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Chair

Ms. Marie-Claude Morin

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• (1535)

[Translation]

The Chair (Ms. Marie-Claude Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, NDP)): Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the 32nd meeting of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women. We are continuing our study on improving economic prospects for Canadian girls.

Welcome to our two witnesses. Representing the Native Women's Association of Canada, we have with us Ms. Claudette Dumont-Smith, Executive Director. For the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada, we have Ms. Cindy Blackstock, Executive Director.

As an exception for today only, our meeting will be only one hour long since two witnesses have cancelled. No one from the Assembly of the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador was available. The representative from the Bent Arrow Traditional Health Healing Society was also unavailable. Life is full of unforeseen circumstances.

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill, NDP): Madam Chair, I would like to make a quick comment. A pattern seems to be developing. Two weeks ago, a number of people received invitations and now we learn that some of them are not coming. So I would like to make a request. I would like us to ask them to send an email explaining why they cannot come to testify. We could add those emails to our notes.

The Chair: Okay, Ms. Ashton.

Is the committee in agreement with proceeding in that way?

Hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: So we will take care of that by next week. Thank you for your comment.

Do you have anything to add, Ms. Young?

[English]

Ms. Wai Young (Vancouver South, CPC): I would like to support that, but I would also offer to these groups that they can, of course, also table written submissions. Just because they're not able to come, that doesn't mean they can't submit something, right?

[Translation]

The Chair: Our committee clerk will do what she can to obtain briefs from those people. We will include the briefs in our study.

Thank you for your comments.

I will now turn the floor over to our witnesses. We will start with the Native Women's Association of Canada.

Ms. Dumont-Smith, you have 10 minutes. Ms. Blackstock will also have 10 minutes for her testimony. Then we will have time for questions.

[English]

Ms. Claudette Dumont-Smith (Executive Director, Native Women's Association of Canada): *Merci, bonjour, kwe.* Hello, good afternoon, *nidjiniikàz* Claudette Dumont-Smith. I'm Algonquin from the Kitigan Zibi community, located just 90 miles across the river, directly north. So you are in Algonquin territory. I guess I don't have to acknowledge my people for being on my land.

I'd first like to apologize for not being able to come on Monday when we were first scheduled to appear, but we are very short-staffed and there are just so many things happening. But I'm here now, so I guess that's the good news.

I'd like to begin by thanking you for inviting the Native Women's Association of Canada to come and speak to this committee on matters that are crucial to Canada's aboriginal women, their children, their families, and their communities.

The Native Women's Association of Canada is a nationally representative political organization comprising 13 provincial and territorial member associations, known as PTMAs, from right across Canada. Each is striving to improve the social, economic, health, and political well-being of first nations and Métis women of Canada.

Forums like this one today help us to discuss the role that aboriginal women and girls can play in economic development, which is a major area to address if conditions of aboriginal women and girls are to change for the better.

At NWAC we recognize that positive action and concrete measures must be implemented by governments to ensure that women, as well as aboriginal people with disabilities and single mothers, are able to access a wide range of educational and employment opportunities so that they too can benefit from the economic security and prosperity that we have here in Canada.

Violence against women and girls is a major concern and a key priority for our organization. We're always trying to reduce violence directed towards aboriginal women and girls. In particular, aboriginal women and girls in remote communities often experience higher rates of violence and unemployment, lower quality of life, and less access to health care, social services, and other supports. Providing economic opportunities can help to alleviate this situation.

NWAC continues to raise attention to these issues with government in order to promote economic and social development, including better living conditions, to directly benefit the aboriginal women who live there.

In a meeting with Minister Duncan in February 2011, the president of NWAC, Jeannette Corbiere Lavell, informed him of our organization's activities in the area of economic development. In 2009 NWAC carried out an aboriginal-specific, gender-based analysis of the federal framework for aboriginal development and found that the framework was gender-blind. It had a heavy focus on sectors where male employment and ownership were strong. It overlooked the importance of the creative economy in building sustainable jobs for aboriginal girls and women. There was no recognition that the usual barriers and obstacles to economic development in aboriginal communities are even more pronounced for aboriginal women and girls, and the guiding principles of the framework failed to take into account the different socio-economic conditions affecting aboriginal women. Moreover, it did not recognize the traditional economic roles that aboriginal women had in the past.

In the same year NWAC developed an aboriginal women's comprehensive economic empowerment development plan. And in March 2010, NWAC invited and led a working session with various federal departments to increase aboriginal women's participation through the federal framework for economic development.

Economic security remains a challenge for many of our women. Accordingly, it remains a top priority for NWAC and we will continue to work to advance aboriginal women's economic security and prosperity.

Recently, budget 2012 announced the investments that Canada will continue to make in aboriginal economic development and small and medium sized businesses. Aboriginal women have a strong role to play in building a strong Canadian economy. Economic security and prosperity for aboriginal women and their families is an essential step for improving the lives of aboriginal people and their communities.

