as I might like to understand. Could you help me to understand better the difference, if you might, between First Nations University, your program, and let's say another university? Could you help me understand how that works? It would be easier for me to ask a couple of questions from that.

Dr. Angelina Weenie: When the elders share with us, they always have a vision that there would be a place for aboriginal people and first nations people to be able to learn about their own language, culture, history, world view, and philosophy. When you talk about the racism that is experienced...we needed to have a place where we would be able to learn about ourselves and our own history, because really it wasn't being taught out there.

Mr. Ed Holder: You mentioned the University of Regina. How does that work in terms of...? Are these accredited courses that work toward or become a degree, or is that the intent of it?

Dr. Angelina Weenie: First Nations University has been in existence for 35 years. We are a federated college with the University of Regina, which grants our degrees. All our programs are in partnership with the University of Regina.

Mr. Ed Holder: Are your students required to take any other courses associated, say, with the university directly—let's say mathematics, or in my case, with apologies, a degree in philosophy? Are there any requirements for other courses as well?

• (1710)

Dr. Angelina Weenie: Yes. For instance, in our secondary program we ourselves have a major in indigenous studies and a minor in first nations languages. Other majors and minors are taken through the University of Regina, which teaches them. There is always a collaboration and partnership in all the courses. They are also free to take our courses as well.

Mr. Ed Holder: You've mentioned, Ms. Weenie, that the university has been in existence now for some 35 years. How is it going? What has the success rate been—the number of people participating and then ultimately the number of, if I might call them so, graduates? I'll just call them as we would any other person attending university. What are those kinds of numbers looking like, please?

Dr. Angelina Weenie: I can share the numbers with you in a follow-up to this presentation. Of course, we are a smaller institution, and that's to be remembered.

Mr. Ed Holder: Sure, but how many students—

Dr. Angelina Weenie: Currently, in terms of graduates in education, we have roughly 2,000 graduates.

Mr. Ed Holder: Okay. If you were just to take this year alone, are we talking this year about 2,000 students who are—

Dr. Angelina Weenie: No, in the history of education, for instance...we would have 2,000 graduates in total.

Mr. Ed Holder: What does that reflect as a percentage of total participants, would you say? If we define...and we all have our different definitions of success in terms of results, but from the results of the number of students who have gone through the system and the 2,000 graduates, what do the 2,000 graduates represent as a percentage, please, roughly?

Dr. Angelina Weenie: Again, I would have to get back to you on numbers.

Actually, I was just talking to the registrar's office today, and our current enrollment is 560. At one point we enjoyed an enrollment of 1,600, prior to all the disruptions in our institution since 2005. At one point we had 1,600 students enrolled in our university, and now our current enrollment is 560.

As I say, we've had to grapple with a lot of external and internal issues. But in regard to the percentage of graduates, I can provide it to you at a later time.

Mr. Ed Holder: Perhaps through the chair, I could ask that this happen, if you would, please.

Let me ask a question, if I can. I think you're absolutely brilliant when you say that education is the key. If you want to change hearts and change minds, you must do it through education. You've indicated that you've had, over the 35 years, some 2,000 graduates.

Dr. Angelina Weenie: There are probably more; I'm sorry.

Mr. Ed Holder: All right. That's fair enough.

When these students graduate, what are their success patterns for encouraging others to participate? I would think that's the greatest challenge: to support others and become role models for others to participate.

Dr. Angelina Weenie: I think most of them will take on leadership roles in their communities. They take on administrative roles. A lot of our graduates become the principals and vice-principals in the communities. Sometimes they'll take up political work; some may have political aspirations. They are the leaders in the community once they graduate.

Mr. Ed Holder: As much as I love Churchill, can I ask you your reach, please, in terms of your students right across the—

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Holder, you are out of time, unfortunately.

[*English*]

Mr. Ed Holder: Perhaps I could just have an answer to that question about the reach across the province or the country.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: We'll give Ms. Weenie a chance to answer.

Ms. Weenie, the member just wanted to know whether the people come from outside the region or the town.

[*English*]

Mr. Ed Holder: I'm just trying to understand where your students come from. Is it from across the city, across the province, or beyond?

• (1715)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Could you answer very quickly, please, Ms. Weenie?

[*English*]

Dr. Angelina Weenie: Our students come from across the province and they come from other parts of Canada.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Over to Ms. Sgro now.

Seven minutes. Go ahead.

[*English*]

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

My list of questions has already been asked by Mr. Calkins. I was going in that very same direction.

