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Chair

Mr. Andy Fillmore

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• (1630)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Andy Fillmore (Halifax, Lib.)): I want to welcome our guests today from NWAC, the Native Women's Association of Canada. We're very pleased you've been able to make the time to join us today. We look forward to hearing everything you have to say and to learn from you.

With us today are Dawn Lavell-Harvard, the president of NWAC, and Dan Peters, the acting executive director.

Just before I turn the floor over to you, Dawn and Dan, I want to let you know about the process we have in place. We're going to give you 10 minutes to present. We have an hour, all in all. We finish up at 5:30. You'll have 10 minutes. Then we're going to go into rounds of questions from committee members that are fairly strictly timed. The first rounds of questions are seven-minutes long. If we make it into the second rounds, they will be five minutes long.

In order to ensure fairness, I will be cutting people off, including you, at 10 minutes. I am apologizing in advance if I am rude, but it really is the only way we can ensure fairness and get people on to the responsibilities awaiting them after 5:30.

If you're ready, I welcome you to take the floor. Thank you.

Ms. Dawn Lavell-Harvard (President, Native Women's Association of Canada): Thank you, because that was actually my first question. At what point do you cut me off?

The Chair: I'll show you a yellow card at one minute left, and then the red card means "Please conclude your sentence."

Ms. Dawn Lavell-Harvard: Thank you very much.

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen of the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

I want to thank you for this opportunity to address you today. I want to begin by acknowledging that we are meeting here on Algonquin territory, the traditional indigenous peoples of this area.

The Native Women's Association of Canada is founded on the collective goal to enhance, promote, and foster the social, economic, cultural, and political well-being of indigenous women in Canada. NWAC is an aggregate of 13 native women's organizations from across Canada and was incorporated as a non-profit organization in 1974.

Back in the 1970s, our women were struggling to be reinstated in their communities. Women were removed from their communities because of gender discrimination and sex discrimination in the

Indian Act. When an indigenous woman married a non-indigenous man, she was removed from the community. She received a cheque from the government for \$12, and a letter that said, "You're no longer an Indian". That meant she no longer had the right to live in her community. She no longer had the right to even return to her community without permission. She lost her land, her home, and the right to be buried in that community.

It was this clear gender discrimination that organized our women. Our women have been activists at the community level for generations, starting with homemakers clubs, where to the outsiders it looked...They spread the image that they were there to trade recipes and talk about stain removal and laundry, but they were there behind closed doors to talk about how to better the lives in their communities.

This was the beginning of a very long tradition when our women went all the way to the Supreme Court over what eventually became Bill C-31. They actually lost at the Supreme Court level.

This was our experience where we realized that the voice of our women and our communities had been silenced, that Indian Act governments, band councils, and chiefs had superseded our traditional forms of government, and had silenced the voices of our women. That was why our associations were created.

We are now the modern incarnation of those traditional indigenous women's councils that happened in our traditions all across the country, those circles where our women had equality and had a voice in our communities. We're the contemporary incarnation of our traditional women's councils, our grandmothers lodges, the clan mothers, depending on which nation you arise from. We as the aunties, mothers, sisters, and daughters collectively recognize, respect, promote, and defend our ancestral laws, spiritual beliefs, languages, and traditions, but most importantly our families and our nations.

We are the voice of aboriginal women in part because many national, provincial, and local organizations do not have defined or well-developed avenues to allow aboriginal women's voices to be heard.

Since we were founded in 1974, we have fostered trust, we have listened to our women, and we have created the forms and the venues for our women to have their voices heard. Our ability to listen has generated many positive outcomes, including Bill C-31. After we lost at the Supreme Court here in Canada, we went to the international human rights watchdogs, the international human rights laws, to ensure that our women were treated with equality. As a result, tens of thousands of indigenous women and children were reinstated to their communities.

However, this gender discrimination is still continuing because they were not given back their original status. They were put back as reinstates. Many communities still, in fact, refuse to accept the women and children back into their communities. We're still facing this ongoing discrimination simply because we're indigenous women.

We have been working since we began on bringing to light the issue of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls in Canada. We've been working to bring to light the issue of the extremely high levels of violence that our women and girls face in our communities.

Fleeing violence is the number one reason our women leave the communities. It's not for an education, not for a job, but to find somewhere where they can be safe. Unfortunately, many of our women, when they enter into the urban settings having left their communities, find that because of the additional racism, they're even less safe. They are slipping through the cracks because of systemic racism.

● (1635)

This issue has been brought to light not only in Canada but in international forums. As we all know, we are now heading into the national inquiry. Despite being consistently underfunded from our inception, we have brought to international attention this human rights crisis that we're facing here in Canada. We have done this collectively, with our history of strength and our capacity to listen, act, and inform our women.