The opportunities for economic development and business growth have never been greater than right now. We must support aboriginal women's participation in both the labour market as well as economic development initiatives across the country as an important part of rebuilding our nations within the larger Canadian economy.

• (1540)

With more than 400,000 aboriginal youth projected to enter the labour market by 2020, aboriginal participation in the labour market will continue to be important. More than half of these youth are girls. We must support them in the contributions they can make.

Corporate Canada is working with aboriginal business and communities, and over \$315 billion in potential resource development has been identified in or near aboriginal communities. These investments must benefit our women in order to change the future of our communities as a whole. By building on our women's strengths, we can continue to improve the quality of life and the self-sufficiency of our families and communities.

We need to identify concrete measures and targeted investments to support women in order to ensure that aboriginal peoples benefit as a whole. We have also taken other important steps to modernize and improve federal support for aboriginal economic development. We must ensure that the level of education that an aboriginal woman obtains translates into the income she receives. Economic security and prosperity for aboriginal women must be the goal.

It is clear that partnerships continue to grow between Canada's business community and aboriginal peoples. We just need to make sure that these benefit all people. Together we must ensure that no one is left behind. By supporting aboriginal women and youth, this will be the key to Canada's future economic prosperity.

Over the past several years, NWAC has put forward the following recommendations at the federal, provincial, or territorial levels to improve the economic outcomes of aboriginal women and girls in Canada. I'm presenting them again today. The government should develop microfinancing and business development solutions to support the development of communities and women's and girls' participation in sustainable business. Community and economic development requires long-term strategies—

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Ms. Dumont-Smith, my apologies, but I have to interrupt you for a few moments. The interpreter is telling me that he would like you to speak a little more slowly, if possible.

Ms. Claudette Dumont-Smith: Okay. I have almost finished.

[*English*]

Community and economic development requires long-term strategies to increase economic, human, and cultural capital. Therefore, governments must increase investment and access to training and development programs and services in both traditional and non-traditional fields. Governments and business must commit to the engagement and active participation of aboriginal women and girls in leadership and decision-making roles, and in the promotion of economic development to achieve sustainable economic outcomes for all members of aboriginal communities. Government should conduct a cultural and gender-based analysis of community assets and developmental funding at the federal level to evaluate access and outcomes of funding; implement equitable and/or increase funding opportunities for aboriginal women in programs like the aboriginal business development program and aboriginal procurement strategy; and measure gender equity in a consistent manner and analyze data disaggregated by age and gender using a gender analysis method.

Regrettably at this time, NWAC cannot pursue further activity in the area of economic development because of a lack of resources, financial as well as personnel, at the national as well as regional levels.

Thank you. *Migwech*. Merci.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Blackstock, you have 10 minutes.

[*English*]

Dr. Cindy Blackstock (Executive Director, First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada): Thank you, Madam Chair, and members of the committee.

A recognition of the Algonquin Nation and of all Canadians.... Of all Canadians when they sing "O, Canada, we stand on guard for thee", they're called back to the central values of our nation, the principles of justice, of fairness, of freedom, and of equality. And they are called there particularly when they go home at night and see the eyes of their own children, knowing that if there ever is a generation that deserves the full enjoyment of those values, it's a country's children.

Economic development theory and practice has told us that a thriving nation can be measured if there's a thriving generation of children, that as a government, the most important economic stimulus that you can provide is investing a dollar in a child. As the World Health Organization has said time and time again, for every dollar invested in a child, a government can expect to save \$7 down the line. This \$7 can be available for things such as building roads, for health care, for an aging generation, for pensions, for all caring Canadians and citizens to ensure mental health practices. All of those things can be in place. Fail to spend the dollar on the child, look at the child as a way to save money, and you'll still spend those remaining dollars but you'll spend it on prisons, mental health care, and welfare payments.

Just a number of weeks ago, I was reading a report and there's a phrase in there that says:

Let someone hazard a guess as to what year or what century real progress will be made in the equality of [First nations] children.

It was written in 1967. I was three years old.

Successive governments have known about the inequalities of first nations children on reserve in education, child welfare, and other services. Some investments have been made but they fall far short of equality. As the Auditor General found in 2004, and again in 2011, in education, the investments are short. Your own first nations panel on elementary and secondary education found that investments are immediately required to bring first nations students up to the same standard that all other Canadian children enjoy. The Auditor General in 2008, and again in 2011, and the Parliamentary Budget Officer in 2009 found that these same inequalities echo across child welfare.

So how does this inequality happen? Well, as you know, parliamentarians, provincial and territorial laws, child welfare, education, and health all apply on reserves but the federal government is to fund them. As the Auditor General has repeatedly found, the federal government does so to a lesser level than all other Canadians enjoy. This happens across multiple experiences in childhood, and it weighs on the hopes and dreams and potential of a whole generation of first nations children.

The good news is that there's something we can do about it; we need not leave things the way they are. You have the power amongst you to make a strong departure from the parliamentarians who have preceded you and decide that racial discrimination against children is not a legitimate fiscal restraint measure; to decide that there's no room within the Canadian consciousness for a child to be left on the sidelines because of their race; to know that every child should grow up in this country having the same opportunity to start the race on the same values; to know that the Government of Canada as represented by all parties is prepared to truly put children first.

