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Ms. Marie-Claude Morin

Standing Committee on the Status of Women

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•(1105)

[Translation]

The Chair (Ms. Marie-Claude Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, NDP)): Since we have quorum and we don't have a lot of time, we will get started right away.

Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the 63rd meeting of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women. I would just like to point out that today is March 7, the day before International Women's Day. I thought it was worth mentioning since we are the Standing Committee on the Status of Women.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we are continuing our study of sexual harassment in the federal workplace.

Today we have with us Sherry Lee Benson-Podolchuk.

Ms. Sgro?

[English]

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Before we start with our witness, I'd like to raise a point of order regarding the other witness who was supposed to appear today, Ms. Krista Carle. I understand that the committee passed a motion at Tuesday's meeting. Could the clerk read that out, what was passed on Tuesday before I make any remarks pertaining to it?

[Translation]

The Chair: With pleasure. We will do that in a few moments. It won't be long, Ms. Benson-Podolchuk.

Am I pronouncing your name correctly?

[English]

Ms. Sherry Lee Benson-Podolchuk (As an Individual): Yes, you are.

[Translation]

The Chair: Okay.

It won't be long. I'm going to read a motion and come back to you in a few moments.

The following motion, which was passed unanimously at Tuesday's meeting, reads as follows:

It was agreed,—That, in accordance with the *sub judice* convention, invitations to appear on the study of sexual harassment in the federal workplace be limited to individuals not currently under a judicial process or grievance.

[English]

Hon. Judy Sgro: There are a couple of issues that I want to raise.

Anybody coming before our committee has Parliamentary immunity from that perspective, both the witnesses and members of Parliament. Often there have been issues actively before the courts, and standing committees have still had witnesses come to speak to them on a particular issue. I think this issue is really important.

[Translation]

The Chair: I'm sorry, Ms. Sgro, but I am going to stop you there. This was something we discussed at the beginning of our study. The committee agreed that it would not get involved in judicial processes. It's simply that we didn't have a motion in that regard. But it was passed unanimously.

[English]

Hon. Judy Sgro: All right, but I'm speaking directly to the motion right now, not necessarily to Ms. Carle. That's a separate issue. But there is nothing certified at the moment—

[Translation]

The Chair: I'm talking about the motion, too.

[English]

Hon. Judy Sgro: —before the courts. So, it's inaccurate to say that she is part of something that is before the courts. There is a class action talked about in and around this issue that we are dealing with, but it has not been certified and accepted that it is going to be heard as of yet. So, at the moment there is no class action suit out there and there is nothing before the courts that is involving Ms. Carle.

What I'd like to ask, for this issue and for the benefit of all of the committee, is could we get a legal opinion on this issue as to whether there is or isn't—because to my knowledge there is nothing so far before the courts. Could we get from our own staff a legal opinion on who can come before committee and so on? I think it would be helpful for everybody to understand the issue better.

More importantly, is there a particular reason that Ms. Carle could not come before the committee, that we didn't need to have that motion because she doesn't have anything before the courts at this particular time? Could we get a decision, some information back for the use of the committee? Then we can look at that again if we get the appropriate legal advice.

[Translation]

The Chair: Ms. Ashton would like to have the floor.

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill, NDP): I would like to support the idea that we get a legal opinion.

[English]

I think it's essential as we move forward to have a legal opinion. I support that idea.

[Translation]

The Chair: Ms. James, you have the floor.

[English]

Ms. Roxanne James (Scarborough Centre, CPC): Madam Chair, just to talk about the motion that was passed last week, that was a unanimous motion. I believe that you were not here for that meeting. We do not normally request a legal opinion on these types of matters. It was discussed within the committee. We passed that motion. I think that we should just move forward and listen to the witness. I think everyone here today realizes that we have an impending vote coming very shortly and I request that we actually hear the witness before the bells start to ring.

Thank you.

Hon. Judy Sgro: This is an issue that would benefit all of us who sit on the committee, so that we know more specifically what our rights are as members of the committee. To not hear from a woman who was an integral part of the sexual harassment for many years, to not hear from her when we heard from Commissioner Paulson who admitted there were some issues, and to deny the committee the opportunity to hear more in detail on some of these issues, and we only have, I believe, these two individuals who are going to speak directly to it, I think, really leaves the committee at a disadvantage. If we're trying to do a wholesome, full report I think it would be helpful if we could have her.

Thank you.

[Translation]

The Chair: Given the type of morning we have—as you know, we are going to hear the bells in 10 minutes for a vote in about 40 minutes—I propose that we hear Ms. Benson-Podolchuk's testimony, which will last 10 minutes. However, we won't have time to ask her any questions. We could then plan another meeting during committee work. Does everyone agree with that suggestion?