We have many priorities. Many of the issues and challenges for our women and girls exist and are all related to this history of oppression, dispossession, and the imposition of a foreign governance on our communities that replaced our traditional role as women. It's very difficult, when we're looking at the issue of violence, to determine; there is no one, easy answer. It's a complex web of poverty that is making our women unsafe. Our women are not vulnerable; they are put in circumstances where they become vulnerable, because of broken treaties, because of communities that are living in third world conditions.

It's not about choosing a high-risk lifestyle. We've heard this conversation many times, that indigenous women and girls are going missing or are being murdered because of high-risk lifestyles. We agree that our women have high-risk lifestyles, not because they chose a high-risk lifestyle but because of lack of choice, because of lack of opportunity when you're in a community that doesn't have clean water, when you're in a community that doesn't have schools, that doesn't have housing, that doesn't have many of the basic things we see as human rights here in Canada. They're living in third world conditions in the middle of one of the richest countries in the world.

This is why ending violence against our women is our number one priority. You cannot focus on your education, you cannot write a paper, when you cannot go home at night because it's not safe. How do you apply for a job when you're trying to cover the black eyes and the bruises? How do you keep your family together when you have no housing? Children and welfare? You don't want to report, because the first consideration is that they're going to take the children out of the home because they believe it's unsafe.

All of these factors are going together and tearing our families apart, putting our women in danger, and this should not be happening. This has been identified very clearly as a grave human rights violation against indigenous women and girls here in Canada.

We need to continue to focus, number one, on ending the violence, on making sure that our women and girls have safety, so that we can focus on empowerment and building capacity in employment and education, and can begin to address the over-incarceration of our women, who are being thrown into prison and doing time for stealing food to feed their families. They are sentenced to 30 days for stealing food. Of course, you know this means that the woman's child ends up on child welfare, and the cycle goes on and starts with the next generation.

There are the mental health issues because of the ongoing issues of violence, because of the lack of follow-up and healing from residential schools, from the Sixties Scoop, from the ongoing trauma, not to mention the post-traumatic stress of living consistently with this experience of violence.

We've heard the crisis that has been declared because of the high level of suicide attempts. This community, which had 11 suicide attempts last Saturday, is just one of the many communities struggling with this issue. We have to address mental health, maternal child health, diabetes, health conditions, housing, poverty, environmental concerns.

Indigenous women have the role, since time immemorial, as the carriers of water, as the protectors of the water because of our role as women and the givers of life. We need to make sure as indigenous women and as one of the national aboriginal organizations who have fought hard to get a seat at the table, that the voices of our women and children are heard. We're very concerned right now that we have seen the potential that our voices will be silenced yet again, pushed back from the table. We say we cannot let this happen.

•(1640)

We have struggled too long to get a seat at the table. We have struggled too long to hold our families and our communities together. But the fact that we're still here shows that we can declare victory because we have survived, and we will continue to do so.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much for that, Dawn.

We're going to move right into the questioning. We start in the seven-minute question round with Michael McLeod, please.

Mr. Michael McLeod (Northwest Territories, Lib.): Thank you for the presentation. You've described a condition that many communities in my riding are facing.

I welcomed the opportunity to talk to the Native Women's Association of NWT. We talked about a number of different things, and some of the issues were startling to me and we need to find solutions in a lot of different areas.

One of the things we discussed was the legal system. In the north, at least, it's very complicated and, for the most part, confusing to people who are in distress and are seeking assistance and to have the justice system on their side, to be reassured that they can deal with the issue at hand. A lot of times the system is too complicated and a woman will just throw her hands up in the air and give up and go back into a community or a relationship that, a lot of times, is not safe and high risk, as you stated. They really pointed to the need for an advocate or an ombudsman to help them as they enter into the system. They also talked about the lack of resources for programs to help individuals who come into the larger centres and to refer them to.

First, can you talk a little about your funding? Can you talk a little about the resources that you have to operate within, how they have either grown over the last years, or shrunk or been reduced? Maybe give us a snapshot of what you have to work with.

•(1645)

Ms. Dawn Lavell-Harvard: In fact, our resources, our capacity to deliver the support needed by the families, have shrunk considerably over the last years. We have been one of the hardest-hit aboriginal organizations by recent funding cuts over the last three or four years. We are well behind what we were even 10 years ago because of the cuts.

I think Dan can have some numbers.

Mr. Dan Peters (Acting Executive Director, Native Women's Association of Canada): Yes, we are well behind. When I first started at NWAC eight years ago, we had a whole suite of programs, health programs. That was back in the time when they had NAHO. We had the aboriginal suicide prevention program, maternal child health, diabetes, and a number of other programs that really supported indigenous women. All the NAOs received that funding, but that was cut at FNIHB in Health Canada.