Some people might wonder why these inequalities have gone on for so long. I think it's because in a busy legislative office it's sometimes easy to forget whom it impacts. I'd like to share with you a story of Shannen Koostachin. Shannen Koostachin was born in the year of 2000 in the Attawapiskat First Nation. She was an excited little girl, like any other kindergarten kid, and wanted to go to school. But the only school in her community was closed because it sat on top of 30,000 gallons of diesel fuel. Over three ministers of Indian Affairs across two political parties promised Shannen and her friends a school and didn't deliver. Instead they went to portable trailers set beside the toxic waste dump, separated from it by only a chain link fence. The trailers deteriorated so much that there often wasn't heat in the portables, and mice would eat their sandwiches. There's no money for a library, no money for computers, no money for proper teachers, and no funding for a science lab.

● (1545)

When grade eight came, she believed in the goodness of each and every one of you. She thought the reason you didn't provide her and other first nations children with a proper school and equitable funding for education wasn't that you were bad people. It must be, she thought, because you didn't know how bad it was, that when you heard the statistics about the underfunding of first nations education, you would think it's almost beyond belief in a wealthy country like ours.

So, she organized non-aboriginal and first nations children to send you letters to say this is what it's like: "We're worried about not growing up and getting a proper education, because we want to get jobs, we want to make a contribution to our families and our communities. We know if we don't get that education, we're really going to suffer." Some of those letters from Canada's children to parliamentarians are in the *Our Dreams Matter Too* report that's before you.

Shannen was true to her word. She did everything she could to fight for proper education for first nations children, including meeting with the Minister of Indian Affairs and asking for a new school. As many of you know, that request was declined on the basis of there apparently not being enough funding in the Government of Canada to provide a school at that time.

Shannen Koostachin went on to speak to anyone who would listen. She was one of 45 children in the world to be nominated for the International Children's Peace Prize given out by the Nobel laureates. She should be one of our true Canadian heroes. But sadly, it wasn't too long after her 15th birthday, living hundreds of miles away from her family so she could get the quality of education all of you received, that she died in a car accident, never having been treated equally by the Government of Canada. She would have graduated this year.

I will be giving an address at the University of Northern British Columbia, where I'll be receiving an honorary doctorate in law degree. I will dedicate it to Shannen Koostachin for the graduation she was never able to attend. Shannen had wanted to grow up to be a lawyer.

What about child welfare? There are more first nations kids in child welfare today than there were at the height of residential schools. They are driven there by poverty, poor housing, and substance misuse, all factors that we could do something about. As the Auditor General has found, there is underfunding of child welfare services on reserve. Has the federal government made some investments? Yes, but they're at a standard we read about in the Sims report. If investments continue at this very slow pace, it's not unreasonable to think that it will be another 45 years before we will be re-reading this report and wondering why equality didn't happen in child welfare.

Instead, in 2007, along with the Assembly of First Nations, we filed an action in the Federal Court against the Government of Canada alleging that the Government of Canada was racially discriminating against children by underfunding child services on reserve. I tell many people that the day I filed that complaint against the Government of Canada was one of the saddest of my life. I could not believe that in a country that I loved so much this was even necessary.

Over the next five years, the Government of Canada tried to derail a hearing on the merits—not on the facts, not on the substantive question of whether racial discrimination was happening. I think you can agree with me that if confronted with that allegation, if the Canadian government as a whole were innocent, then it should put its cards face-up on the table and let's have the debate. Instead it is pursuing a bunch of legal loopholes. One is that you can't compare, it says, federal services to provincial services. I'm very grateful to say that just a couple of weeks ago, the Federal Court rejected that argument and ordered a full hearing on the facts at the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal.

Ladies and gentlemen, I don't even think that a hearing is necessary. It would not be necessary if all parliamentarians across all parties decided that today was the day that first nations children would get a chance, that today was the day that first nations children would no longer stand at the sidelines of the country getting less because of who they are, that today was the day we recognized the 700% return of investing a dollar in a child and receiving seven dollars down the line.

There are other questions about best practices and research. The good news is that we know what many of these are, but without the

financial dollars to put them in place, they're nothing but spirits in the wind.

As we know from Shannen's experience, there are thousands of Shannens out there right now. Do any of us around this table want to see another graduation day go by where a child who should really be there is somewhere in the spirit world looking down and hoping that we'll do the right thing?

Thank you very much.

• (1550)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Blackstock.

We now move to the question period. We will start with Ms. Truppe. You have seven minutes.

[*English*]

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

I would like to thank you both for being here today. I know you're really busy. We appreciate hearing from you, and I appreciate Shannen's story.

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

Claudette, you mentioned that there would be approximately 400,000 aboriginal youth entering the labour market by 2020 and that about half of them would be girls. Can you tell us what, in your experience, you think the focus of Status of Women should be when trying to directly improve the economic participation, prosperity, and leadership of aboriginal girls in Canada?

