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Chair

Ms. Marilyn Gladu

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• (1540)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC)): I'm going to call the meeting to order. You can see that the bells are on for votes, so I think I need unanimous consent of the committee to at least hear the testimony of our witness. I've recommended to her that we would be able to send our questions through the clerk to her for her written response, if that's acceptable.

Do I have unanimous consent to proceed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: All right, Tessa, I would invite you to begin. You have 10 minutes. Welcome.

Ms. Tessa Hill (Co-Founder, We Give Consent): Thank you all very much for having me speak here this afternoon.

In September of my grade 8 year, Lia Valente and I decided to take on rape culture. Our documentary *Allegedly* and our We Give Consent campaign were created because we are passionate about feminism and committed to taking action against gender-based violence.

While the term “rape culture” is generally pretty unknown to 13-year-olds, we were exposed on a daily basis to the effects of rape culture in our daily lives. The core of our campaign was our petition to the Ontario government to include consent as a topic in the Ontario health and physical education curriculum. Through the platform provided by Change.org, we were able to reach thousands of people with our petition. Through social media, the number of people who followed our campaign grew and grew until we gathered over 40,000 signatures in support of consent in the curriculum.

Young people who want to speak out against injustice can often face many obstacles. There is a lot of dismissal and condescension, and overall, the voices and opinions of young people are often not seen as valid. As a young activist talking about rape culture and consent culture, I have had my views questioned because of my age and experience. I have also sometimes been seen as a sort of exception to the rule about young people. While not every young person is an activist, many are having intelligent conversations about these issues. I believe that on a larger scale we have to start to understand that young people are aware and capable, and some of our broader conversations need to shift to acknowledge that.

Sometimes those who want to be activists can face impossibly negative reactions from adults in their own community. Using the Internet and social media in our project, we were able to not only

learn what we hadn't been taught about consent and healthy relationships, although our immediate school community was supportive of our initiative, but also have the opportunity for our voices to be heard by many more people who wanted to listen. That was something very different from anything we had ever experienced before.

Throughout the campaign, the main thing I have focused on is working to create a consent culture. When Lia and I began to look at rape culture and interview experts for our film *Allegedly*, we also didn't know the term “consent culture”. It became clear that in order to move towards ending rape culture in our society and in Canada, we had to work to move towards a society that values consent and mutual respect. For us, that meant the education of our own peers.

In my opinion, talking about consent does not just mean talking about the laws. It means starting to talk at a young age about respecting boundaries.

Often the first thought that comes to mind about consent is about the term in the context of sexual activity, but consent is also key when talking about building healthy relationships and respect. It is important for young people to understand not only the legal rules but also how their actions affect other people. Furthermore, for consent and sex education to be successful and to fully address the prevalence of sexual violence, the perceived divide and barriers between genders need to be broken. Currently, when it comes to sex education, there is a noticeable split between the way we talk to boys and the way we talk to girls. Health classes are taught within those two binary genders and there is still a mindset of telling girls to avoid rape and an emphasis on the right to say no. Talking about the ability to say no is extremely important, but I also think it is equally important to discuss affirmative consent and the concept of yes means yes.

I believe that good conversations about sexual health and healthy relationships need to be inclusive of all genders. Everyone should be on exactly the same page. From my point of view, education is the key to the prevention of sexual violence. Though there are many reasons, some of them unknown, that someone becomes a perpetrator of violence, I think it is also unfair to make excuses or to isolate an incident.

I've experienced what society is like for my generation and I'm currently experiencing our school system. I know that though many things have progressed, there is still a huge stigma around sex. Within school environments, sex-positive, body-positive, and queer-positive information about sex education is not at all accessible to young people.

As Lia and I were doing our work around changing the health curriculum in Ontario, we knew that even though the curriculum may change, not every classroom will change. The reality is that not every teacher has the same level of comfort with teaching content that talks specifically about consent and sex, and not every province has an updated and progressive health curriculum. If they do, there is not always a great amount of training, and teachers may come from backgrounds where there is a lot of stigma. In addition, there are many intersections of identity such as race, gender, sexuality, and socio-economic class that may prevent young people from having equal access to comprehensive information. I was very privileged to have extensive and positive sex education in grade 8 at my alternative middle school, but very few young people get that opportunity.

In response to that, I think the Internet can be an extremely useful tool for connecting with young people. Oftentimes, especially on the subject of rape culture, the Internet can be dismissed as an inherently bad place.

It is true that it is the first place that we turn to when we have a lack of information, but it can be extremely helpful. Using the Internet as a resource for education is very valuable, because for the most part it surpasses the barriers that may prevent teens from accessing information, and it levels the playing field.

There are many positive ways to look at the world online, but it is key that we do acknowledge the negative aspects. For example, we have recently seen the intense effects of the American election and Donald Trump's media presence on our social media environments and in our communities. Trump has given permission for people to express their hatred, and I've been witnessing these ripples in my own school community. His comments directly perpetuate the rape culture that we currently live in, and I have seen a few of my own peers attempt to use that controversy and hatred online and toward others.

The online environment can be a harsh and toxic place for teens and activists even though it is such an integral part of our lives. In contrast, my experiences with legal consent online were vastly different from what I expected. It is easy to get overwhelmed with the trolls and comments, but for the most part, I felt an amazing sense of support from people online.

The truth is that people are ready to have these conversations, and they are ready to hear from young people like me, but we have to shift our conversations to include more of my generation. It's critical to call out what we see, utilize the term "rape culture", and acknowledge that it is an intersectional issue. We can harness the power of the Internet and social media to educate and to have these conversations that educate young people and adults about how rape culture affects us all.

Thank you so much for this opportunity. I hope my thoughts and experiences can contribute to the ongoing effort to end violence against women and girls.

● (1545)

The Chair: Excellent. I really want to thank you, Tessa, for coming and for the work you're doing with We Give Consent.

In light of the fact that we need to go vote, I would invite all committee members to send their questions to the clerk. We will send them to Tessa, and she'll provide a written response.

Thank you again for being with us, and I would like to suspend—

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): If there is unanimous consent, I'd be happy to extend for another six minutes, giving us 15—

An hon. member: No.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Okay.

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, NDP): Can I just say one thing on behalf of the other members of the committee? Thank you for being so articulate and for taking charge and using your voice. I am really sad that we're not going to be able to have more dialogue with you, but I really want to thank you for your leadership. It's really inspiring.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Awesome.

The Chair: All right, I'm suspending the meeting.

● (1545)

(Pause)

● (1630)

The Chair: I call the meeting to order.

I'm really happy today to welcome, from the Government of Ontario, Maureen Adamson, who is the deputy minister responsible for women's issues, and Lisa Priest, who is the assistant deputy minister.

Also, by video conference, I'm pleased to welcome, from the Government of New Brunswick, Jocelyne Mills, who is the assistant deputy minister for the executive council office of the women's equality branch.

Welcome to all of you.

We're going to have 10 minutes of comments from the Government of Ontario, and then 10 minutes of comments from the Government of New Brunswick.

We'll begin with you, Maureen. You have 10 minutes.

Mr. Sean Fraser (Central Nova, Lib.): Madam Chair, just before we begin, I'm getting a notice that there may be another vote imminently, if it's not already started.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Has it started?

A voice: Yes.

The Chair: Is that it?

Mr. Sean Fraser: Yes.

The Chair: All right.

The Chair: Yikes.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Sorry.

I am really sorry, ladies. We've just been called back to the House for more votes, so we will have to reschedule.

The Chair: Do we have consent to do five minutes and five minutes of speeches?

Voices: No.

The meeting is adjourned.

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