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Chair

Mr. Bryan May

Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Bryan May (Cambridge, Lib.)): Good morning, everybody.

Pursuant to the order of reference of Wednesday, October 26, 2016, the committee is resuming consideration of Bill C-243, an act respecting the development of a national maternity assistance program strategy and amending the Employment Insurance Act (maternity benefits).

Welcome to everybody.

First of all, appearing here in Ottawa is Melodie Ballard. I understand that your little one is with you. What's his name?

Ms. Melodie Ballard (As an Individual): This is Ezra.

The Chair: Hi, Ezra.

He's got a cookie. He's fantastic.

Also appearing as an individual by video conference from Langley, British Columbia, is Anna Nienhuis. Am I pronouncing your name correctly?

Ms. Anna Nienhuis (As an Individual): That's pretty close.

The Chair: Pretty close. Okay. Excellent.

Also via video conference, from the Canadian Coalition of Women in Engineering, Science, Trades and Technology, is Liette Vasseur, president and professor at Brock University. Welcome.

Can you hear me okay?

Ms. Liette Vasseur (President and Professor at Brock University, Canadian Coalition of Women in Engineering, Science, Trades and Technology): Yes. Perfect.

The Chair: From the National Council of Women of Canada, we have Karen Dempsey, president. She's also coming to us via video conference from Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Can you hear me okay?

Ms. Karen Dempsey (President, National Council of Women of Canada): Yes, Mr. May.

The Chair: Thank you.

Also, via video conference from Edmonton, Alberta, we have JudyLynn Archer from Women Building Futures, former chief executive officer and director.

Hello. Can you hear me?

Ms. JudyLynn Archer (Former Chief Executive Officer and Director, Women Building Futures): Yes, I can. Thank you.

The Chair: Excellent.

Thank you all for being here. We have a full slate of witnesses and lots of questions, I'm sure.

We're going to start everything off with an introduction by Melodie Ballard. The next seven minutes are yours.

Ms. Melodie Ballard: Thank you.

By training, I am an aluminum welder and carpenter. My career started in 2011 when I graduated from St. Lawrence College in Kingston, Ontario.

I chose to go into the trades for the stability of employment opportunities. I thought they would provide me with the money and time I needed to raise and nurture a family, but I was wrong. When I unexpectedly became pregnant, the combined impact of working a dangerous job, a lack of accommodation from my employer and, most importantly for today, no proper government aid program affected me for the worse. In other words, because of the nature of my job, I could not work while pregnant, even in my first trimester.

I had to take sick leave, for which I received 55% of my average pay. This lasted for 15 weeks. It was helpful at the time, but it ran out in my second trimester. I would have no income until I was eligible for maternity leave in my third trimester, eight weeks before the estimated due date of my son. That's two months with no cash flow.

I was not initially warned of this gap when I opened a file with Service Canada. I was also not initially warned that the 15 weeks of sick leave and the two months of no income would be deducted from my parental leave. My leave benefits were scheduled to end when Ezra, my son, was a mere four months old. I was heartbroken.

I put in a complaint to Service Canada about the deduction and was granted a three-month extension. That still meant I would have no parental benefits when my son was seven months old.

Before we talk about the end of my parental leave, I would like to revisit my sick leave for a moment. It's important to note that I was not sick. Service Canada just didn't know how else to handle my situation.

During my 15-week sick leave period, I was restricted by the rules of the employment insurance program, which I found to be grossly inappropriate for an early pregnancy leave. Notably, I was not allowed to earn money. Again, I was receiving only 55% of my average pay and was about to face two months of no income while preparing for the arrival of a baby, but I was not allowed to better my situation financially. The sick leave program is designed for a true sickness and is in no way appropriate for a healthy pregnancy.

During the two-month gap with no income, I tried feverishly to find some sort of aid for my situation, to no avail. I placed over 100 phone calls to different levels of government. I wrote to several ministers. I even resorted to community charity organizations. I took every suggestion made to me and left no stone unturned.

While I did discover Quebec's preventative withdrawal program, for which I did not qualify as an Ontario resident, I can tell you with the utmost confidence that absolutely nothing else currently exists for the rest of Canadians to help a pregnant woman on early leave from a dangerous job.

I petitioned the 41st Parliament through my previous representative and did not receive a response. I followed up with my current representative, MP Mark Gerretsen, whom I am pleased to say has managed to carry the issue much further than I ever could have done alone by his selecting it for his private member's bill.

All this brings me back to my shortened parental leave. As a Canadian, I had always expected I would get to be with my own child for the entire first year of his life. When he was seven months old, I was not ready to put him in the care of someone else. He was so little, and our time so far had been full of stress due to the bureaucratic mess I was in.

More than that, my work as a welder would have required me to work 10 hours per work day—an honest day's work, yes, but also requiring a lot of child care. On top of this I was still breastfeeding, while attempts at pumping had not been working so far. We just weren't ready.

I turned to the Ontario Works program. I hoped they could see me through the next five months until my provincially guaranteed right to return to work deadline, which was my son's first birthday, in May of 2016.

I had budgeted my life around receiving 55% of my pay in terms of EI benefits. Ontario Works represented a sharp decline in income. While we are not here to discuss a provincial program, I mention this to illustrate what came after my Service Canada file closed, the trajectory of being a mother cut off from EI with a seven-month-old.

Despite creative attempts to make ends meet, such as bartering with my landlord and offering child care to other families, I had to give up on those efforts when I lost my apartment, because despite my efforts, we couldn't afford the rent. The social housing wait list in my city, which we are on, is two to seven years.

I also need to point out that since resorting to Ontario Works, my tools have become trapped in a storage unit I cannot afford to pay for. I can't afford a place to live that would accommodate my tools, and I can't be employed in my field without my tools.

I have moved 10 times since discovering my pregnancy in September of 2015. I'm currently getting ready for my 11th move this June. The emotional and physical strain of unstable housing and poverty has been so taxing on my mental health that I have an application in progress for the Ontario disability support program as I battle severe anxiety and panic attacks. This all started with the gap of having no income.

Let me say that constantly moving between temporary housing makes committing to a day care or putting energy into a job search extremely awkward and difficult. This poverty cycle is self-feeding and ever-worsening the more time passes, as I am sure you can see.

• (1110)

In September 2015 I was skilled, willing, fit, and able to work, with an opportunity in hand. Now, in my second year of poverty, I am skilled and willing, but less fit, unable, and without opportunity. Last year, after discovering that even the family homeless shelter in my town had a months long wait list, I panicked that we were at risk of living on the street, so I bought an old 14-foot travel trailer for a couple of hundred dollars. I collected scrap materials to fix it up, and friends have volunteered their time to help with the project, and I put my carpentry, marine outfitting, and welding skills to work. I even launched a GoFundMe campaign to try to raise money for the renovation. It is not an ideal solution; it's just better than nothing and the best I could do.

I am doing this because no matter what now, I have a roof for my son. You, members of Parliament, need to know that I'm doing this because our social system failed me and is failing me. I hadn't expected to fall into a federal aid gap. I didn't know there was one. No one seemed to know there was one. I hadn't expected to use the Ontario Works program and I never expected it to be so far behind the cost of living.

Before Bill C-243, most people I explained my situation to, including government employees, seemed sure that I had missed something. I hadn't. During this whole journey I've used my hard work, my creativity, resourcefulness, and practicality, and yet I've come up short.

Canada has many social programs to protect health and financial vulnerabilities, and when people assume you must be covered, they're less likely to help. I was not covered, and women working dangerous jobs around this country are not covered. This must change for those women and for their children to come.

I am forever grateful to all the wonderful friends and strangers who have reached out to me and offered me help. Some admitted that it was my ability to articulate my needs that led them to help. I hope I have been articulate today. If so, I hope you will be moved to help me and, more importantly, the many who can't articulate the challenging situations they face. Women who work dangerous jobs shouldn't have to face dangerous pregnancies and maternity leaves. They should not receive less protected time with their newborn children.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we go to Langley, British Columbia, for the next seven minutes.

Anna Nienhuis, please.

Ms. Anna Nienhuis: Thank you for inviting me to be here today to speak about the need for Bill C-243. It was amazing to hear Melodie's story and to be able to see where this is really coming from.

This is an exciting opportunity to evaluate the maternity benefit program in Canada. I'm hopeful that it will lead to changes that will mean every woman who chooses motherhood is supported in that decision from the earliest stages. I hope to contribute a voice that speaks for increasing the social value of motherhood and the need for a health benefit plan for pregnant and postpartum women.

I'm a mother of five children who range in age from three months to eight years. I was able to take maternity leave with my first three children, but for the last two, I fell short of the required hours. This was because I chose to work reduced hours in order to care for my other children, rather than putting them in other child care. I went back to work part time when my fourth child was eight months old, and now I'm starting part-time work again, now that my baby is three months old.