• (1555)

Ms. Claudette Dumont-Smith: I think there's not enough focus on girls. There is focus on women—though not enough as well—but there should be added focus on reaching the girls from maybe the age of 12 onwards to inform them about the opportunities that exist for them and where they can go to receive information. I think there's no link between information at the federal level and the communities, especially the more northern communities.

NWAC has a very important role to play. Although NWAC is situated at the national level, we have, as I mentioned, our provincial-territorial member organizations at the regional level, who in turn have memberships from the community level. It would be a perfect conduit to get that kind of information from NWAC to the PTMAs and down to the local level. I think there's a gap in the information reaching them, and there's no special focus on them either. That's the reason why many of them don't achieve their full potential.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Because they're not aware of—

Ms. Claudette Dumont-Smith: Exactly. There's a lot of—

Mrs. Susan Truppe: —how they can do that?

Ms. Claudette Dumont-Smith: I beg your pardon?

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Do you mean, because they're not aware of how they can reach that potential—

Ms. Claudette Dumont-Smith: Exactly.

Mrs. Susan Truppe:—and how we can do something for them so that they know there are leadership opportunities out there?

Ms. Claudette Dumont-Smith: That's correct.

NWAC, through Health Canada funding—which was cut just a couple of weeks ago—convened a very successful career fair for young girls. I think more than a hundred attended. It was in the west someplace—I think in Saskatchewan. Many of them came, and they learned of the different health careers they didn't know of. There's not just nursing or being a doctor, but many careers they were made aware of. It's those kinds of forums that have to take place so that our young women will be apprised of opportunities.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Thank you.

Cindy, I have the same question in regard to economic participation, prosperity, and leadership for the girls. What would you suggest Status of Women could do for them?

Dr. Cindy Blackstock: Thank you, member.

I have prepared a written submission with about six very specific recommendations, and also all the research backing up my oral remarks.

I think one of the fundamental things is ensuring that first nations girls are getting a good education to prepare them for the careers of their dreams. Also, growing up in healthy families is important. We know that those are foundations for economic success.

In addition to that, it is important to support mentorship programs such as the one led by the Quebec native women's association in a circle of leadership that pairs young girls with mentors. But more specifically, it's not just in terms of pairing a woman with a girl, but also pairing a girl with an interest, perhaps, in becoming a member of Parliament, with somebody who is already a leader in politics; or a girl who's interested in becoming a lawyer, like Shannen, with somebody who's already a member of the bar, so that they're able to exercise and see a particular path based on their skills and abilities.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: I like the mentorship programs as well. I think they do a lot for young girls to see that there are other opportunities out there.

Claudette, can you provide any insight into what unique challenges aboriginal girls are likely to face in respect to economic participation, prosperity, and leadership? It's a two-part question. Also, how are these challenges different for aboriginal girls living in urban versus rural areas?

Ms. Claudette Dumont-Smith: I think the ones in the rural areas lacked information, because the information sources are very limited, especially in more remote communities. If you speak to someone in or living close to an urban area, you will find that their knowledge of what's out there will be much greater than a person living in a northern area. As well, I think there are less economic opportunities in the remote communities than in the more southern areas near urban communities. They are at a disadvantage.

We found in our research with Sisters in Spirit that what has happened is that a lot of young women left their communities to go to urban centres. A lot of them ended up.... Well, there's the Highway of Tears, for example. A lot of them were leaving their communities to go into large urban areas and never got there; they were murdered along the way. A lot of them end up going to larger cities, and they fall between the cracks. They don't know where to go.

There are a lot of situations where we could focus, especially on young women. We can work with the friendship centres, for example, and with native women's organizations in cities and in larger centres, to help them navigate the systems. NWAC does have, through the labour market development initiative, a small program to help young women enter the labour force, but it's very small and much more is needed. We should target the younger women as well. What we're focusing on at NWAC now is the young women, but the older young women. Here I think we should focus more on the younger teenage population.

● (1600)

Mrs. Susan Truppe: When you mentioned the friendship centres

[*Translation*]

The Chair: You only have 10 seconds left.

[*English*]

Mrs. Susan Truppe: That's okay, then. You wouldn't have time to answer that.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Now we move to a member from the official opposition. Ms. Ashton, you have seven minutes.

[*English*]

Ms. Niki Ashton: I'd like to thank Ms. Dumont-Smith and Ms. Blackstock for their presentations today. I certainly think I can speak on behalf of my colleagues in saying that it takes a lot of courage to say what you have brought forward today. It takes courage to do the work that you do. You are standing up and pointing to the gaps within the federal government and at the way the federal government has ignored the voices of first nations in so many cases. I certainly know it from having the honour of representing the first nations in northern Manitoba.

Ms. Blackstock, you referred to there being thousands of Shannen Koostachins in Canada. While I am honoured to think that I represent some of these dynamic young women in my part of the country, where I come from, you are absolutely right in saying that we must act now to prevent the kind of future that, in many cases, their mothers and grandmothers have faced. I thank you for the presentation you made and the sentiments you expressed.