Some hon. members: Yes.

The Chair: Ms. Benson-Podolchuk, I will ask that you give your testimony. You have 10 minutes. I'll let you know when you have one minute left. If the bells start a little before the end of your testimony, we will still let you finish, given that we have half an hour to get to the House.

Thank you. I'm sorry for the inconvenience.

You have the floor.

• (1110)

[English]

Ms. Sherry Lee Benson-Podolchuk: Thank you very much. Good morning.

My goal for today is not only to provide another face—I didn't realize I was the only face—but also to provide insight into what it looks like in the culture of protectiveness that's deeply embedded within the RCMP and the federal government.

I've been sending letters since 1999 to media, to various government officials, trying to bring attention to this very serious issue, knowing that there were whispers across the country of other women and men who were suffering from harassment and sexual harassment.

I'll give you a little bit of background. I joined the RCMP in 1989, as a single mom on welfare, with the hopes of making a better life for myself and my daughter. In training the instructors always said to tell the truth, never, never lie, and the RCMP will protect you, and that the law was sacrosanct.

At no time did we learn anything about respect for the workplace, conflict resolution, anti-bullying techniques with regard to the inner dynamics of the detachment. We learned about how to communicate with bad guys, people who were suicidal, and victims of domestic dispute, but we didn't learn how to do conflict resolution within our own detachments and the members.

Our troop counsellor at the very beginning told us that as a female, our life expectancy in the RCMP was between three and five years. I really didn't know what she meant. I thought she was referring to getting married and having kids, and that would be how we would get weeded out.

When I look back in hindsight, she had this very serious face. I think she was referring to the harassment that we were about to experience. That was something of a taboo topic. Nobody talked about it. It hasn't really been in the forefront until Catherine Galliford spoke out.

For me, at my very first detachment, there was of course the typical gentle teasing, and eventually the names became more derogatory. My supervisor, the one who was in charge of me, and another officer thought it was funny to call me “beaver” and “raisin tits”, not only in the office but on the radio and in public. When I would sign birthday cards, they would put “the beaver” or “raisin tits” underneath my name after I had signed it.

I did the right thing, I went to each one and I spoke to them. I asked them to please not call me those names. They laughed, and the name-calling only intensified. I went to my sergeant, the detachment commander, and he laughed as well and just said, “Maybe you just like the attention.”

Things went from bad to worse for me when another senior partner came to work drunk. He was so drunk he actually fell into his gun locker, and I had to pry him out. I asked him to wait there, and I would go lock the detachment door and drive him home. I didn't know what to do. It was my first year as a police officer.

While I was locking the front door, he took off in his own car, forced another vehicle off the road, then crashed his own car into a parked car, and then managed to drive home. I eventually caught up to him, and I was in a police car, as he was pulling into his driveway. Thankfully, his wife was home and kept him home.

Later when I took a statement from the witness, and I had my own statement, he provided one to me. He expected me to lie. He was blaming the car accident on his foot getting caught in the carpet. When I said I wouldn't lie for him, he said, "Well, you hand in your statement; I'll hand in mine." As a result, he was charged with impaired driving and was convicted.

The good news for him was, he admitted to me he had been trying to quit drinking for 15 years, and everybody else had been covering up for him. He was crying on the phone and thanking me for helping him quit drinking. He never drank again, as far as I know.

The bad news for me is the other officers looked at me like I was not one of them. I became a target. When he returned, as punishment to me, I was forced to be his partner. That meant other people had to take calls because he couldn't drive.

Eventually it became very polarized at that detachment, them against me. One evening I came to work, and when I went to use the ladies washroom, the screws on the bathroom stall doors had been loosened. When I opened the door, it fell off the wall, hit me in the face, split my head, and gave me a concussion.

When I returned three days later, in my gun locker I found a dead prairie chicken with blood dripping all over my personal things. I took that as a threat, as a message to shut up. It took a long time, but when I made a complaint to my detachment commander, after that dead prairie chicken incident, he realized he had a problem, but nothing was ever resolved.

• (1115)

I was shunned. What is it like to be a target? You're shunned. People don't talk to you.

Imagine if you went to work every day and you said hello to your friends, Madam Chairman, and no one said hello back. When the phone would ring they would just hand it to you. They wouldn't say, "There's a call for you."

I would find nasty notes on my files. When I went to a domestic dispute—domestics are very serious—where there was potential danger, one officer refused to back me up.

When people are under severe stress like that, it begins to wear at their sense of self-esteem. I began to doubt everything I did. Of course you start to make mistakes.