I am blessed to be able to work from home, but many women do not have that or do not want that. They would be faced with placing their babies in child care almost immediately if they were like me and didn't qualify for maternity leave benefits.

According to Statistics Canada, in 2009, 40% of new parents could not afford to take maternity leave at all, and 81% of them indicated that they would have stayed home longer if they had felt it were financially possible. This is overwhelming evidence that many women would choose motherhood as a career path, but are forced by finances to work two jobs: one as a mother and one to pay the bills. I work part-time as a researcher with a national pro-life organization, and I believe strongly in the need for holistic care for pregnant and postpartum women and their children.

In Canada, at least 100,000 abortions are performed annually, and the Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada cites finances as a main reason women choose abortion. According to AbortioninCanada.ca, 20% of women seeking abortions cite finances as the number one reason that they're getting an abortion. They don't feel financially able to welcome a child. It's so discouraging to know that 20,000 abortions are occurring annually because the mothers don't feel financially able to take care of those children.

Obviously, a lot of progress can be made in how we support pregnant and postpartum women so they do feel able to make a choice that's not decided by finances and fear.

For me, caring for my children myself has always been a priority. I have not always felt social support for that choice, as our government continues to push funding for child care outside the home and puts significant emphasis on getting women back into the workforce as soon as possible. This subtle pressure creates social stigma around stay-at-home parenthood, and implies that women who do not re-enter the workforce as soon as possible are a burden and a drain on Canada's economy.

This implication devalues our next generation and the choice those women have made. The next generation will allow our economy to continue to function. Our fertility rate is well below the replacement rate of 2.1 children per woman, and it has been for over 40 years. Our aging population is a growing concern. Obviously, this is not about forcing women to have two children each. It is about supporting those who would like to have children and about recognizing the contribution they make to Canadian society by doing so. When a woman chooses motherhood, that should be supported as a legitimate career choice, not a stopping point or a hindrance to another career path.

Along with a general shift to viewing motherhood as career choice like any other, I would suggest the committee consider also adding a health benefit plan to maternity and parental benefits. Such a plan would tangibly support women and children. For many women, particularly low-income earners and those who are self-employed, employment does not come with a health benefit plan. Maternity leave may be just enough to cover the necessities to allow a woman to stay home with her child, but extra costs, such as prescription medications, could be the tipping point that forces her back to work. For example, my son had bronchitis at two months of age, and the medication for a two-week treatment cost about \$200. This is for an otherwise healthy child. Imagine the costs for a child who needs ongoing treatment and medication, or for a mother who needs treatment and medication. When finances are tight, costs may determine whether a woman gets counselling or medication to address postpartum depression, or physiotherapy to help restore her health after giving birth.

The implementation of health benefits would say that we care about ensuring the best health of the mother and that we want her to not just survive, but thrive, in her role as a mother. We do have an incredible health care system and maternity benefit program in Canada. I don't mean to discount that, but it's clear that people are falling through the cracks and more help is needed. I'm thankful for the maternity benefits I've been able to collect three times, but making motherhood a priority and a career choice for me has meant that, despite part-time work, I'm unable to benefit from maternity support for my last two children. I know that many without my support system would find that the current benefit system falls short, and often it's the women who need it most who suffer.

• (1115)

There's currently a gap evident in the lack of health plan benefits for many pregnant and postpartum women, and many women are choosing not to have children or choosing to end pregnancies for fear of the financial repercussions. There are many more women who are not getting pregnant in the first place because of financial fear, and many women who are not taking the best care of themselves physically and mentally during pregnancy and after giving birth because they fear the costs associated with seeking medical treatment. The Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada reports, "Many women state that they 'have no real choice,' [when having an abortion] as they do not have the financial resources to support themselves and a child." All of this indicates a need for improvement. Motherhood is a choice like any other, and no woman should be made to feel lesser for taking maternity leave benefits or for choosing to stay home with her child.

Bill C-243 is an excellent opportunity to evaluate our national maternity assistance program and address gaps in the system. Improvements will show that we value motherhood and we want to ensure the best possible health for Canadian women and their children.

Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we will go to Liette Vasseur, president of the Canadian Coalition of Women in Engineering, Science, Trades and Technology, and a professor at Brock University, who is coming to us via video conference from St. Catharines, Ontario.

• (1120)

Ms. Liette Vasseur: Thank you very much.

I would like to also acknowledge Melodie. We met in May 2016 at the national conference of CCWESTT, the Canadian Coalition of Women in Engineering, Science, Trades and Technology.

Thank you very much for this opportunity to talk about the private member's bill C-243. My comments are based on discussions and exchanges, I should say, with professional women who are part of two organizations: the Canadian Coalition of Women in Engineering, Science, Trades and Technology, and the International Network of Women Engineers and Scientists, which I am the president-elect of. I should say that in both organizations we have discussed these issues, especially in an era when women are taking a greater role in the job market.

I want to make three key points today. The first one will be on women in the new innovation agenda, the second is protecting expecting women, and the third is the need for a national strategy.

Regarding women in the new innovation agenda, in Canada women remain an important, unexploited workforce. Here are just a few numbers to illustrate this. While women in the entire workforce represent 47%, most of the trade jobs are in the fields of hairdressing, retail, or hospitality. In natural sciences and engineering they only represent 21.9%. However, it is important to note that only 10.5% of practising engineers are women and 9% of women apprenticeship program graduates complete a male-dominated skilled trade. When we look at trades such as welding and transportation, the numbers drop to 6.5% and, in construction, to 3.5%. Overall registration of women in non-traditional apprenticeship programs is a meagre 14.2%. Clearly, women are highly under-represented in many of these fields.

When we look at that, women can play a critical role in the new Canada innovation and skills plan that was delivered in the federal budget this year, but this cannot happen if they are not entirely supported, especially regarding when they are expecting.

As mentioned in the World Economic Forum's "Global Gender Gap Report":

People and their talents are among the core drivers of sustainable, long-term economic growth.

It is, therefore, clear that as women roughly represent 50% of the Canadian population, they have to be part of this plan. The mining sector alone expects to require more than 75,000 new workers by 2021. But there are many obstacles, and maternity and maternal care are among the main factors contributing to women leaving fields such as engineering and sciences.

My second point relates to protecting expecting women. In general, working and expecting women are often exposed to various stresses due to their work environment and their pregnancy conditions. I think Melodie really expressed very well this condition.

One of the main challenges that women face is the upcoming financial burden, especially if they are single mothers or in a single-income family, which I was—and I was back to work two months after giving birth. When a woman is working in an environment that can be dangerous for her or the unborn, there is a need for better protection. How will she manage if she cannot continue working and if there is no financial support?

While the Canadian Human Rights Act prohibits discrimination related to pregnancy, the situation is not simple. As stated in the pregnancy and human rights in the workplace policy and best practices of the Canadian Human Rights Commission:

Pregnancy in the workplace is a fundamental human rights issue of equality of opportunity between women and men. Women should not suffer negative consequences in the workplace simply because they are pregnant....

Employers have a legal obligation to accommodate pregnancy-related needs unless the accommodation will cause undue hardship.

● (1125)

However, this does not help when the employer cannot accommodate a pregnant worker. On one side the employee has the right to fully contribute to the workforce, but on the other hand, when health and safety is important in these conditions, there is a need to support the expecting woman.

In Canada, under the current laws and regulations, and until recently, it was difficult for an expecting woman to stop working under these conditions—except in Quebec, where it's a different situation. The move to allow women to claim EI for 12 weeks under the 2017 federal budget, or 15 weeks under Bill C-243 before giving birth, instead of the eight current weeks, will already help a lot of women who are experiencing the stress of pregnancy at work. However, this will not completely solve the challenges of those who are dealing with dangerous conditions, like Melodie, or even in my case when I was doing genetics research in a lab. Adding some flexibility to be able to, for example, take part of these 17 weeks after birth and transfer them to the period before birth could significantly reduce the burden and help remove the gap when there is one. However, this is not the only challenge that needs to be addressed.

There are already very good examples that demonstrate the capacity of the industry to support women in the workplace. This is mainly from specific industries. For example, Rio Tinto Coal Australia supports work-from-home arrangements as part of its flexible working policy. The Spanish firm Iberdrola, producer and distributor of electricity, gas and renewable energy, supports maternity and equal opportunities and offers various options and arrangements that not only help women but also promote them in their jobs and leadership.

That brings me to this very point: the need for a national strategy. We need to ensure that Canada is positioned advantageously in a system that is fair for all classes of society. There are many more barriers that currently stop women from fully participating in the workforce, especially in the fields of science, engineering, trades, and technology. They include the hiring process, workplace respect—as harassment and bullying are still more rampant than people believe—work-family conflict due to inflexibility of work hours, and more. In engineering, workplace climate and culture is one of the main factors causing women to leave the workforce. The recent report by the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum also demonstrates the need to change the culture in the workplace due to discrimination. What will be important in the new strategy is to ensure that the low-income earners in particular are not unfairly treated, especially when they have a hard time meeting their needs, including those of their unborn.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we go over to President Karen Dempsey of the National Council of Women of Canada, via video conference from Halifax, Nova Scotia. The next seven minutes are yours.