Ms. Dumont-Smith, I want to hear from you with respect to today's study. In recent weeks, we found out about the cuts to the Native Women's Association of Canada. Could you explain to us what programs will be cut and what kind of impact this will have on the well-being of aboriginal girls?

Ms. Claudette Dumont-Smith: On April 13, we got word from Health Canada's First Nations and Inuit Health Branch that our health funding would be cut by 100%. One that particularly touches on the topic of today is that we had an aboriginal health initiative program, where we introduced the different health careers to young aboriginal girls. We did it in various ways. We had a huge conference where we had doctors and high-level health people come and speak to them as role models. We developed booklets about different health careers to get them interested so that they would pursue these careers and make a better life for themselves. We worked on that—the AHHRI it was called—for about four or five years. We did good work. We were proud of that work. It has been cut. Consequently, we will not be able to do any more work in that area. That's a great gap. The young girls we were trying to reach and the girls in the future that we would have reached through such a program will be at a loss.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Can you give us a financial figure for that cut?

Ms. Claudette Dumont-Smith: For just that program or the whole cut?

Ms. Niki Ashton: For the whole cut.

Ms. Claudette Dumont-Smith: About one-fifth of our funding was cut, which would be between \$700,000 and \$800,000. It fluctuated from year to year. The most we received from the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch was about \$1 million, and then it would fluctuate depending upon what our projects were.

• (1605)

Ms. Niki Ashton: So in your opinion, young aboriginal girls will lose out as a result.

Ms. Claudette Dumont-Smith: Definitely.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you very much.

I'd like to move on to Ms. Blackstock.

Given the extent of the work that you've done, Ms. Blackstock, I just have a general question. We hear a lot—certainly from the current government—about financial management with respect to first nations. But I was wondering if you could explain to us how aboriginal children are actually less dependent on the public purse than non-aboriginal children, and how public funding in general exists with respect to aboriginal young people.

Dr. Cindy Blackstock: Well, less dependency comes from less provision from the government in the first place. So that's where those inequalities end up, because governments provide less to first nations children on reserve because they're first nations children on reserve.

My plea to all of you is that this needs to stop, regardless of political party. Equality doesn't have a party. But it needs to stop now, because children only have one childhood.

This idea about fiscal mismanagement I think is really a red herring. None of us around this table would view in any favourable

terms the mismanagement of dollars intended to go to children. But as I sometimes say to Canadians—and please excuse me for this—if financial mismanagement were a racial characteristic, no Caucasian man in his 40s and 50s should ever again, after 2008, touch a Fortune 500 company.

That is not to say that when this happens people shouldn't be held to account, but it should be no reason to deny children basic access to services. Where there are allegations of mismanagement of funding, there are provisions within the agreements to stop that and address it—and of course, there are the criminal courts, and they should be used to the fullest extent. But we should not say that this issue, which the Auditor General has already said is really a red herring, should bar us from doing the right thing for kids today.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Given your work on child welfare, I'm wondering if you see a connection between the proportion of aboriginal children in the child welfare system and the poverty of their mothers. Are they connected?

Dr. Cindy Blackstock: Absolutely. We know that from reputable studies not only in Canada but from around the world.

Specific to first nations children, there is a study called the "Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect". Over three successive cycles of that study, with an error rate of less than .001—which is less than 1% and really the lowest possible rate of error you can get in a study—it says that the three factors driving the overrepresentation are poverty, poor housing, and substance misuse, all factors that we can do something about, thankfully, with culturally based and targeted interventions.

Unfortunately, that's significantly hampered by the inequalities in child welfare funding.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

How much time do I have left, Madam Chair?

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

[*English*]

Ms. Niki Ashton: In terms of the timing of the court case, I would just ask where we are at, and could you let us know a bit about your work?

Dr. Cindy Blackstock: Sure. The Federal Court ruled on April 18 that the hearing is supposed to proceed at the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal. We are working on that at the moment. We want to see that hearing going on as soon as possible, where all parties put their cards face up on the table and that we come out, hopefully, with a ruling for the benefit of first nations children.

Our anticipated timeline is that the hearing should happen in the fall. The only blockade to it is that Canada may appeal and that may delay the hearing.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Okay. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Blackstock.

I now give the floor to a member from the government party.

Ms. Young, you have seven minutes.

[English]

Ms. Wai Young: Thanks so much to the two of you for coming here today. Your testimony is certainly very compelling.

I used to be a native youth worker in the downtown eastside of Vancouver, so I understand well some of the massive issues, the complexities, and the sensitivities in addressing this very complex issue and problem.

Can I just pull you back...? Although we heard a lot from you, because you were both presenting a lot, for some of us who don't have the experience of the rural situation—and certainly I don't—can you tell us a little bit about the practicalities of what is happening right now? How many children needing schooling are there in a place like Attawapiskat? How many teachers are there?

Give us some basics that we can sort of wrap our heads around, if you can. I'll leave that open to either of you.