Right now we have some CIHR funding through the PEACE program, which is the prevention, education, action, change, and evaluation program. It's to create safety nets for aboriginal women.

We also have some labour market development funding from ESDC. We have some status from the PEACE project funding.

As far as INAC goes, there's ARO funding, which is the aboriginal representative organization program funding envelope. It's a competitive process to get that money. I'm not one hundred per cent sure how much, but I think it was around \$76 million over five years. That was in the budget. We haven't heard about getting that. We have a few projects, an entrepreneurship network that we've been doing for the last few years, and actually projects called Activating Social Change and Project Uplift. We have a few projects from INAC.

We also receive some core funding. As Dawn was saying, we don't really have the capacity to do a lot of things, such as to have someone in communications, especially with the inquiry going on, and the pre-inquiry. We need an increase in core funding. I believe we get \$560,000 a year, which is just a pittance considering the work that we do. We need more core funding, and that's something we're definitely striving to do.

Mr. Michael McLeod: Thank you for that.

In the Northwest Territories, we have a few safe houses and shelters, but not very many. They are usually just in the regional centres, and we don't have any treatment, alcohol treatment centres, any treatment centres or facilities of that nature. So a lot of times individuals in the community, including women, will turn to the aboriginal organizations, their friendship centre, the band councils, the Métis Nation, or the native women's associations.

Now I've talked to everyone of these organizations, and their budgets have been cut to where they really can't function. They're almost at a point where they're looking at maybe closing their doors.

So there are still a lot of big issues out there. So what do you do in the case of gender discrimination? I heard a lot of discussion on this in my talks. If somebody goes to you and says their wages are not on par with men in the same field or sector or they are only hiring men, where do you refer people? What do you do with these people who are coming to you if you don't have the resources to deal with them yourself?

Ms. Dawn Lavell-Harvard: Exactly. This is specifically the problem we're dealing with. We have been cut to the point where we can't function in many of the areas that women are still coming to us for. When they don't get what they need in the community, when it's a family of missing or murdered, they will call the national office. It very often means that, because we cannot in good conscience ever turn somebody away and say we're not funded to do that...

I have been on the phone for hours with social workers trying to sort out somebody's disability cheque making sure, as the president, that it gets done. I have been with the human rights council in the province that we work with to make sure things get done. As always, it's those with the fewest resources and the least capacity who are expected to shoulder the burden of these cuts. We will continue to do what we can, but it's heartbreaking to have to tell somebody that we're trying to do this off the side of the desk or having to try to refer when there should be the resources there so that when women come forward when they're in danger, they know that they can count on us to advocate and to do something for them. And right now, if that means I have to do it personally on my time off, then that's what we've had to do.

• (1650)

The Chair: Thanks, Dawn. We'll have to leave it there.

David, you're to go, please.

Mr. David Yurdiga (Fort McMurray—Cold Lake, CPC): Thank you for being here today. Obviously this is a great concern for everyone around this table, actually everywhere in Canada, because this is a significant issue that we have to address.

What role does the NWAC play in supporting provincial and territorial aboriginal women's organizations? You guys have a lot of organizations underneath you, so what role do you play? Is it financial support? Is it also a knowledge-based support, and how is that broken down?

Ms. Dawn Lavell-Harvard: Actually we would like to provide more support for the provincial associations. Right now, we have been working on trying to foster partnerships when we're at the Council of the Federation, for example, when the provinces are talking about their commitment to indigenous peoples and their commitment to ending violence against indigenous women.

I was starting to ask, "What are you doing in your province or territory to support your provincial association?" How do we build that partnership and try to foster that? We have consistently applied year after year after year for funds and resources to be able to support provincial associations. We have consistently been denied, but we have tried to work around that with knowledge sharing to help the provincial associations.

If it's a competitive process, we can help them to develop better proposals because we know proposal processes always end up with those who have the money. They continue to get more money because they have the capacity to write the good proposals. Those who have not had a chance to get into the door never get a chance to get in the door because they don't have the capacity to write their proposals.

This is creating severe inequality province by province, and when you see provinces that have a commitment to ending violence, a commitment to supporting indigenous people.... I know Ontario has made huge commitments to ending violence. There was a recent announcement of \$100 million. They provide core funding for their provincial association, they have a facility, they have tremendous support, but then you'll see other provinces where there's nothing, where they're struggling and we're supporting them so that they can have an office. This is clear inequality across the provinces.