All requests for a transfer were denied. Finally, when I was at my wit's end, I made a Canadian human rights complaint in 1992.

I was transferred to Selkirk where I remained for several months. I enjoyed it. However, after one particular night when I decided to stay and have a couple of drinks with some officers—I didn't want to drive; I'm not a very big person—another officer offered me his place to stay. So I stayed at his house with the understanding, "I will be in one room and you'll be in the other. I'm not interested." But he came into the room and he raped me.

You would think because I was a police officer that I know self-defence, I know the pain areas, I carry a gun, but I was just like everyone else who's a victim. You never know how you're going to react until it's actually happening. I was frozen, not only because it was happening to me, but this was an officer who also carried a gun.

I kept that silent shame for years. What was most beneficial for me was the fact that I wrote about it and I was able to help other people deal with that same kind of problem.

In 1994 I blew out my shoulder in a shotgun training accident. Right after that there were serious attempts to medically discharge me. While I was recovering for the nine months, I noticed that the RCMP had accommodated men who had been playing hockey or had fallen off their roofs. They were allowed to maintain very successful careers, and yet I was not afforded the same consideration. That would not do. They served me medical discharge papers, and for the next six years and \$14,000 later, I was fighting to keep my job. Finally in 2002, the external review committee said they agreed with all my grievances and that I was to be accommodated in another section.

During those six years, since the RCMP refused to train me, I had to retrain myself in human resources. Commissioner Zaccardelli ordered me into a section where he knew I was unable to perform. Quite clearly it became evident that this was a punishment transfer.

Having a strong work ethic, I thought I could try to make this work, but basically I was making \$79,000 as a paper shredder and file clerk. This is not to say there's anything wrong with that, but I didn't spend six years grieving the medical discharge just to be a secretary. Again all requests for transfer were denied.

This time the experience of harassment and abuse of power came from the higher ranking officers, from staffing, from the chief superintendent, from inspectors. The people I worked with on commercial crime were supportive and understanding. They were just as dumbfounded as I that I was being sent to a position for which I clearly had no education, knowledge, or even interest. The learning curve in that particular section is quite long. Also, because of my injury, I was unable to go out and do search warrants, which is part of the learning process for that highly skilled section.

From my experience the division representatives were impotent and unwilling to do anything to go against the chain of command. Basically they said, "You're on your own, Sherry." I'd follow the procedures and policies every day everywhere I went and yet the RCMP would set up roadblocks for everything I did.

You have to take into account that for harassment, it's not just the victims, it's the spouses and the children who suffer as well. I'm speaking from experience.

In 2006 I hired another lawyer and filed another Canadian human rights complaint, as well as a federal lawsuit. In order to survive I knew I had to do something, so I wrote a book about my experiences. That helped me detail everything I had gone through. Not only that, it's been able to help other women and men who have been experiencing harassment and abuse in their workplace, not just in the RCMP but in other federal government agencies.

• (1120)

One officer said to my face, "You know, Sherry, the RCMP hate you. They want to ruin you. They want to drive you to suicide or ruin you financially." If you've heard a little bit about what I've just said, you can see how I took that as a very legitimate threat.

My goal from having survived 20 years was to encourage people to speak up, educate people on the impact of harassment in the workplace, the bully, the bystander and the victim, and also the financial costs, but most importantly, make people accountable for their behaviours.

I wrote down a few things that I thought would be important. I'm very pleased with this hearing today. It's vital that people have a voice. I think the number one healing process for the victims from today and tomorrow would be video or audio archives such as this for them to at least have two minutes to say, "This is what happened to me", and have it documented. That's part of the healing process.

For me it was my book, and I continue to speak up for people. I meet people all the time who are trying to cope with what's happened

to them and they're stuck. I believe that criminal charges are important for those who have been RCMP offenders, impartial investigations on such things as sexual assaults committed by RCMP officers, and improved hiring practices.

For example, in the 1990s, and this is probably documented somewhere, the Canadian Forces and other federal government agencies, including the RCMP, were asked about anti-harassment training and did they want it. The commissioner at that time said, "Nah, we don't need that." That speaks volumes to the kind of people who are hired and promoted.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Ms. Benson-Podolchuk, I must interrupt you. It's a part of my job I don't like doing, especially in the case of a testimony as deep as yours. The bells have started, indicating that we must go vote. So I will have to end the meeting.

We will get in touch with you again so that you can continue your testimony and the committee members can ask you questions. You are very brave and I salute you. It's admirable. I think the committee members are unanimous on that. Thank you very much for appearing before us today. The clerk of the committee will contact you to figure out what's next. The committee members will certainly want to ask you some questions.

Have a very good day. Thank you.

The meeting adjourned.

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