Dr. Cindy Blackstock: Well, there are 160,000 first nations children, and approximately half of them are on reserves.

The reports I would commend to you, member, are the Parliamentary Budget Officer's report on first nations schools, authored in 2009. He did a rather thorough inventory of the needs of first nations schools in terms of bringing them up to the same standards as offered in the provinces and territories. Of course there's the recent report by the first nations panel on elementary and secondary education, and of course your colleagues in the Senate also just did a report on first nations education. They demarcate, really, where are those areas where investments could be made that would make the most significant impacts for children. In terms of child welfare, there's the Auditor General's report of 2008 and her refresh report in 2011.

As well, a joint report was done between first nations and the government in 2005. The Wen:de report involved over 20 leading experts, including five economists. We wanted to make sure that we were being very fiscally prudent, that we could link every penny we were recommending to be spent with actually good evidence on what happens on the ground in child welfare for children.

Member, I know that you yourself are very familiar with foster care with the work that you were doing in terms of the development of foster care programs, etc., and your own family's commitment.

If you'd like a copy of those reports, we'd be happy to send them to your office.

• (1610)

Ms. Wai Young: I'd like to suggest that perhaps you table those reports for the purposes of this committee and for the education and information of all the members here. This is certainly an issue of grave concern, I think, not only to your community but for us as well, because we do want not just economic but also social stability and development, etc., for the children, that's for sure.

Dr. Cindy Blackstock: What we're finding is that when we go across the country and talk to first nations and non-aboriginal kids, first nations kids have dreams of becoming physicians, of becoming

business owners, of wanting to be pharmacists, of wanting to be artists. They really do want to make the very best contribution they can for their families and communities. I think these investments in them would help make a far better country for us all, as you point out.

Ms. Wai Young: If I may, I'd like to focus again on some of the complexities of this very big issue. As we know, it's not just a simple matter of dollars, right? I mean, some of these communities are very remote. Even getting teachers and staffing and a set of supplies to them is difficult at times, given winter conditions, etc., in Canada.

In addition to that, when you mirror that with what's happening in the urban centres, we do have some serious problems there, too, in terms of accomplishment rates, graduation rates, and all of those kinds of things. So we know there are some social issues tied in with the educational issues, which then are challenges for economic success, correct?

Given all of that, I guess what I'd like to ask you, given your extensive knowledge and experience in this area is this. Where are the areas, if you had to name the top three, where we can get the biggest bang for our activity or investment? I'm going to ask each of you to respond to this question, given that we have time.

Dr. Cindy Blackstock: I would say that I look at funding as enabling, as being the first domino. If you follow that, then the implementation of best practices is possible.

Ms. Wai Young: But what if we were to take that away? I mean, funding is an obvious thing, right? So let's take that way.

Dr. Cindy Blackstock: If we take that away, I would say poverty reduction strategies and investments in programs or even corporate partnerships.

There's a great partnership, and I'm not sure the committee has heard about this, by the National Australia Bank with regard to payday loan operations, for example, which in my personal view are very exploitive of the poor. They charge interest rates that the middle class and rich would never consider paying. In Australia the anti-poverty groups and aboriginal communities went to the National Australia Bank in that country. The bank actually decided it would set up competition for these payday loan operations and provide microcredit to the poor.

That kind of operation has significantly enhanced people's lives and lifted them out of poverty, in some instances, because as you get into that payday loan operation, it can really create a circle of poverty.

Ms. Wai Young: But are you familiar with the fact that Canada currently funds federal micro-loan programs through various banks and institutions, available at very good rates?

Dr. Cindy Blackstock: Right, but not as probably systematically as we were seeing in Australia. There was also an envelope around it of economic development and education, etc. So it's worth taking a look at.

The other thing is substance misuse and mental health treatment. I think it's really critical; it's really what drives a lot of the problems that we're seeing in our communities. If these were more widely available...along with investments in terms of self-esteem and cultural and language investments. We know from the research that girls growing up with a good sense of who they are, feeling proud of who they are, are less likely to get involved in domestic violence, less likely to get involved in other risky behaviours, and more set up for success.

Those would be my three.

● (1615)

Ms. Wai Young: Okay.

Ms. Dumont-Smith.

Ms. Claudette Dumont-Smith: Well, I was going to say microfinancing as well, but that has been touched upon.

These were raised as well to government by NWAC a while back. I think we don't have a good handle on measuring the success rates of aboriginal women or girls in the economic development milieu. I think that should be something the government begins. We need this aggregated data by age, as I mentioned, and by gender, to really be able to assess the situation.

I think there have to be programs and services specifically for young women in the cities—more than what there is now. Granted, there are a few that are usually provided by the friendship centres, but I think that has to be really augmented. There has to be more, and it has to be aboriginal young girl-specific.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Young's time is up. We will now move to other questions. Ms. Sgro, you have seven minutes.

[English]

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Please feel free to add anything you wanted to add in some of those other comments, because sometimes they're really important for all of us, regardless of which side of this room we're on.