With this inquiry, we need to make sure that the provinces and the federal government... When everybody is talking about genuine relationships and genuine collaboration, that means we have to make sure that all of the partners have the capacity to participate in that relationship and not be the poor cousin who has the right to be at the table but doesn't have even the gas money to get there.

Mr. David Yurdiga: Another thing we talked a bit about was inadequate funding. The ability to do a good job requires a certain amount of money. I don't know what your current budget is, but what would be your ideal budget to carry out your mandate? Is it short by 50%? Give us an idea exactly what the shortfall is.

Ms. Dawn Lavell-Harvard: We would have to be at least double where we are at now. We have been cut back so much that we are operating at less than half of what we need, and that is just to meet minimum standards, minimum emergency crisis standards, when people come to our door, not to even get to the kind of larger long-term, capacity-building or sustainability. Talking about advocates in the system, this is one of the fundamental problems. There are many resources and supports out there, but even for well-educated people who have significant resources—phones, the Internet, and all of these things—it's difficult to navigate all of the many systems. Often dollars go unspent, and resources are not accessed, because of the number of hoops they have to be get through.

We have a centre in Thunder Bay where they have brought together workers in one building, where one worker is for housing, one worker is for child welfare, one worker is for the healthy babies initiative, and it's a model.... We've had these community hubs where when a woman and her children come in, and if she comes in for employment, but then we find out she has nowhere to sleep tonight, and then we walk down the hall together.

Having this kind of wraparound care in every province would help us to work to end the violence, to build that capacity, and to make sure that an investment in a woman always results in long-term improvement for the entire family and community, because that increases the chances of those children having a better outcome, of having increased education, and for employment later in life.

Significant upstream investments, for us to be able to just meet the demand that's out there right now, would require double our current budget. To start making improvements and significant long-term improvements in the lives of indigenous women and children, we would have to be at minimum four times what we're at now. With that we also have to build the capacity in the provincial associations.

• (1655)

Mr. David Yurdiga: I understand that a portion of it is federal and a portion of it is provincial. Do first nations play any part in financial contributions to your organization?

Ms. Dawn Lavell-Harvard: Just to be clear, the Native Women's Association of Canada only gets federal funding. Our provincial affiliates get provincial funding to varying degrees. To my current knowledge, we don't get any funding through any first nations for any of our provincial affiliates or programs at either the national or the provincial level.

Mr. David Yurdiga: Thank you. That clarifies that for me because I didn't know how you were funded. So it's strictly federal and—

Ms. Dawn Lavell-Harvard: For the National Women's Association of Canada, yes.

Mr. David Yurdiga: I have a quick further question.

Your organization has been very active since 1974. Can you highlight some of your accomplishments that we can take back and say this is what you have completed, these are some of the programs you have instituted to make the lives of our aboriginal women better?

Ms. Dawn Lavell-Harvard: I think Bill C-31 was one of our first and most significant accomplishments. That was our rallying call, where women got together so that indigenous women had the right to be indigenous, that we had a right to be members of our communities, to be who we were, and to regain that. That was carried on to the next generation, with Sharon McIvor and the McIvor decision, which allowed the next generation to have the right to be indigenous and to have a right to be members of their first nation communities.

That's a huge accomplishment, but also I think one of our largest accomplishments, as a result of 30 years of struggle, has been to bring attention to the issue of violence, something that nobody wanted to talk about and nobody wanted to hear. There was the notion that once economic development was dealt with, the violence wouldn't be a problem. It was a struggle just to start having those conversations and the fact that the Sisters in Spirit initiative—even if we had to go to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to get an investigation, to have them here in Canada, to have the human rights violation identified, exposed, and hopefully dealt with.... It's the same thing with the United Nations. We are using those kinds of international human rights protocols to shine a light and expose the human rights violations here in Canada. That has made a significant difference and has catapulted us into this process, and we are now at the first steps of making long-term change by addressing that violence.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll hear from Niki Ashton, please, who is substituting for committee member Charlie Angus.

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill—Keewatinook Aski, NDP): Thank you very much, Ms. Lavell-Harvard, for joining us today to speak to the important work of the Native Women's Association of Canada. You gave a very powerful synopsis of the extent of NWAC's contributions not only to indigenous women and indigenous communities, but also to Canadian society.

I do want to highlight the work of Sisters in Spirit as well. Despite the fact that its funding was entirely cut, it continues to be an effort that is in people's psyches, and certainly brings people together. It

continues to bring people together. Families that were first reunited through the work of Sisters in Spirit continue to come together and be powerful voices on the ultimate need for justice for indigenous women.