Ms. Karen Dempsey: Thank you.

I'd like to thank the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities for the opportunity to speak to the study of Bill C-243.

The National Council of Women of Canada has been the leading national voice of women for the past 124 years. As an organization composed of local, provincial, and national organizations that are closely connected with issues at those levels, we are uniquely qualified to speak to government with suggestions and recommendations that are based on carefully researched and democratically approved policies for improving the quality of life of Canadians.

Our mission is to empower all women to work towards improving the quality of life for women, families, and society through a forum of member organizations and individuals. Gender equality has been an integral component of that. Our policy “Economic Gender Equality Indicators and Gender Analysis”, from 1998, states that “the advancement of women includes understanding their reality and the unique constraints they face”.

Women should not be penalized because they give birth. In 1983—over 30 years ago—we passed policy that addressed discriminatory clauses in what was then called the “unemployment” act, particularly with reference to maternity-related matters. A key part of that policy urged that the time in which maternity benefits could be claimed be made more flexible. This issue, then, has been on our radar for a long time.

Since that time, many improvements have been made, and we were pleased to support MP Mark Gerretsen's Bill C-243, which addressed a key issue; that is, improving and giving needed flexibility to maternity leave so that women who need to take their leave earlier than usual can do so without suffering a loss of income and creating unnecessary hardship for their families. This bill strengthens maternity benefits to better reflect Canada's changing labour market. The bill stated that women who work in hazardous conditions should be able to access their maternity benefits earlier than normal through a more flexible employment insurance.

The third trimester of pregnancy can be physically challenging, as some women suffer from severe backaches; serious swelling in their feet, legs, and even arms and hands; painful varicose veins; and gestational diabetes. Others suffer from pre-eclampsia, which typically occurs after 20 weeks; it can result in eclampsia, kidney failure, or even death.

While women can take sick leave from the workplace if necessary before accessing maternity leave, the amount of sick leave time can vary significantly. The article “Many Canadians lack sick leave coverage,” from Benefits Canada in 2013, states that a report by the Conference Board of Canada shows that “only a third of employees between the ages of 18 and 24 have any sick days or short-term disability coverage.” The December 2007 article “Paid sick leave has its advantages” by Yosie Saint-Cyr, a lawyer and managing editor from HRinfodesk, states that, “Paid sick leave...is an optional benefit employers may grant to employees”.

An HRinfodesk poll with 501 respondents indicated that 32.7% of organizations gave their employees five paid sick days, 28.9% gave their employees three paid days or less, and 22.2% gave more than 10 sick days. That is why it is so important that the new budget proposes that any woman can begin her maternity leave at 12 weeks prior to her due date.

Women have the right to pursue any profession or trade they wish and not have their participation in the labour force questioned or minimized.

• (1130)

During World War II, women in the western hemisphere were put in jobs that men had always done, for example, building airplanes, and they played an essential part in the war effort. However, after the war, men came home and women resumed their pre-war lives for the most part. There have traditionally been areas of the workforce where women have been under-represented, and that is still the case in many of the trades, the construction industry, engineering, the sciences, etc.

While this is gradually changing, it is vital that there be no barriers to women's participation in those areas that have traditionally been male dominated. That is why this conversation is so important. It is necessary to ensure that pregnancy is not made an issue for women in any job, particularly those in which they are under-represented.

We strongly agree that the greater flexibility that is proposed is necessary and vital and that EI maternity benefits should reflect that. If an employer can accommodate the pregnant employee by finding risk-free work for those in hazardous jobs, that's great. In cases where that is not viable, or if an employee finds it too difficult to continue to work for any reason, then she needs to be able to access maternity leave when necessary without putting herself and her family in a position of financial hardship and distress.

In its guidebook “Pregnancy and Human Rights in the Workplace A Guide for Employers”, the Canadian Human Rights Commission states:

Pregnancy in the workplace is a fundamental human rights issue of equality of opportunity: women should not suffer negative consequences in the workplace because they are pregnant. The *Canadian Human Rights Act* (the Act) prohibits discrimination related to pregnancy.

Thank you.

• (1135)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Finally, from Women Building Futures, former chief executive officer and director, JudyLynn Archer, is coming to us via video conference from Edmonton, Alberta.

The next seven minutes is yours.

Ms. JudyLynn Archer: Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to speak to this issue.

At Women Building Futures, we work with companies that are engaged in Canada's construction, maintenance, and energy sector, and we work with women like Melodie every day.

I don't mean to repeat any of the wonderful points that were made by my fellow speaker, so my response will focus on a bit of a different perspective in all of this.

Women are Canada's largest under-leveraged human resource asset. By that, I mean that women working full time in Canada, thirty hours a week, earn on average \$32,000 a year. It means that half of our workforce in this country are struggling to make ends meet, let alone being able to contribute to our tax base in the way that we need them to. Meanwhile, Canada is losing one-quarter of its very well-paid construction and maintenance and energy workforce. That's about 250,000 tradespeople, again, in one of Canada's highest paid sectors. We are not only losing them, we are losing the considerable collective tax contribution they make to our society.

Together, this is creating an unprecedented opportunity for Canada and Canadian women. Bill C-243 would play a significant role in bringing this opportunity to fruition. This bill would increase access to jobs that pay well. Raising the annual income of women, getting women and their children out of poverty, will help to replace the retiring trades workforce. We need this workforce to continue to attract investment so that we can attract, build, maintain, and operate our projects across this country.

We also need to replace the considerable tax base that Canada is losing to this retiring workforce.

I'm going to give you just one example of the type of result we see at Women Building Futures due to more women coming into this high-paid workforce. Right now, we have an Alberta company that is building a project just outside of Edmonton. This company, North West Refining, contracted with Women Building Futures to recruit and train 40 women as iron workers, scaffolders, and carpenters for this project. These 40 were recruited and trained. They're all working at the refinery and 39 of those 40 individuals are now registered apprentices. The average increase in income for these individuals was 203% on the day of hire. If they had been making \$32,000 a year before being hired, they were, on day one of being hired, making \$96,000. This changed the lives of these women and their families, including 34 children. Moreover, 20% of these women are indigenous.

The story that Melodie shared with us this morning is very common. Right now in Canada, we have an opportunity before us that we absolutely must act on. We are losing a significant chunk of our workforce in this country. They're paid among the highest salaries. Women are absolutely more than interested and capable of doing this work. Bill C-243 is going to women to come into and work at these jobs, without the fear that was expressed eloquently by the other speakers today.

● (1140)

We need a national strategy that would help Canada reinvest in the women who are already out there working 40 hours a week. They're the perfect recruitment asset for Canada's industry that pays high salaries.

All I can say is, Melodie, thank you for sharing your story and pushing this bill. Thank you to everyone who is speaking today and working towards bringing this bill to fruition, to help women get into these jobs, because it will benefit the women, their children, and Canada as whole. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, and thanks to all of you for your introductions.

We're going to get to questions, but before we do that, I was remiss in not welcoming two guests to our committee. First of all, thank you for being here, Jennifer O'Connell and Gary Ananda-sangaree.

First up we have Mark Warawa for six minutes. Go ahead.

Mr. Mark Warawa (Langley—Aldergrove, CPC): Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for some very interesting testimony.

I find it particularly relevant to listen to moms sharing with us their experience of what works and what doesn't. It's also interesting to share with the witnesses that we are just in the last days of a national discussion on a national poverty reduction strategy, and we're preparing a report on that. Melodie, you've shared how you experienced poverty and that social network that is supposed to help you, help moms, and help women. We've also heard from Anna out in Langley. We've heard from both of you what worked and what didn't.

I also want to thank Mark Gerretsen for raising this issue in Parliament, for listening to a constituent and presenting this very important bill.

MP Gerretsen was here a week ago and shared that in the budget, the government is giving 12 rather than the 15 weeks. He suggests that we not focus on that but rather on a national maternity assistance program, which is the second half of the bill, so that will be what my questions relate to.

This question is for Melodie and Anna. If you could give very specific recommendations to this committee, number one, do you support Bill C-243 and that Parliament establish a national maternity assistance program? What are the specific changes that need to be made? I'll just elaborate a little.

I heard that if you've already had a child—Melodie you've had a child, and Anna you have five—if another child comes along and

you're not welding or not at work, then there are no sick benefits, no unemployment benefits, or any of these benefits that relate to your job. It makes it extremely difficult, then, from what I'm hearing, for a woman to decide to have another child. It's almost financially impossible.