With regard to the success rate of most of the students at the university, do most of the students end up back working with the community itself rather than going out into the workforce in larger capacities? You mentioned that a lot of them end up as community leaders and so on. Is that in addition to their following a career path on something else as well?

Dr. Angelina Weenie: Most of them are hired in their own communities once they graduate. There is a high need for aboriginal graduates in all areas. We even get requests from other provinces—B.C. and Manitoba have come to visit us—especially for those who are fluent in languages.

Hon. Judy Sgro: I gather then that the university is filling a very sincere, significant need out there for leadership in the aboriginal community when it comes to languages and so on.

Dr. Angelina Weenie: Yes, that's true.

Hon. Judy Sgro: I would think that would be quite successful. It creates a great opportunity for them, and their acting as a role model back in those communities encourages others to follow in their footsteps.

Dr. Angelina Weenie: Yes.

Hon. Judy Sgro: The head start program has been around for quite a while, and I think has been very successful. Is it still operating in your particular area?

Dr. Angelina Weenie: We once did an evaluation of the Aboriginal Head Start programs in Saskatchewan for Health Canada. We have an Aboriginal Head Start program in Regina, and I'm aware of the one in Prince Albert, so....

Hon. Judy Sgro: It continues to be a very successful program.

Dr. Angelina Weenie: Yes.

Hon. Judy Sgro: Of the 560 students you currently have at the university, what percentage of them would be women, do you know?

Dr. Angelina Weenie: The majority of them are women. I would say that about 66% or higher are women.

Hon. Judy Sgro: Do most of them come from urban centres?

Dr. Angelina Weenie: Most of them come from the communities. As I say, community-based programming is a big part of what we do. For instance, we have programs in Black Lake, which is in northern Saskatchewan.

Most of them are coming from communities.

Hon. Judy Sgro: It's really good to hear that they're coming out and graduating from the university and then finding very successful opportunities to work within their own community. I did not realize there would be such a need out there, but it's very much....

Those who graduate fulfill several roles, including that of leadership, especially amongst the young women, in order to encourage them to complete their education. I do believe as well that this is the key for success for many.

Their being able to go back into their own communities following graduation from the program must be very satisfying for you as well.

Dr. Angelina Weenie: This is my personal commitment to remaining in this position, to see young people be successful, to support them, and to do whatever it takes to help them be successful. That is always my goal.

•(1720)

Hon. Judy Sgro: How do they deal with the financial aspect of it? Is the university able to help some of them with grants? There must be some who have a pretty significant struggle.

Dr. Angelina Weenie: Yes, that's true. As a university we need to be doing more to support them. Right now the university is involved in strategic planning. I think that would be one of the areas in which to support our students more.

Hon. Judy Sgro: The fact that you have the capacity for 800 full-time students and you only have 560 I suggest would be a significant concern for you.

Dr. Angelina Weenie: Yes, it is, absolutely. As I said, sometimes these are issues that are beyond our control. There are political circumstances that impede our work, but at the same time we have a core group of people who are committed to this institution and who are committed to improving the lives of aboriginal people.

Hon. Judy Sgro: Thank you very much, Dr. Weenie. Unfortunately, I have to slip out to another meeting. Thank you very much for your contribution.

Is there any time left?

[Translation]

The Chair: Fifty seconds left.

[English]

Hon. Judy Sgro: Thank you. I'll let someone else ask questions.

[Translation]

The Chair: That means we have about eight minutes left, so we have time for someone else.

Ms. Bateman, you have eight minutes.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: Thank you.

The Chair: Sorry, it is actually six minutes, now that we're on our second round.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: You're giving me six minutes. Great.

The Chair: Sorry, it's really five minutes.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: No problem.

The Chair: Because we can't share our time.

[English]

Ms. Joyce Bateman: Angelina, I want to thank you so much for joining us today and for your comments.

I noted with care your comments about the importance of high school. I had the honour to serve as both the chair and a trustee in the Winnipeg School Division. Children of the Earth High School is a beautiful model. I know they would be delighted to share their model with you in any way that it could help students in your care.

One thing we learned on the board of trustees for Children of the Earth, which was one of our 79 schools, was that science and math are very important to young aboriginal students if we want them to succeed at higher levels of learning.

I'm interested to find out a few things. First, I'd like to find out the percentage of the curriculum of your university that is science and math, because those are the tools for success for all students. It certainly was our motive. Of our population of 34,000 students, 25% were aboriginal students.