Thank you to both of you for such an excellent presentation and for giving us a copy of the report from the United Nations as well. I think your comments were very, very moving, both of you, and it's just very sad that we're still struggling to solve this issue.

Frankly, if it takes the courts to solve it, then let's get it solved and let's move on with it, because I find these issues nothing short of a disgrace for all of us as Canadians. I think most Canadians want to see full opportunity for our aboriginal community, for our first nations. There's no reason why there shouldn't be.

Maybe this will be the turning point—through the court and through your excellent presentations.

Ms. Dumont-Smith, could you elaborate on the issue to do with the funding cut? That \$700,000 to \$800,000 is a huge amount of money.

Ms. Claudette Dumont-Smith: It is.

Hon. Judy Sgro: It's not a small token. Could you elaborate on just how you're not going to be able to offer...? Tell me a little more about that health program that is no longer going to be.

Ms. Claudette Dumont-Smith: I'll just give you a little bit of history, because I was the first health director of the Native Women's Association of Canada back in 2005. We applied for and received funding from the first nations and Inuit health branch of Health Canada to delve into different health topics, such as maternal and child health, aboriginal health human resources, FASD, early childhood development, and diabetes. The issues that were of great concern to aboriginal women were our concern as well.

We applied for project funding. Every year we got the funding and we would develop whatever we could develop. We would raise the awareness of these issues to our constituents and try to address the issues. We have done very well. As a matter of fact, one of our products on suicide prevention was identified—this was for young girls, as a matter of fact—as a best practice last year.

So as I said, we really thought that we would continue this work. We were very proud of our health unit, and consequently we were very surprised when they cut us at 100%. What will that do to the national office? Well, it's one-fifth of our budget. Six of our staff had to be let go. They had to be laid off. That seems to be the end of our health unit.

So yes, it doesn't only impact us at the national level. It's going to impact our constituents as well. When we had our annual general assembly or special meetings throughout the year, we would talk about whatever issue there was and whatever project we were developing. We would bring that information to them and get their input. We would also go to the tables at the national level, where they would talk about diabetes prevention, for example, or maternal and child health. We would have somebody from our health unit there to give their expert advice and to develop better programs and better policies.

There will be a tremendous backlash, I think, on the health of our women and girls.

Hon. Judy Sgro: Was there a consultation prior to that cut happening?

Ms. Claudette Dumont-Smith: Not at all. No.

Hon. Judy Sgro: When we started this study regarding where our young women in Canada would fit, the area that was the lowest was the aboriginal girls. We were doing pretty well everywhere else, except for the aboriginal girls, who were the ones who faced the biggest challenges. We were rated lowest in that particular category. So I'm glad that you're here, because I think that's an area that we really need to focus on with the kind of recommendations we're hoping to make here.

You tie it into education. Well, you know, you need healthy communities, and then you have to make sure that the girls are educated. You have to make sure that they know there are opportunities out there for them, that they can be successful if they do the things they're supposed to do.

The amount of substance abuse continues to be a concern for everyone. Is a lot of that a result of thinking that there's not a lot out there for them, that they'll end up without opportunities, and so they go into substance abuse as a way of killing the pain they're feeling about their future opportunities?

• (1620)

Dr. Cindy Blackstock: Shannen Koostachin said that she saw children as young as grade 5 dropping out because they had no hope.

I think if you were to imagine you or your family growing up in a community where people are living in tents, where there's one potable source of water; where you get two buckets, one for sewer and one for water; where your school is sitting next to a toxic waste dump, you could understand why hopelessness sets in as young as 10-years-old. But it's also made worse by the multigenerational impacts of residential schools, and in that regard, among the cuts that happened last year was the 100% cut to the funding to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation. There's no real strategy that I know of on how to support the survivors of residential schools and to address the multigenerational impacts of residential schools that are very much alive in our communities.

I don't know if Claudette—

Ms. Claudette Dumont-Smith: Yes, they are.

Hon. Judy Sgro: Ms. Dumont-Smith, you mentioned various recommendations. I don't think you had a chance to finish them. You mentioned microfinancing and community economics. What were the others?

Ms. Claudette Dumont-Smith: There was the thing about the disaggregation of data. We have to have a better handle on that. There are programs, the aboriginal procurement strategy, for example. Are young aboriginal women accessing the funds that are in there? We don't know. The information is there, but who's receiving the funds available for aboriginal business people from it? We don't know, and we've been asking for that for several years now. Also, are there measures in place to make sure that some of the funding available through that program, and the aboriginal business development program as well, is targeted to young aboriginal female entrepreneurs? We don't know. We don't have that information. We need that information.

I think we don't have a good handle on that. We don't have a good assessment, and I think we have to start to do the work so that we can develop the proper solutions.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Sgro.

As we continue around the table, you have five minutes, Ms. O'Neill Gordon

[English]

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill Gordon (Miramichi, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair. I want to thank the witnesses for being with us this afternoon.

I have to say that prior to becoming a member of Parliament, I was a teacher in a public school for 33 years. Following that, I taught for four years on a reserve after I retired. I felt that retirement wasn't for

me, that I needed to go and make myself useful. So I went to a reserve and taught there.