We scratch our heads, as parliamentarians, asking why aren't Canadian women having more children? Well, maybe this is why. They just do not have the financial support to make that choice, to make motherhood a career choice. I think, Anna, you elaborated how important that is. That is a career choice. I think you shared that. How are you able to make that choice without the financial backing of a network?

Melodie and Anna, if you could both share practical suggestions with this committee on what we need to change to make it practical for women to make motherhood a career choice.

Thank you.

● (1145)

Ms. Melodie Ballard: I have three suggestions. One thing that needs to be considered is the idea that a woman could choose to wean herself back to work. The way our EI system works is that either you're using it or you're not. When it comes to pregnancy and maternity, we need to maybe consider a program in which you could partly participate in at work. Restricting a person's ability to make money and their efforts to further the ambitions of their family makes it really difficult to plan for a family when you aren't allowed to wean yourself back to work and better your situation.

Another suggestion I have is to consider, most especially in single-parent families.... I was only allowed to have a 50-week file. I did eventually get that three-month extension, but my son, as a person who only has one parent, didn't get a full year of his life on EI with a parent. The EI benefits were my rights and I had to take some of them early in my pregnancy, but my son, as a citizen of Canada, didn't get a year with a parent. Maybe tackling it from the child's point of view, especially in situations of single-parent families when the second parent can't step in and scoop up the rest of the year, or maybe exceptions could be made for those kinds of families....

Mr. Mark Warawa: Anna, can you elaborate, please?

Ms. Anna Nienhuis: Yes. I think that's an excellent idea. I would suggest something similar. Limiting people's ability to make money when they're on maternity leave or other EI benefits, as Melodie said, puts them in a vicious cycle when they're willing and able to work but are not allowed to work and not allowed to make money. If you do, you're penalized and it comes right off whatever else you're making.

As a mom of multiple children, I've gone back to work each time, but for shorter periods each time because I want to be able to be home with those children. Maybe if someone has multiple children, then the hours requirement could be different or could be extended over a longer period of time, so you need fewer hours to get maternity leave. As you say, if you're not even getting maternity in the first place, the issue is not that it's not enough. The issue is that it's not an option for a lot of women to have another child, if they know they won't be getting that support.

I think those are specific changes that could be made, as well as adding a health benefit plan to maternity benefits, as I mentioned. In that way, if a woman is on maternity benefits and they're just a percentage of her wage, she would still be able to get that extra coverage and won't have to worry that she can't go to the dentist, get mental health support, or get medication for her baby if they have troubles—all those little things that add up and go beyond the scope of what maternity leave benefits will cover.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now move over to MP Long, please.

Mr. Wayne Long (Saint John—Rothesay, Lib.): Thank you, Chair. Good morning to our witnesses.

Anna and Melodie, thank you for your very compelling stories. They're unbelievable.

I want to start by telling you that I have a good friend—my riding is Saint John—Rothesay in southern New Brunswick—a female friend who's a welder. We often talked and she lamented the fact she had been the only female in her class or course. I've talked to welding associations and have had lots of meetings with Matt Wayland too, who is with IBEW, the electrical workers. It's quite clear that basically 5% of their workforce are women. Obviously, that's not acceptable and we need to increase that.

I'll start with Ms. Vasseur, Ms. Dempsey, and Ms. Archer, just to get your comments on this. What can we do to make sure we increase the number of women in the trades? Do you think there's enough alignment between schools, industries, and trades to encourage more women to enter the workplace?

I'll start with you, Ms. Vasseur.

• (1150)

Ms. Liette Vasseur: Thank you for the question.

There is definitely a big challenge among the three components, as you know. First, in school, we don't encourage women and girls to go into trades, technology, science, engineering—trades being the thing that has been mentioned the most—especially in the non-traditional system. The big concern in many cases is the question of the conditions that women will have to deal with. Discrimination is still rampant today. People think that it's disappearing. It's not. In fact, I was talking yesterday to someone who was telling me that especially in small and medium-sized enterprises, which we have in most of the country, if a woman even goes for an interview she will often be discriminated against, because they know that if she's young, that means she will probably get pregnant and that will cause issues. One thing we have to realize is that the workplace culture from the start is very obviously difficult for women. So when a the

potential employer fears that a woman will get pregnant, they always kind of discriminate against that. So that is something from which there is a really important need to protect the woman.

Mr. Wayne Long: I want to get Ms. Dempsey and Ms. Archer in on this, also. Obviously there is a major shortage of workers coming up in the trades. I want to get your input as to what we can do and as to whether you feel there is proper alignment, again, among schools, industry and labour to make this actually happen.

Ms. Dempsey.

Ms. Karen Dempsey: I'm certainly not an expert the way a couple of these women are in the sciences, but we do have affiliate members who are in the sciences, for instance, the Society of Canadian Women in Science and Technology.

I believe it is really important to make sure that young women in school, from junior high on, really understand the opportunities that are available to them, and that they are not steered particularly along one path or another but are shown there are many career paths available to them, and that they are encouraged to explore the so-called non-traditional paths such as the trades, engineering, etc. I know there are a lot more women engineers and a lot more women in science and so on these days. However, something that really needs to be ramped up is exposing young women to other women who are currently working in these areas. They should come to schools, speak to students, and have programs like that where students can interact with them on career days, and all of those sorts of things, because at this point in time, I am not sure that young women are really made aware of the opportunities available to them.

Mr. Wayne Long: I'm going to jump in there. Thank you for that. I would agree. I read an article last night in the *Windsor Star* called "Build-a-Dream Camp...", which was basically teaching young women that the sky's the limit for trades.

Ms. Archer, could you just give me your two cents' worth as to what we can do? I've talked about the alignment among schools, industry, and labour to encourage more women to join a workforce that needs help.

•(1155)

Ms. JudyLynn Archer: My number one suggestion would be to invest. Invest in Canada's most significant workforce. They're already there. They've already proven they have the work ethic we need. Make sure we are meeting the needs of women and the employers. In the scenario that I mentioned to you of the refinery and all those women, that employer paid the whole shot—the housing, the training costs, and all of that. That investment is coming back to that employer big time and we continue to recruit them. I think any time you want to invest, you want to take your best bet and put money behind it. We do need increase awareness across Canada to help women understand that these opportunities are there. The time to do it is now.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you very much.

Mr. Mark Warawa: I have a point of order.

The Chair: Sure.

Mr. Mark Warawa: Mr. Chair, I didn't want to interrupt the testimony or the questions, but the focus of Bill C-243 is on how we can help women who are already in the workforce. I think the questions just asked would be really appropriate for a future study of this committee, but in the limited time that we have to discuss this, we need to stay focused on Bill C-243 and how we can help women who are already in the workforce and are now pregnant. Therefore, I encourage us to stay focused on Bill C-243.

Mr. Wayne Long: I don't agree with that, Chair.

The Chair: That's duly noted.

Mr. Wayne Long: I think they're both very closely related.

The Chair: We have the ability, as committee members, to ask whatever questions we want. However, I agree with Mark that we need to be focused on this. This is a very limited study—so duly noted.

Thank you.

We'll move over to MP Sansoucy, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My thanks to all the witnesses.

Ms. Ballard, allow me to thank you especially. Your story inspired this bill and your testimony has particular significance for me, and for my colleagues, I am sure.

My first question goes to Ms. Dempsey.

In a letter to the previous minister, the National Council of Women of Canada indicated that it would prefer maternity benefits to be provided through a more flexible employment insurance system. In your testimony, however, you clearly said that, throughout an entire pregnancy, it is more about employment conditions. You told us about the relationship to the employer and the need to find a position that poses fewer risks.

At our most recent committee meeting, we had with us an official from the Union des travailleuses et travailleurs accidentés ou malades. He told us about a program that has existed in Quebec since

1981, a program called For a safe maternity experience. The program provides preventive withdrawal leave to pregnant workers whose position poses a danger to them. The official told us that the employment insurance scheme is not the right vehicle to handle a preventive withdrawal program. Actually, that opinion is quite widely shared in Quebec.

Then, in her testimony, Ms. Ballard told us that Service Canada had no idea how to deal with her situation because pregnancy is not an illness. That is why, in Quebec, the program is funded exclusively by employers. Quebec considers that preventive withdrawal is more about working conditions. It's the working conditions that represent the dangers for a pregnancy or for an unborn child, not the pregnancy itself.

As a committee, we have to hold consultations and make recommendations with a view to establishing a national maternity assistance program. Should we establish from the outset whether this is about working conditions or maternity leave? Actually, the Supreme Court has already pointed the way in that regard. According to the court, given that preventive withdrawals are more closely linked to working conditions, they fall under provincial jurisdiction.

In our consultations, should we from the outset be seeing how the federal level can provide the leadership in establishing a program in each province such as there is in Quebec, not forgetting that the federal role in this area is limited to workers who are subject to the Canada Labour Code?

In your view, does preventive withdrawal have to be considered an extension of maternity leave or should it rather be a matter of workplace health and safety?