I know that your presentation touched on this a bit. Obviously, we're all very supportive of the work being undertaken to bring forward a national inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women, but one of the things I hear a lot from indigenous women, and from indigenous men as well, in communities across northern Manitoba and across Canada is that while the inquiry is critical and needs to take place, there are certain actions that can take place prior to the inquiry.

One of the words you used to describe the reality that many indigenous peoples face is "poverty" and how it really is linked to the marginalization and the vulnerability that many indigenous peoples experience right now. Do you agree that fundamental actions need to take place in parallel to the inquiry? Do we need wait for the inquiry to tackle poverty in indigenous communities, or can and should we be going forward on that front as soon as possible?

● (1700)

Ms. Dawn Lavell-Harvard: I think we've made it very clear on a number of occasions that while it's absolutely important that we have this inquiry to articulate and identify long-term upstream investments and the nature of the racialized, sexualized violence, and systemic discrimination that have put our people in danger, we've been very, very clear that there are many things we can do right now, and that should be done. We cannot afford to wait two, three, or four years for recommendations down the road while girls continue to go missing every week and women continue to be murdered every week. We can't afford to wait.

There were plenty of recommendations. There are many things that we know we can do right now. Transportation on the Highway of Tears needs to be dealt with right away.

We need to look at pilot projects for exiting programs for women who want to get off the streets. We have women in B.C. who have come forward wanting to have these kinds of supports so that it's not a perpetual revolving door.

We need improvement in child welfare and, very clearly, in equality issues. We're talking about generations over the time frame of an inquiry. That's an entire childhood in a community. That is an individual human being's entire childhood while they wait for incremental equality. Children deserve better now—and absolutely, it has to start right away.

Ms. Niki Ashton: I also noted in the NWAC report with regard to the inquiry that one of the recommendations was for a comprehensive national action plan. That's a discussion that I've been involved with for years, and in the previous Parliament I certainly was very closely involved; but, of course, the discussion continues as to what that comprehensive national action plan ought to include. I'm wondering if you could speak to that from NWAC's position.

Ms. Dawn Lavell-Harvard: From NWAC's position, we are very clear that our people are too important to be trapped in jurisdictional issues, where responsibility for ending violence is bounced back and forth between the federal government, provincial government, and local communities. We want to see a national action plan where all the players, all those who have responsibility for improving the conditions for indigenous families and indigenous nations, are at that table engaging in a genuine, collaborative, and participatory development of an action plan.

That's really key: not something that is handed to us to rubber-stamp, where we have to backtrack and fix a model or ideas, but something where we are involved in a genuine collaborative development of an action plan that includes addressing the root causes—the poverty, the child welfare issues, and the addictions. We talked about the supports for treatment.

All of these situations are contributing to the violence, and we need to be addressing them in a much more integrated way. It is not only frustrating for those on the ground who are trying to make a difference; it is fiscally irresponsible to be operating in silos and across jurisdictional boundaries, and then claiming we don't have the budget to make the significant upstream investments, because it is just not efficient to be operating in that way.

If we are talking about ending violence, that means everybody. It means housing, education, health, corrections, justice, and cops. There are so many players that have a role in this, and it's just not efficient to be operating in separate fields. It needs to be integrated, to be collaborative, and—I can't say this enough—co-developed right from the start so that we are not wasting time correcting things down the path, but instead are doing it right the first time.

• (1705)

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Ms. Niki Ashton: I am wondering if we could go back to the reference to poverty. How important do you feel it is not just to reduce but to eliminate poverty in indigenous communities?

Ms. Dawn Lavell-Harvard: Absolutely. Poverty is one of the main contributors to indigenous women, children, and families' lack of safety. Poverty is one of the main contributors to the loss of life, to the loss of future generations, and there is no excuse for that kind of poverty in one of the richest countries in the world where we have entire communities living in third world conditions. This cannot be allowed to continue for another generation. We need to address it.

This means upstream investments, so we are saving money in the long run—investing in education, employment, and the eradication of poverty so we don't have to spend triple the money on prisons and treatment.

The Chair: Don Rusnak, go ahead, please.

Mr. Don Rusnak (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Thank you for coming today. I know a little bit of the work that NWAC does, as well as its affiliate the Ontario Native Women's Association, in Thunder Bay. You mentioned a project in Thunder Bay, and I wonder if you can elaborate a little on that.

I am a real fan of collaboration and partnerships. I know from my time in the criminal justice system, both in Alberta and in Thunder Bay, that a lot of the supports weren't there for women. I know that the services the Ontario Native Women's Association provides in Thunder Bay are very helpful to women in the community.

Can you elaborate a little on that partnership in Thunder Bay for the benefit of the committee members and other individuals here? Perhaps they would want to look at partnerships like that in their communities and getting them off the ground.