Now in my constituency I have three reserves and I am very proud to say that all those three schools have the highest commendations and the highest technology, which I know because I have visited them since becoming a member of Parliament. The school that I taught at had been requesting a new school because they needed some repairs made to it and they were looking for that while I was there those four years, but it wasn't disastrous. There were things that needed to be repaired, like the electrical system and things like that. So I'm proud to say that as soon as I did get here, our government listened to me, and we have a brand new school there that I'm about to open in a few weeks.

These things provide a lot to our children back home on the reserve, and I'm happy and proud to see these kids enjoying such accommodations. It's good not just for the girls and the boys but also for the teachers. It gives them great ambition to go ahead and provide these kids with lots of different programs, which I have seen first hand.

Now of course this new school that we're about to open has breakfast in the morning and lunch at the cafeteria and everything. These are things that students on reserves need to have at their fingertips. They get a three course dinner at this new school for a dollar each. That is a very, very good program being provided by our government. There are some success stories out there, no doubt, with that.

But my question is, why do you see such a big difference from one area to another? I can visit any one of those three schools and be proud about what is going on there, and be proud about the accommodations and the work by teachers and volunteers in the community. Why is there such a big difference from one area to another? Being a teacher, I'm going to be the first to say that I don't like to see boys or girls lose out on a good opportunity for education. But why is it that some areas are doing so well and another has nothing? Is it financial mismanagement? Is there something that our government should be looking at to make things better for all?

• (1625)

Dr. Cindy Blackstock: Thank you, member. It's a very important question.

It's one that the Parliamentary Budget Officer asked when he did his review of first nations schools. So we'll make it a particular concern of ours following on your colleague's mention. We'll send you a copy of that report.

What they found is that there was no clear process inside the aboriginal affairs department for deciding which communities receive schools and which do not. That was one of his central recommendations, that there need to be some kind of clear criteria set out.

He found that 50 communities needed schools. As you may know, in Thunder Bay, for example, many first nations children, including some as young as 13, are having to fly down from their communities to go to school. I have an 18-year-old at home and I think many of us have kids. We don't even want to see them going away at 18, let alone at 13. They're getting into at-risk behaviours.

Twenty nine others need substantial repairs, according to the Parliamentary Budget Officer. Even in communities where there are good quality schools, the estimate is that there is underfunding in the basic formula for education—for teachers, libraries, and those types of things—by \$2,000 to \$3,000 per student per year.

Despite that, in some areas both the teachers and schools are able to do good work. But I think you can agree with me that good public policy is when success is the rule and not the exception. So we need to bring everybody up to that basic standard of equity and I think that it would be worth it for the government to look into how these schools are actually allocated. What are the criteria? How do we ensure that they're going to those most in need?

I think that's a very important question.

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill Gordon: How much time do I have?

[Translation]

The Chair: You have 30 seconds left.

[English]

You have 30 seconds.

[Translation]

As Ms. O'Neill Gordon tells me that she has finished, we now move to Ms. Freeman. You have about two and a half minutes.

[English]

Ms. Mylène Freeman (Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, NDP): Thank you.

Given the brevity of my time, I just want to quickly say thank you for all the work that you're both doing. It's incredible work and you're both such wonderful advocates. I really appreciate the time that you've taken to come here today.

I am going to ask you both to essentially give us an update. Tell us how inadequate housing and shelter on reserve, and maybe the inaccessibility of some areas, and even urban areas, affect aboriginal girls' future economic prospects, given that we know that there's a link between a lack of housing, lack of shelter, and violence.

What recommendations could you offer the government to address that situation?

Thank you.

Ms. Claudette Dumont-Smith: Well, what you say is right: there is more violence in the communities. Overcrowding is an issue, and we know that overcrowding causes violence and mental health issues as well. That's probably why a lot of the young women leave home when they're not ready to leave.

When I say they're not ready, it's that they don't know enough about the outside world, so to speak. But they do take that risk. They leave and we know where they end up. I think you're well aware of the 580 some aboriginal women, many very young, who ended up on Vancouver's east side and they're either dead or missing. I think all of that is interrelated. I think that housing has to be improved.

As for shelters, there are shelters on the reserve, but it's a situation where everybody knows everybody. Usually the communities are small and everybody knows everybody. Are the young women accessing services there? I'm doubtful about that.

I think that where there are no services in the communities for young females... But as I mentioned earlier, I want to stress that there are friendship centres that are good places, which young women who are leaving their communities should be made aware of and where they can go for services.

I know that the friendship centres as well are very underfunded. I think the government has a prime opportunity to work with the friendship centres and to offer these services to the young women, because the end results are very sad.

• (1630)

[Translation]

The Chair: I have to interrupt you, Ms. Dumont-Smith. That was very interesting.

At this point, we end today's meeting. We will meet again next Monday: same time, same channel. I wish you a very good evening and I thank our witnesses very much for appearing today.

(Meeting adjourned)

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