•(1200)

[*English*]

Ms. Karen Dempsey: I'm not all that familiar with the situation in Quebec. However, I think anything that would help the situation would certainly be a great boon to working women.

In my speaking notes I mentioned the hazardous conditions. Those were originally addressed in Bill C-243, and were the reason that Melodie, for example, needed time off or to exit the workforce. In the bill it did mention that if the employer could find other duties for the employee that were less hazardous, that would be preferable because then she could still remain in the workforce. However, if you're a skilled tradesperson, that's probably going to be very difficult for the employer to do. You can't just go from being a welder to being a receptionist or a secretary, or an HR person—whatever. You're a skilled person and you can't transition into something else that easily.

Maybe if EI could be combined with the provincial programs, as you were saying, that would certainly be a good solution. I think you're asking for some onus to be put on the employer. The employer has a stake in this. If the employer were to step up to the plate, as it were, and contribute so there is a preventive withdrawal system, that might be a very good solution.

I don't know. Does that answer your question?

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: Yes, thank you.

My next question goes to Ms. Vasseur. It is along similar lines to my last question.

Ms. Vasseur, in the second point in your remarks, you mentioned the stress caused by the work environment. So let me ask you the question as well. In your view, when we discuss preventive withdrawal for pregnant workers, are we talking about working conditions or is it more about the pregnancy itself? For pregnant women who cannot remain in their positions because of dangerous working conditions, do you think that Quebec's For a safe maternity experience program is an example we can use? Should we allow or encourage that model in other provinces rather than working with the employment insurance program?

Ms. Liette Vasseur: Thank you for the question.

As I see it, employment insurance is one stage. However, if we are talking about a national strategy, it is going to be very important to think about better integration with matters like working conditions.

If we consider the International Labour Organization, especially convention no. 183 and recommendation no. 190, there is clearly a need. There really is a problem, a gap, in linking employment insurance with working conditions, especially for women. Some countries, like Denmark and Finland, are a long way ahead in this area. They have been able to link the two situations and to make sure that a woman who becomes pregnant can take advantage of preventive withdrawal and not lose her job.

The problem at the moment, especially with small and medium businesses, is that employers do not necessarily have the means to cover all the costs. That is something that needs attention.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we'll go over to MP Dhillon, please.

Ms. Anju Dhillon (Dorval—Lachine—LaSalle, Lib.): Hi. Thank you to all for being here today.

Mrs. Dempsey, you talked about the employer's giving less hazardous duties to a pregnant woman, especially when it comes to dangerous jobs, but you also spoke about human rights at the same time. You said it would be a downgrade to give the woman less dangerous work, maybe by bringing her down to receptionist work. How do you reconcile the two, since there would obviously be a pay cut as well?

• (1205)

Ms. Karen Dempsey: I wouldn't use the word "downgrade". That's certainly not what I meant.

As I said, it was part of Bill C-243 that if a woman in a hazardous position could be kept in her job or be given another job with her company but in a less hazardous position, then it would be a good solution if she could remain working and stay in the workforce for as long as possible. That said, I referred to the fact it might not be that easy for someone who is skilled in a particular job to switch to another job, which is not to say that a secretary, receptionist, or whoever is not skilled. It's just a totally different skill set. I have

worked as a secretary, as a receptionist, and as a teacher, so I'm certainly not downgrading those positions. I just meant that it's a totally different skill set, so it may not be possible. Even if an employer wants to be as accommodating as possible, it just may not be possible to accommodate an employee and to put them in a different position that is less hazardous. In that case, she would have no other choice but to go on maternity leave, which is what Melodie did.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: For small business enterprises, it would be very burdensome as well. Let's say there are four or five employees and it's a trades job. It would be harder for the small enterprise to support that change. Is that so?

Ms. Karen Dempsey: Yes, I think that's the case, whether it's a small or large enterprise, but especially for small businesses with a very small workforce. You may only have one person doing a particular job, so yes, I think it would be very difficult.

This is why we need to be able to give women the opportunity to access maternity leave earlier when necessary.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: The way you were talking about it, it seemed like you wished that employers also have a private insurance regime. Am I correct?

Ms. Karen Dempsey: No, that's not something I'm advocating, simply because we don't have policy on it. I can only speak to things that we have policy on. We do have policy on its being more flexible, and so on.

I was just answering Brigitte Sansoucy's question by saying that what she has suggested could be a viable solution for the rest of Canada, the way it was in Quebec. If it works there, maybe it could work in the rest of Canada, but I can't really speak to particulars, because at the moment those particulars are not something we have a policy on.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: What would you like to see the government do in terms of actual concrete steps?

Ms. Karen Dempsey: Actual concrete steps? Make it easier for women to access maternity leave. Right at the moment, for instance, it's one year. That's 55% of their salary. While we certainly support the idea in the budget of women being given the opportunity to take 18 months, that reduces their EI to something like 33% from 55% of their pay. In essence, if they can take 18 months, they're doing it at 33% of their salary, which is a big pay cut. Melodie said she's a single mother. There are single mothers out there. There are single fathers out there. But anyway, it's difficult.

The money is a problem because it's difficult to live on that amount. It's nice to have the time. But I know a lot of women who have gotten pregnant and have not been able to take even the whole of their maternity leave simply because they can't afford it. That's one thing in the population. Another much smaller segment of the population can't take that much time off from work because of the job they're in. They have to go back to work. They feel they have to go back to work.

It's mostly that they go back because of the money. We've given women 12 months and now possibly 18 months but with the same amount of money. I think we have to make it easier for them to actually access that. It's all right to say you can take 12 months but you're doing it at half your salary. That's major, especially for young families. I don't know too many families these days where there aren't two working parents. So to have the one salary cut by half for 12 months or cut by a third if you go to 18 months, that's a lot. It comes down to the money a lot of times, I think. That's a big deal. It comes down to, as Anna was saying, that you build up your 600 hours—I think it's 600 hours before you can access your maternity leave—but then if something happens, if you become pregnant earlier, then maybe you anticipate it for your second child or your third child, but you don't have that bank of hours built up. So maybe that's something where a little more flexibility could be introduced to the strategy as well.

Instead of just looking at the previous 600 hours, maybe EI could look at it going back further and say, “You've worked for the last 10 years; you've got so many hours banked in the last 10 years, not just 600 hours in the last year, and this is the first time you're going to access EI”. Maybe it could be a little more flexible.

• (1210)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we go over to Ramesh Sangha for six minutes.

Mr. Ramesh Sangha (Brampton Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for the testimony.

My question will be for JudyLynn. During your presentation, you discussed attracting more women to the workforce. Similarly, we heard Melodie making three points. First, she is interested in attracting more women into the jobs that are being done by men—into male-dominated jobs.

My question is this. Do you think that this Bill C-243 with this development of the national maternity assistance program study will attract more women into the workforce?

Ms. JudyLynn Archer: Thank you for your question, Ramesh.

I think it will help to attract and retain women. I think it's a big retention benefit. So when women are looking at these career opportunities, what we find is that women tend to be quite thoughtful, and before getting into a career, before taking training to get into the career, they're asking those questions. What's going to happen if and when I become pregnant? I believe it is an attraction and a retention benefit, absolutely.

I think what I would be interested in seeing in the strategy is something that also works for the employer, given that the largest number of companies in Canada that actually hire and train apprentices in trades are small to medium companies. These companies cannot afford to pay the bill for an individual to be on maternity leave, and it would become a huge disincentive to hire.

I'm hoping that the strategy will look at a number of different programs that are going on in other countries—and maybe our own country that maybe I'm not aware of—to find something that will

really work for women and the companies that hire them to really create big incentives for the women and those companies.

Mr. Ramesh Sangha: Women Building Futures is already doing a great job via its advertisements and appearances on the web, saying that all women who want to earn more money, want to stay physically fit, and want to have an incredible lifestyle, learn more skills, and don't mind getting dirty, can come forward to join you.

As a stakeholder, if this becomes law, will you advertise that there are now new benefits? It will surely attract more women to the jobs. Do you think those attractions will increase women's living standards?

• (1215)

Ms. JudyLynn Archer: Again, I think that having the benefit of knowing that you can take an extended, a different type of maternity benefit, which would meet your needs and those of your children, is only going to encourage women to consider jobs that are going to support them in that whole effort, and support them in earning a much better living, which is what you find in those non-traditional careers.

Right now, I think there is an opportunity for Canada from the fact that we are currently losing that big workforce. We need to replace those workers just to maintain what we have in Canada—not even talking about new projects—and women are our best option for doing that. We have to deal with this maternity leave issue.

From our work at Women Building Futures, we find that they are the gold walking around on Canadian soil. We need to spend money and invest in getting these individuals into these jobs in a way that is good for them and their families, so they can make a great living and contribute back to society in the way we all need.