Ms. Dawn Lavell-Harvard: Absolutely.

The Thunder Bay Centre for the Ontario Native Women's Association is looking at that wraparound model in which we bring in partners. In many of the things we do, we have partnerships with not only first nations but with the Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres and with the Métis Nation of Ontario.

Whether it be the housing corporation, so that we can provide housing, or employment and training initiatives, or the health outreach workers, very often our workers will have an entire family—the woman and her children—as clients. If it means that our worker goes with them to court, we go with them to court; if it means that we go with them to the housing office, we go with them there, to make sure that these families are getting the maximum supports, that they're not just being bounced around and told they need to go across town.

I don't know how many of you are parents, but if you have ever tried as a parent to get three little kids ready in the morning to get to an appointment, only to arrive there and be told that you missed this one thing and now you have to go across town to get something else.... Very often, people give up. Those kinds of systemic hoops are the reasons many people don't get the services they need and are entitled to.

That's why having those supports, having that person with you who knows what your rights are, who knows what services are out there and can facilitate getting them—that wraparound model to make sure that we're not losing clients, not losing families because of lack of understanding, when there are many opportunities and lots of partnerships—has been very successful in holding families together and addressing poverty. If their kids are going to be taken away because they have no housing, we get them housing, rather than paying triple the amount—thousands of dollars—to put those children in foster homes. How do we get that family food? How do we get those children jackets? These are the kinds of common sense solutions that can be found, if we're working in partnerships.

• (1710)

Mr. Don Rusnak: As a followup to that question for the benefit of my colleagues, are there any other partnerships across the country that can be used as a model to help women in distress or women in these situations, as an example to other cities and other communities in my colleagues' ridings? Are there any other examples?

Ms. Dawn Lavell-Harvard: Actually, I would like to extend an open invitation to anybody who would like to come to Thunder Bay to look at the model, look at the wraparound services, and look at the partnerships that are being done there to facilitate this. I can't speak exactly to the other partnerships that are in other provinces, because each province is autonomous and works on developing things within its own region. We know, however, that moving forward we have to become more engaged with what we call “cops, courts, and corrections”. We have to start doing a better job in the justice area so that our families in the future are not shying away from the authorities.

When a woman reaches out for help, when she realizes maybe that she has an addictions issue and requires treatment, very often reaching out to the authorities, if there's violence in the home, results in children being taken away. Many women would rather continue to experience the violence than lose their kids. That results in yet another generation.... We can't break the cycle if we don't address it to make sure that when women reach out.... That requires prevention and support, and separation from those who will apprehend. That's a really key factor. It's a new, innovative way of thinking about how we create partnerships and use community grassroots partnerships to provide the supports, rather than use those who are tasked, unfortunately, with removing children as their obligation.

Mr. Don Rusnak: I'm just going to switch gears a little here. The recently released report by NWAC recommended that a national inquiry be independent from government, adequately funded, and be free of funding restrictions that will impede its ability to effectively address the scope and nature of the problem.

Can you elaborate upon how a national inquiry can be independent from government, along with any advantages or disadvantages associated with this approach?

Ms. Dawn Lavell-Harvard: There are legal ways they can set up the inquiry so it has authority, so it is not being directed by any specific department, making sure that it is truly arm's length so it's not beholden exactly to somebody's department.

The concerns that we've seen in the past inquiries, specifically in B.C., were with regard to the fact that even though civil

organizations such as the Native Women's Association of Canada were given standing in the inquiry.... We had the right to go to the inquiry and to speak. It's organizations such as the Native Women's Association and the Feminist Alliance for International Action that have genuine independence, because we are not constrained by being paid employees of the government, and we have that voice. However, because we were not provided sufficient funding for legal counsel, sufficient funding to be able to attend the inquiry, it meant that our voice was in effect silenced. It significantly reduced the independence of the inquiry because those who had the independent thought, knowledge, and the grassroots' ability to speak out were silenced because we were not able to get to the table.

Our rights are only as valid as our ability to exercise them, and having the right to be at the table means nothing if we can't get there.

The Chair: We're moving to the five-minute questions now, and Arnold Viersen is up.

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Thank you for joining us today and sharing the work that your organization does.

It's clear that NWAC has made combatting violence against indigenous women and girls the primary focus of your work.

I liked how you highlighted the point at the beginning that in order to eliminate poverty, we have to get rid of violence first. If we can eliminate the violence, the poverty will be reduced in and of itself.

When it comes to violence against women, there's one area that I'm particularly interested in hearing about, which was raised by your organization two years ago at a Senate committee. At that time, NWAC urged that the accessibility of online, violent, sexually explicit material and its effect on youth, and especially on boys, be at the forefront of our minds as parliamentarians.