The other thing we did was partner often. The University of Winnipeg has done some outstanding work with the aboriginal and immigrant communities. A homework club was created where older students help younger students. They mentor the younger students. I know that the president, Dr. Lloyd Axworthy, would be very willing to share that information with you in the interests of sharing the models.

The University of Winnipeg is a huge aboriginal education university now. It realizes the importance of reaching out to younger students and helping them get there.

How are you doing that? Are you partnering with other organizations such as the University of Winnipeg or, as we heard from my colleague, the University of Western Ontario? How are you approaching that?

Dr. Angelina Weenie: I think that's part of the strategic plan in terms of creating more partnerships and networking with other universities. It is an area in which we ourselves recognize the need to improve.

Also, we work under the umbrella of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, which has summer programs for youth. We build on those. There are science camps. More activity similar to that would be beneficial.

•(1725)

Ms. Joyce Bateman: I know they would be willing to share, because they're very generous, and they're very committed to this community. I'll make sure they know I said that.

I want to ask about the curriculum you offer in the university you serve. Our colleague, Ms. Sgro, has left now, but she indicated that you have declining enrollment. In an academic environment, where most enrollments are increasing, that has to be of some concern.

I wanted to ask about the composition of most of your degrees and the graduation rates you have experienced. Of the 565 students, what is the anticipated graduation rate? Over the 35 years, you have had more experience than many other universities in terms of having interesting data to demonstrate. Has it improved?

Dr. Angelina Weenie: I want to provide more accurate data to you following this presentation.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: Okay. I welcome that. We'll wait until you get your data. Just know that we, through the committee and through *Mme la présidente*, are very interested in it.

Can I ask you about the composition of math and science in your

[Translation]

The Chair: Ms. Bateman, sorry, you've run out of time.

Ms. Freeman, go ahead.

[English]

Ms. Mylène Freeman (Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, NDP): Thank you very much, Ms. Weenie, for being here. It's a real pleasure to have you talk about your university, all the good work it's doing, what has been done, and what we can learn from what your university has been doing to make the curriculum more relevant to first nations students.

Could you reiterate for this committee essentially how that is having an effect on the accessibility of education for first nations?

Dr. Angelina Weenie: The question is about our curriculum.

Ms. Mylène Freeman: Yes, exactly.

Dr. Angelina Weenie: A lot of our work is on first nations language revitalization and the indigenous studies courses. We also offer programs in indigenous health studies. We have Indian social work programs and a school of business. Those are the different areas we work in, in terms of our programming.

Ms. Mylène Freeman: I'm sorry to interrupt. Could you maybe explain to this committee why it's necessary that there be culturally specific programs in things like business and social work?

Dr. Angelina Weenie: I can explain, from my own perspective. Our language gives us a different lens. We have a different aboriginal world view and philosophy, and that's what our foundation is. Our language, our culture, and those traditional practices are where the indigenous knowledge is. Our purpose is to promote indigenous knowledge.

Ms. Mylène Freeman: This is, in fact, having the effect of having more first nations students complete their schooling. Is that right?

Dr. Angelina Weenie: Yes.

My own grandsons went through that system, and they struggled in that system. One of the things I always say is that as long as you can give them a piece of themselves and they know where they come from and have a sense of belonging, they will do well.

•(1730)

Ms. Mylène Freeman: It sounds as if you're really producing leaders.

As elected representatives of the federal government, we really should be promoting things like this and helping your university with stable funding and things like that so that you can continue this project. It seems to be having a very positive effect on many lives.

Dr. Angelina Weenie: Yes.

Ms. Mylène Freeman: I'd like to ask you very briefly about—

[Translation]

The Chair: Time is up.

We'll give Ms. Weenie time to finish what she is saying.

[English]

Dr. Angelina Weenie: Thank you very much.

[Translation]

The Chair: You can go ahead, Ms. Weenie.

[*English*]

Dr. Angelina Weenie: I just want to thank you for the opportunity to share with you. I can tell you that from my own personal experience as an educator and an administrator, in sharing with you my own vision of helping and of seeing our aboriginal people being successful and our communities thriving, we always come from that vision of things.

My own foundation is my own language and culture. I mentioned my language. I still speak Cree fluently, and that is my foundation.

That's the ground from which I understand and interact with my world. I carry that message to the youth as well.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Weenie, for joining us today.

That wraps up our meeting.

Meeting adjourned.

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