Mr. Ramesh Sangha: When you say it's sustainable, does that mean that women, after their pregnancy leave, will come back to the job?

Ms. JudyLynn Archer: Statistically it shows that women come back to work after maternity leave at a very high rate.

Mr. Ramesh Sangha: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Over to Bob Zimmer, please.

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC): Thanks to you all for appearing at our committee today about Bill C-243.

First of all, Anna, you mentioned a few statistics. You're part of a pro-life organization. I'm pro life myself. You're not here to talk about that necessarily, but it links into the issue. I was really struck by the number of 20,000 that you gave us. You say that one of the reasons that ladies make decisions to have an abortion is because of finances, which to me is absolutely tragic. It's a sad statement.

Go ahead, Anna.

Ms. Anna Nienhuis: I was going to say that's just the number of people who cite it as their number one reason. There are many more who have it in their top three. With the 20,000, the number one reason would be finances.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Again, it's an absolutely tragic situation for the mothers who have to make this arduous decision to either have their pregnancy go to full term or be eliminated, based on finances. It's never been presented to me that it was based on finances. It has me thinking.

I would ask for your perspective, being a stay-at-home mom. My wife stayed home. I was going to university at the time. We had four kids, and my wife stayed home throughout the whole process. She received no benefits for staying at home. It was a decision that we made. I was a teacher, so we didn't have much money, but we thought it was best for the kids. She wanted to stay home and be a mom. She's "back at work" now. I say that with quotes, because she has never stopped working the whole way through, I think since we were married. We've been married 21 years now, and I think she's never stopped; she's worked in different roles.

In terms of perspective, another thing that we have to weigh as government all the time is the costing out of programs. It's a perfect idea if we don't have to weigh out the cost to taxpayers. That's a cold perspective, but it's a caring perspective, to our understanding.

With the people presenting today, you're all taxpayers, and we want to have a balanced approach. We help out mothers who need the help, but we also know it's going to be an expensive program. How do you balance the two?

Anna, if you were designing the program in a perfect way, what would you have that balanced out as? I know you understand both. You're a taxpayer and a mother who sees the need for a maternity program. What would the program look like?

• (1220)

Ms. Anna Nienhuis: I think that's really difficult because, as you say, some people need the help more than others. I think it's important that a plan take that into account. I think that's where, when we talk about having a strategy that looks at whether a woman is in a much higher risk job or has multiple children already, we need that flexibility of saying that every person is not the same and that it's not just a case of you getting 55% of your income if you have a child. Rather, it's about seeing that if someone only made \$32,000 a year, 55% of their income would not be a reasonable amount to expect them to live on, but that we still want that person to be able to stay home, whereas, with someone who's making \$90,000 a year, maybe then we could say, okay, 55% is enough for you. It should be based on that.

What I believe the government and some employers do is that they will top up maternity leave if there's a guarantee that the person will come back to work. If that the person doesn't return, then they don't get that top up. It is a real incentive to go back to the workforce and also to have a livable wage when you're at home. I think that's a really valuable place where employers can step up, also knowing that the training that they've put into someone won't be lost, but that they're retaining that person even at a slight cost to them. I think that's another place where money could come from [*inaudible-Editor*] with it benefiting employers.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: To me, that's the kind of clever solution that we need that works for employers, government, and mothers.

Judy, I just wanted to speak about what you had mentioned. I had heard somebody else say that the employer should cover the entire cost of the whole maternity assistance program. In a perfect world, where employers make all the money, that might be possible. But we have a country with a lot of small businesses, who are really the fabric of our economy in a lot of ways, and you had mentioned that it would be a huge disincentive to hiring women if we have a program whose costs the employers alone had to cover. Then the female worker being hired would have potential huge other costs for that particular employer.

I just wanted to ask you, because you brought it up, how would you balance the two, where the government has a role certainly; the employer has a role certainly; and as Anna just suggested, there's a bit of a hybrid between the two. What would be a good balanced program in which we do see women being helped out in this situation so that they're not going out and having to make hard decisions on their pregnancy? How do you help that person out with a balanced approach between employer and government?

Ms. JudyLynn Archer: I think one of the things I can think of just off the top of my head this morning is the example of the Canada job fund agreements. The funds from those agreements are accessed by employers to deal with training costs. I don't see why some of those costs couldn't be built into that type of program so that for the employers who are putting in the training, who are contributing to the costs of recruiting and training and retaining that person, could take advantage of the program, and the government would be putting in its fair share too, so that at the end of the day, it would really be up to whether or not that individual is the type of worker the company wants to hire. That company is seeing that individual as a worthy investment. I think we have some programs that we could build upon to create such a situation, so that it's not just a matter of one side or the other bearing the burden. Taxpayers shouldn't be paying for the whole thing and, certainly, neither should the small or medium employer.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: If Bill C-243 were to be tweaked in any way, Judy, how would you tweak it? Would you make the benefits longer in terms of weeks, or how would you tweak it as is? That's what we're really doing here today.

Ms. JudyLynn Archer: I'd like to see it longer and I'd like to see it be customizable—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Excellent, thank you.

Ms. JudyLynn Archer: —so that it meets the needs of the individual woman. I don't see why we can't do that.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Long.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you, Chair.

Again, thanks for the testimony.

Melodie, if you could, can you just give us a brief summary of the welding trade, the wage you make, the possible increase in wages you could have if you had a prolonged career and just elaborate on, with the proper support of a bill like Bill C-243, how women could really have a long, healthy career in a trade such as welding.

Can you just give me some details on that.

• (1225)

Ms. Melodie Ballard: Sure. I fell into welding by accident; I actually tried to be a carpenter. I moved to Wolfe Island and I met the president of MetalCraft Marine on the island. Hitchhiking is really popular on the island, and he picked me up one day and we started chatting and he encouraged me to apply for a job there. He said that they really like to hire carpenters; carpenters have to be exact within one-sixteenth of an inch whereas metal workers tend to be within one-quarter of an inch. With boat building, you have to be within one-sixteenth of an inch, so they like to hire carpenters and then teach them how to work with metal.

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon (Argenteuil—La Petite-Nation, Lib.): Wrong.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Stéphane Lauzon: Sorry about that.

Mr. Wayne Long: I'm sorry. Continue. We'll let them debate later.

Ms. Melodie Ballard: This was his take on it.

He encouraged me to apply, and I did. He said they'd be very interested in training me, which they did.

I started out as a marine outfitter. They paid me \$14 an hour, and I got annual cost-of-living raise. They raised the pay once a year for everybody—I think it was 43¢ the first year. Then they asked if anybody wanted to be trained as a welder. I love collecting skills, so I always put up my hand when they ask those questions.

They took me over to welding, and I think at that point I was making \$15.43 an hour. When my training was complete, I was scheduled—

Mr. Wayne Long: How long was the training? How long did it take for you to start?

Ms. Melodie Ballard: It was three months. Actually, I had been welding boats for only three days when I found out I was pregnant. I was scheduled to get my raise to \$17 an hour, which is actually the minimum for welders in the company.

Mr. Wayne Long: Was the course just three months?

Ms. Melodie Ballard: Yes. It was with the company.

Mr. Wayne Long: Okay.

Ms. Melodie Ballard: I had been scheduled to receive a raise and then move up to boats, but I got pregnant, so I never saw that. Obviously, that wasn't reflected in my maternity benefits, because I hadn't put in enough time.

Did I answer your question fully?

Mr. Wayne Long: As I said, I want to get a feel for the overall support among witnesses for a bill like Bill C-243. Can you elaborate a bit on how this bill would change things for potential new females entering the workforce and looking at opportunities in trades like electrical, welding, or what have you?

Again, I'll just reference my friend. She is from Saint John. She is a welding inspector now, but she came up through the trade and often lamented that she was the only female there. She is still talking about barriers and stuff.

But let's go back to how Bill C-243 would change the game.

Ms. Melodie Ballard: It would offer more stability. For me, it's a blue-collar job and it doesn't pay that much money—not to begin with, anyway. Eventually, as you progress through the career, you can make very good money welding, but I was just at the beginning of it.

If I had that stability. If I had a stable home and if I hadn't gone through the emotional duress, I would be back to work right now. My employer would be retaining the investment they had put in me, and I would be able to return to work as somebody who is already trained in it, somebody who has already earned some raises in the company. Right now I'm going to have to start at the bottom again, with a new job, when the time comes.

It's about stability. It's making sure that your housing situation is stable so that you can go back. It's about retaining investment—my investment in the company and their investment in me—which I wasn't able to do.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you for that. Again, your story is very compelling.

Ms. Vasseur, my riding is Saint John—Rothesay. It's a very industrial riding. Obviously, it's home to the Irving refinery. There's lots of work with IBEW and JDI. The head office of Saint John Shipbuilding was in my riding.