Could you share with the committee why you believe this is an issue that Parliament should examine and take action on?

• (1715)

Ms. Dawn Lavell-Harvard: What I was pointing out was that this is a very vicious cycle. Ending violence helps to end poverty because it allows our women to get an education, to get employment, to take care of their families; and at the same time, the poverty is contributing to the violence and the lack of safety. It's an unfortunate never-ending cycle where poverty reproduces the violence and the violence reproduces the poverty.

I just wanted to be clear on that.

As well, with the issue of online, violent, sexualized content, we have seen significant research that shows that generations of young people now, and young boys specifically, who are being exposed to explicit, violent, sexualized content depicting the degradation, dehumanization, and objectification of women leads to increased violence.

We need only look at the situation that happened with Cindy Gladue to see one of the most extremely offensive, horrific atrocities that is the outcome of that kind of violent content. The fact that this perpetrator's computer, which had hundreds of graphic images of what could only be described as sexual torture, was not allowed as part of the evidence in his trial for the brutal murder of Cindy Gladue—who was then herself degraded and dehumanized by having pictures of her most vital body parts passed around the jury as evidence—shows exactly the kind of horrific outcome that happen when explicit, sexual, violent content imprints in young minds.

I think we are really just beginning to see the outcome in this next generation of what is a very different environment.

As a mother, and as representing the Native Women's Association, we know how many times children accidentally stumble onto some of the most horrifying sexual violence on the Internet when they are innocently typing in something. We're seeing that kind of long-term shaping of attitudes towards women and girls, shaping of attitudes towards sex, and shaping of attitudes towards relationships that then become based on violence. We're seeing it more and more because of the violent content on the Internet that, increasingly, large numbers of young children are being exposed to.

The Chair: You have 45 seconds, Arnold.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: NWAC has also worked to end violence toward women and girls who have been victims of sex trafficking. Do you see a link between the accessibility of violent sexual material and sex trafficking?

Ms. Dawn Lavell-Harvard: I think that the availability online of violent sexual material contributes to the larger attitudes behind the degradation and dehumanization of women generally. Moreover, the racialization of indigenous women specifically contributes to trafficking, which contributes to a larger societal attitude that often blames the victim in these situations. For young women and girls, the average age they are recruited and trafficked is 13.

As for the arguments suggesting that prostitution is a choice, when we are talking about the average age of a girl being recruited and trafficked as 13, it means this is exploitation of children. We need to be very clear that human trafficking is one of the outcomes of the larger attitudes that degrade and dehumanize indigenous women specifically.

The Chair: Thanks.

Gary Anandasangaree.

• (1720)

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree (Scarborough—Rouge Park, Lib.): Thank you, Ms. Lavell-Harvard and Mr. Peters, for being here today.

You mentioned earlier that women are being jailed 30 days for stealing food just to survive. A disturbing statistic shows that 35% of women in federal prisons are aboriginal women.

I know it's a large issue, but where are the challenges? The social challenges aside, in terms of poverty and so on, but within the criminal justice system, is it issues like aboriginal women being targeted by police? Is it poor prosecution, lack of diversion, or lack of a judiciary that reflects the community? Where are we in the spectrum, and what are the challenges that we need to address? I think this number has been growing over the last couple of decades.

Ms. Dawn Lavell-Harvard: Okay, so yes, yes, and yes.

Indigenous women, unfortunately, are the most over policed, but less likely to get justice. Our women are targeted, and they're being monitored because of racial issues.

We know that justice is intimately connected to the representation you can purchase. It's intimately connected to poverty as well. If you don't have the funds to buy a lawyer, and if you don't have the funds to get justice, then you're going to end up with the least favourable outcomes. They're going to end up in jail.

There was a clear example of this when we were in Vancouver during the Stanley Cup riots and there were young men coming in from the suburbs and lighting police cars on fire. Across the country there were arguments about why a young man should not go to jail because he had a beautiful career ahead of him and a scholarship to some Ivy League university. This was not a matter of boys being boys, but they were actually going to set police cars on fire. That's large-scale damage and potential danger, and yet an indigenous woman who defends herself.... If somebody has their hands around my throat, I'm going to fight back, too. That's real honest. Often many of our women end up in jail because they have stood up for themselves, or because they have fought back in violent situations. Double charging means they end up in jail, too, if he says, "He hit, she hit back". We've seen again and again that our women are over-policed. Because of the high levels of violence when women fight back, they end up in jail because of racism. Because of the absence of indigenous women on juries, and because of court processes, our women don't get justice. We get harsher sentences.