Do you think there is enough being done by employers in offering programs and incentives to attract more females to the trade? I know there's certainly some work being done in my riding with Saint John Shipbuilding and a few other ones that were referenced here. Can you elaborate on whether enough is being done and what can be done to potentially attract more females?

• (1230)

Ms. Liette Vasseur: I think it depends. The larger corporations.... You talked about Irving. Yes, we are very familiar with their program. I'm very familiar with what they are doing. That helps a lot.

The problem is that we have few large corporations that can do that, versus the small and medium-sized enterprises, which do not necessarily have the same capacity. This is why the Canada job fund agreement programs can help and facilitate this, but if and only if they can support, in some way, the flexibility of women getting a trade job and being protected.

Mr. Wayne Long: Thank you.

The Chair: That's time.

Now we move over to MP Poilievre, please, for five minutes.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre (Carleton, CPC): Thank you very much.

The employment insurance system is so big and complex that these idiosyncrasies often find their way into the system, even if they weren't designed to be there.

I remember when I was knocking on doors in the community of Osgoode, a soldier told me that his wife had a child three days before he went to serve Canada in the Middle East, in the Golan Heights. He was there for a year. He came back and applied for his parental benefits, but they said, "You can't take them, because you have to take parental leave during the first year." He said, "I was soldiering abroad for the country in that year. Surely there must be an exception." They said, "There is only one exception, and that is if you were, otherwise, imprisoned in a federal penitentiary, in which case you could have deferred your benefits, but not if you're protecting the country in uniform." Anyway, we managed to fix that with the Fairness for Military Families Act.

You have identified another problem, probably one that wasn't designed to be there but just happened to be. Are there other hidden gems such as this in the system that we should know about right now while we're at it?

Ms. Melodie Ballard: Do you mean specifically with the EI program?

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: That's right, particularly for parental and maternal benefits.

Ms. Melodie Ballard: One of the most striking things I experienced through this is that I didn't actually interact with a person when I filed for my benefits. Nobody sat down with me and said, "Let's look at your unique situation. Have you considered this option or that option? If you take this road, the gap with no income is going to happen."

Once I started my file, it was as though the clock was ticking on my 50 weeks. I didn't find out until the sick leave was about to end; I had a few weeks' notice that I was about to have no income.

Then there was a mistake at the end of my file, at the extension, about when they thought that was going to end. So my income ended abruptly then, as well.

In my unique situation, I personally would have benefited greatly had somebody sat down with me and gone through the situation and helped me make a plan for how to navigate this, and told me what my choices were. There's a federal program, but I'm also a resident of Ontario. Then there are my provincial rights. I needed somebody to help me reconcile the two, because they don't always reconcile. Even though I switched to the OW program and wasn't accessing EI, my province was still protecting my right to return to work.

I think having an intake person make sure that somebody understands all their rights and all their options ahead of time is one of the biggest things we could design into the program, especially for unique situations.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: I guess the challenge with that one, even in cases where the system is unfair, is that public servants don't have the power to change the rules. Sometimes those problems are just right in the law. They'd be breaking the law if they did otherwise.

Second, the more front-line casework the department does, the higher the cost, because the caseworkers have to be paid. That can only be covered through higher premiums for workers or lower benefits for recipients. Where do we get the money to pay for that?

•(1235)

Ms. Melodie Ballard: I don't know. I don't work with money.

Another idea could be having a website designed where people would input their unique situations and suggestions would be output for a path to take. Maybe that's just a one-off cost and then people could interact with it on their own. I don't design big programs.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Are you still working in welding?

Ms. Melodie Ballard: No.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Do you expect that you will go back to that career at some point?

Ms. Melodie Ballard: Yes, I would like to.

I addressed in my speech the fact that the gap with no income and my benefits getting cut off when my son was really young threw me off course. I ended up using the Ontario Works program, which was another deduction in income. All of that has created a lot of chaos in my life. I've been moving a lot, and I haven't been able to find stability yet to this day.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Is it your goal to become a ticketed welder, to have a licence to practise as a journey person?

Ms. Melodie Ballard: For the marine industry you don't need a ticket.

Hon. Pierre Poilievre: Okay.

Ms. Melodie Ballard: Because it's in the water it falls under different rules.

I was very much into boatbuilding. I really liked that job.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll move over to MP Sansoucy for three minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Ballard, I do not know if you are aware of the Quebec program called For a safe maternity experience. It is a flexible program that has proved its worth. In Quebec, it is possible for a mother to be assigned to different work that is not dangerous.

Just now, we were talking about SMEs, but they are compensated. Pregnant women actually keep the same salaries that they had before, even if the position to which she is re-assigned has a lower salary, and employers are compensated accordingly. If a woman has to stop working, she receives 90% of her salary until she gives birth. Then she has maternity benefits for 50 weeks. So she is protected for longer.

You also emphasized the difficulty of receiving only 55% of one's salary. I believe that it is important to emphasize that the Quebec program is funded exclusively by employers, who pay a contribution of 2.2% of their payroll. That is much less than the employment insurance program requires.

Given the story you told us, I would like your perception. How would things have gone in your case if you had been able to take advantage of a program like that?

[English]

Ms. Melodie Ballard: I did read up on the preventative withdrawal program. I very much liked how it even followed the woman back to work and protected her right to breastfeed. I thought it was a very thorough and thoughtful program. I would be back to work today if I had been a recipient of preventative withdrawal and a resident of Quebec. That certainly would have allowed me to stay in my apartment and the flexibility to go back to work a bit slower than all of a sudden. Ten-hour workdays with a seven-month-old in care are pretty difficult to manage.

Also, 90% of your pay is pretty remarkable. I believe Anna mentioned that 55% of your pay isn't very much to work with, especially for single-income families. And that's true. I was all by myself. I've been talking to a lot of charity organizations and people who help with poverty. I'm being told, oh, maybe if you cut down on drinking soda we can help you with your budget. I don't drink soda. I am so bare bones with my budget there is no place to cut from. That can't be the solution; it's just not enough money.

Sorry, I'm rambling.

The Chair: Not at all.

Thank you.

We're going to do one more quick five-minute round each. That will leave us with about five or 10 minutes to just go over the rest of the week.

To start off for five minutes, we have MP Warawa, please.

Oh, I'm sorry.

• (1240)

Mr. Mark Warawa: [Inaudible—Editor]

The Chair: I've done that twice today where I've cut off people....

Mr. Mark Warawa: Wayne's happy.

Mr. Wayne Long: On a point of order, Mr. Chair....

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Mark Warawa: Thank you for your honesty and very important testimony. We have five children, and each pregnancy was very different. In our fourth pregnancy, my wife fell and was bedridden, but because she was self-employed she didn't qualify for benefits. One of the witnesses highlighted the issue of kidney problems, diabetes during that period, and back problems.

Anna and Melodie, could you share with the committee some of the costs associated with pregnancy, whether it's buying a new car seat, because they expire, or...? What were the costs to the government associated with that need, in consideration of this new national maternity assistance program? How can we help families? How can we help women who have chosen to have another child and who need help with the costs?

You've shared the cost after your delivery, but are there costs associated with the pregnancy, particularly in the last trimester, that we could help with? The Canada child benefit starts at delivery. We heard the importance of allowing women to fill out the forms beforehand, so they don't have to fill them out after delivery, when they're struggling. I think that was a good suggestion, and they take

effect at the time of delivery. Are there costs associated with the pregnancy that you also need help with?

We'll start with Anna, if that's okay.

Ms. Anna Nienhuis: Yes, absolutely.

You mentioned the car seat. They won't let you leave the hospital without one, so you need to have one. There are a lot of other costs, of course, in just setting up for the child, getting somewhere for them to sleep. As Melodie said, just making sure you have a suitable roof over your head that you can bring them home to is costly. For some people that is a really big struggle, and I think, depending on the pregnancy, there can be other costs, such as needing physiotherapy, needing gestational diabetes medication, and all of those things. If you're now on 55% of your income because you've had to take your maternity benefits early, and you're living on a bare-bones budget and you now have to spend hundreds of dollars on medication, you're probably choosing not to get the massage or physiotherapy you might really need, because it's just not an option.

I think there are a lot of costs like that, that pile up for people quite quickly. There is a lot of help out there in pregnancy care centres and places like that, but again access is a problem, and as Melodie said, there are long waiting lists to get into different places. I think paying for job training for people who are coming into a new role at a job is like job training for becoming a mum. There's a period of investment before that baby arrives where you need to be prepared and ready to take on that role as best you can.

Mr. Mark Warawa: Melodie.

Ms. Melodie Ballard: I was pretty lucky; I had a very healthy pregnancy. The only issues I had were in my third trimester because I'm poor. I had vitamin deficiency problems and started getting muscle spasms in my back, but since I was on leave from my employer, I had medical benefits that covered the massage therapy and chiropractic care I needed at that time. The only thing that comes to mind, because I don't have a very complicated case, is vitamins; maybe consider including prenatal vitamins.

Mr. Mark Warawa: Anna, you've had five children, so you've had a number of years of experience in the career of being a mother.

Melodie, how old is your son now?

Ms. Melodie Ballard: He's 22 months.

Mr. Mark Warawa: That's almost two years of being a mom.

You had a welding career before. Anna, what kind of career did you have before that?

• (1245)

Ms. Anna Nienhuis: I worked in retail, and as a researcher at the university.

Mr. Mark Warawa: Would both of you say the career you have now as a mom is less or more important than the previous career?

Ms. Melodie Ballard: Absolutely, it's more important. I really like welding, and when I get my feet again I would like to go back, but my son is the absolute priority.

Mr. Mark Warawa: Anna.

Ms. Anna Nienhuis: I would absolutely agree. We've talked about the importance of getting women back into the workforce because we have this replacement rate issue and all these people retiring. However, if we aren't encouraging women to be mothers, we're going to have this problem for years and years to come, because there are going to be no replacements coming up as we keep losing workforce members. I love being in the workforce, but motherhood is definitely my priority job as well.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you very much.

We'll go over to MP O'Connell, please.

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell (Pickering—Uxbridge, Lib.): Thank you.

Thank you all for your testimony and being here.

As I stated earlier, this isn't my regular committee, so I'm just here filling in for the day. I do have one question. I apologize because I'm not sure if this was covered during the other days of testimony.

I know we've talked a lot here today about maternity leave and taking that time prior to your due date, but I have heard of another situation. This is following up on my colleague's question of hidden gems, and I think this would affect the trades. My question is really open-ended to see if anyone has a response. If a woman is on maternity leave, then goes back to work, but is then laid off right after that—and legitimately laid off along with other workers, but still, being the only one who was on maternity leave—she wouldn't be able to collect EI for being laid off because of the way that EI benefits are calculated. However, a male counterpart who was also laid off would. I would think this factor is predominant in trades, where work might be dependent on the type of jobs, etc.

If the committee intends to make recommendations but hasn't looked at this, can anyone provide insight? Have you seen this as a predominant problem? Do you have recommendations that maybe this committee and the government could consider to deal with the fact that it's not just prior to having a baby, but it's also the return to work, and the issues of maternity leave calculations if a person is laid off?

The Chair: Does anybody want to start? It's an open-ended question, so go ahead.

Ms. Melodie Ballard: I would say that you should maybe consider as a separate issue from employment insurance itself. If it's a completely separate program, then you continue to qualify for EI programs on their own merits, as they currently are, and take maternity leave away from that and create a different and new program that's built up to reflect the workforce of today. That might be a way to address your concern.

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell: Thank you.

The Chair: Madam Vasseur, you had your hand up. Go ahead.

Ms. Liette Vasseur: I would like to talk about the fact that it's already a question that professional people, especially, have to work with. Engineers, for example, and even scientists like me, will not take the full year, because we know we could lose promotions and raises, and it's a very competitive environment. If you don't return relatively quickly, you may lose your job. I should say that even in Quebec, where a woman will try to avoid being seen as pregnant until the end, and will go back relatively quickly, it's just because we

don't want to lose these kinds of advantages and probably lose our position. Even I went back after two months.

There are a lot of other complicated issues when we talk about these issues. The post-pregnancy period can be quite adventurous sometimes, as per what you had experienced before.

• (1250)

The Chair: Is there anyone else?

Yes, JudyLynn, go ahead.

Ms. JudyLynn Archer: At the end of day, of course, with these programs, it all comes down to cost. Who's going to pick up that increased cost? We need to go back and remember that.... Earlier, I had spoken to you about the average increase in income for women coming into a particular company, but the average increase that women see going into trades after being in Women Building Futures is 128%, which translates into a 47% increase in tax paid.

If we extrapolate that and think about the millions of women who could be contributing 47% more income tax, we solve any issue or question about where that money is coming from. It would support letting women taking longer maternity leave, a more customized approach, and actually making sure that she has her salary while she's extending her leave. That's where the money would come from.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

For the final word, over to MP Sansoucy please.

[Translation]

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question goes to Ms. Vasseur.

We received a brief from UNICEF Canada recommending that Bill C-243 be accompanied by federal legislation. It would provide for a new benefit, separate from the employment insurance program, and intended for pregnant women who cannot remain in their positions because of dangerous working conditions. It could be similar to the one provided in Quebec.

As I was saying earlier, and as Ms. Ballard also rightly said, Service Canada people could not handle it. In Quebec, public health authorities evaluate the risk posed by the work environment. A public health doctor makes a recommendation to the doctor looking after the pregnancy.

In Bill C-243, we are dealing with "calendar weeks". This is the same situation after the changes in the recent budget that provided for 12 weeks of maternity benefits before the due date.

A witness came to our last meeting and told us that, in Quebec, workers who take preventive withdrawal in the last 15 weeks of pregnancy are in the minority.

In some workplaces, the first 20 weeks of pregnancy are when those working with small children are exposed to viruses. In some occupations, the baby is least protected in the first trimester.

In your view, should our approach be calculated on the basis of the risks rather than on a "calendar" approach?

Ms. Liette Vasseur: Yes, I quite agree. That is why I believe we need an integrated approach.

We must not forget that this all represents an investment. We are quite familiar with the problem caused by some people not wanting to have children. We must not forget that this is an investment. These children are the taxpayers of tomorrow. If, when they become adults, they are able to get good jobs and to keep them, it will basically make up for the investments made before they were born.

I believe that we perhaps tend to give too much consideration directly to the pregnancy only. But basically, we are talking about people's lives. This is more long term. People could be paying taxes for 50 years during their lives.

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: Yes.

Ms. Liette Vasseur: That is how we have to look at the question.

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: Yes, indeed. It is interesting that you are telling us about integrated systems. As members of this committees, that is something we are focused on. We went all across Canada for our study on poverty. Personally, I believe that this vision also applies to our consideration of Bill C-243. Wherever we went, people talked to us about how important it is for different levels of government to work together better.

In Quebec, in the last few years, we have seen a mini baby boom. We cannot say that it is linked to the CSST's idea of preventive withdrawal. We cannot say that it is directly linked to more accessible day care. Conditions are favourable for women because of a combination of factors. Just now, it was mentioned that it is now possible to choose parental leave of 18 months at 33% of the salary without penalty. My colleague, who knows more about pension schemes than I do, used the example of a mother of five children. In the course of her career, if a woman has a number of 18-month periods during which she only gets 33% of her salary, her retirement income will be cut one day. We have to look at this globally.

It is interesting that you were talking about an integrated global vision, because things are not going to be settled in isolation.

•(1255)

Ms. Liette Vasseur: That is why I was saying that we have to see how things are done in other countries, like Finland and Denmark, where children are considered a long-term investment. It's not just about the pregnancy, the breast-feeding or the jobs, but truly about the entire system.

Ms. Brigitte Sansoucy: It was also interesting to me that you were telling us about the International Labour Organization just now. Last June, I had the opportunity to go to Geneva where that organization was founded. I met Canadians who work there and who have expertise in labour organization, a knowledge of what is being done around the world. I certainly believe that our committee should call on their resources more often. You are right to point that out. In

fact, that international experience could be really helpful for us in our deliberations. Especially given that Canada is a member of the ILO, we should gather that information to support our deliberations.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you to everybody.

Before we wrap up here, we have some administrative issues to deal with. Just to confirm, due to next week's change in the Thursday schedule to a Friday schedule, our committee will not be meeting next Thursday. To partially make up that time, we're going to start next Tuesday at 11. We originally were going to move that to noon to 2, and we're now going to go from 11 to 2, still meeting with the ministers from 12 o'clock to 2, but for that first hour we'll get through the committee business that we need to, and then we'll get right into main estimates. I believe that's going to be at Centre Block? Yes, so we're going to be moving to Centre Block.

Mr. Warawa, go ahead please.

Mr. Mark Warawa: Can I request that it be televised, or will it be televised?

The Chair: I believe we're moving to Centre Block so that it can be televised and so we're close enough to the House that we don't have to cut the witnesses short for us to get to question period.

Mr. Mark Warawa: Thank you.

The Chair: You're more than welcome.

I think that is everything. I'd like to extend my gratitude to all of the witnesses, both for being here in person, as well as for taking time out of your busy days to meet with us via video conference.

Thank you to all the committee members and all of those who made today possible: the interpreters, the tech folk who brought you in loud and clear, and of course the people to my left and right who capture all of this information so we can build this report. Thank you, everybody.

Oh, sorry, before I hit the gavel, Mr. Warawa.

Mr. Mark Warawa: Thank you, Chair.

A number of our offices have been very fortunate to have interns working for them. Their semester is coming to an end. I'm sure we all appreciate so much the work they've done in our offices—

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Mark Warawa: —and trust that they have great futures.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mark.

The meeting is adjourned.

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