Often, when indigenous women end up in jail, one of our primary concerns is that some of the women who are sent there on essentially trivial charges can then be subject to indeterminate sentences because of things that then happen while they're in jail. Somebody who is jailed originally for stealing food for her family ends up doing a life sentence because judges can give them indeterminate sentences because of some petty thing that happened while they were in jail, such as throwing their papers at the parole committee, which is considered assault. We've seen it again and again, where they've gone in for petty theft and end up with a life sentence.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: On the issue of standing in the upcoming inquiry, what type of resources do you need as an organization to fully represent the issues at hand?

Ms. Dawn Lavell-Harvard: One of the things we've mentioned, and in fact the families have said, is that they want the Sisters in Spirit initiative to be done again—it was \$2 million per year over five years—because they relied on that initiative. If a family member needed something, they called our office.

These families know they are going to be moving into a time frame of potentially being re-traumatized and revictimized. We saw this again and again in B.C. They have been asking us if we are going to be able to support them through this and be there for them. This is where they call the Sisters in Spirit, to even have that ongoing data analysis and that support for the families. That is the fundamental first step that many families want—the Sisters in Spirit reinstated so that they have somewhere to go and someone to support them, protect them, and speak out for them in this process, to make sure the victims are not put on trial and re-traumatized through this process.

• (1725)

The Chair: Okay, the final question of the evening is from Todd Doherty, on behalf of Cathy McLeod.

Mr. Todd Doherty (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC): I'd like to start by saying thank you to Ms. Lavell-Harvard and Mr. Peters for being here today. Your passionate presentation can't help but touch our hearts.

I would also like to say that I am very proud to have two indigenous women in my life, and that is the reason why I am here today. I am very proud to say that.

Ms. Lavell-Harvard, we've seen many studies and inquiries done over the years for the MMIW. You spoke about breaking the systemic cycle. This government, in budget 2016, has announced that it is putting forward \$40 million. I've read some of your recommendations.

What else can we do to ensure that we are leaving a legacy of action, and not a legacy of books on shelves? What other kinds of mechanisms can ensure that this money, and any money that this government has put in place or has pledged, gets to those critical areas it is intended for?

Ms. Dawn Lavell-Harvard: I think this is something that necessitates long-term independent oversight, so that it's not just a family advisory while it's in the public view because we are going through the process of the inquiry. This requires a commitment to a funded independent oversight that is going to have the kinds of human rights knowledge and grassroots knowledge to be able to ensure that the government is held to task and that the international human rights watchdogs are continuing to look at this situation. That is what is going to be really important here: that this isn't just a flash in the pan or something that's checked off on a to-do list; that we

don't do the inquiry and then, as you said, it becomes one more report on a shelf that nobody ever looks at.

That's going to mean that the inquiry itself has to have some commitment—we are saying, at minimum—to a third phase. You have the pre-inquiry phase, where they're developing. You have the actual inquiry. There needs to be a third phase that ensures, for any identification of misconduct or lack of justice, or for cases that need to be reopened—because they are not going to be able to reopen them during the inquiry in the number of cases that will need to be—that there is a developed process where those cases are reopened, justice is given to the families, and there are resources provided for that, as well as long-term oversight to ensure there is implementation.

We know that's going to require commitments in budgets. This is about upstream investments. This is about making sure that we are investing now.

Mr. Todd Doherty: You succinctly answered my first question. I'd like to know more about the mechanisms that need to be in place—financial accountability, if you will—to ensure that this funding gets to where it is supposed to get to.

Ms. Dawn Lavell-Harvard: Absolutely. I think we can get back to you with some concrete specifics. I think one of the most important things is that organizations such as the Native Women's Association of Canada and arm's-length human rights groups, the watchdogs who have brought attention to this issue, are part of the oversight moving forward. We need somebody who is genuinely arm's-length, because that independence is really important. If you are 100% in a department of government, you cannot be independent enough to ensure that the hard questions are asked and that the long-term strategies are put in place.

We can get back to you on the specifics of legal processes, because that's not my forte. It's all about independent civil society oversight. That includes not only the implementation of the recommendations, but also oversight of the policing issues of the complaints that will come forward, to see that they're not just identified for a nice story and that the process doesn't just become a record of tragedies, but that there's a commitment to do something about this and to make sure that independent oversight happens. Again, that requires budgets.

• (1730)

The Chair: We're done there, Todd.

Thank you so much, Ms. Lavell-Harvard and Mr. Peters, for sharing your time and your knowledge with us, and for teaching us today. Your passion and your focus underline the importance of the issues facing aboriginal women in Canada. Thank you.

With that, could I ask for a motion to adjourn?

An hon. member: So moved.

The Chair: We're adjourned.

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