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# Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

EVIDENCE

**NUMBER 009**

Friday, May 15, 2020

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Chair: Mr. Bob Bratina





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Friday, May 15, 2020

• (1405)

[*English*]

**The Chair (Mr. Bob Bratina (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.)):** I will now call this meeting to order.

Welcome, all, to meeting number nine of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs.

I'd like to start by acknowledging that I am joining you today from the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee, Anishinabe and Chonnonton nations.

Pursuant to the order of reference of April 20, 2020, the committee is meeting for the purpose of receiving evidence concerning matters related to the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today's meeting is taking place by video conference, and the proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. During this meeting, the webcast will always show the person speaking rather than the entire committee.

In order to facilitate the work of our interpreters and ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline the following rules.

Interpretation in this video conference will work very much as it does in a regular committee meeting. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of either floor, English or French. In order to resolve the sound issues raised in recent virtual committee meetings and ensure clear audio transmissions, we ask those who wish to speak during the meetings to set your interpretation language as follows. If speaking in English, please ensure that you are on the English channel. If speaking in French, please ensure that you are on the French channel. As you are speaking, if you plan to alternate from one language to the other, you will also need to switch the interpretation channel so that it aligns with the language you are speaking. You may want to allow for a short pause when switching languages.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. When you are ready to speak, you can either click on the microphone icon to activate your mike or you can hold down the space bar while you are speaking. When you release the bar, your mike will mute itself, just like a walkie-talkie.

I remind you that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair. Should members need to request the floor outside of their designated time for questions, they should activate their microphone and state that they have a point of order. If a member wishes to intervene on a point of order that has

been raised by another member, they should use the “raise hand” function. This will signal to the chair their interest to speak. In order to do so, they should click on “participants” at the bottom of the screen. When the list pops up, they will see next to their name that they can click “raise hand”. I will try to be very attentive to that today.

When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your microphone should be on mute. The use of headsets is strongly encouraged. If you have earbuds with a microphone, please hold the microphone near your mouth when you are speaking to boost the sound quality for our interpreters.

Should any technical challenges arise, for example, in relation to interpretation or if you are accidentally disconnected, please advise the chair or clerk immediately, and the technical team will work to resolve the issue. Please note that we may need to suspend during these times, as we need to ensure all members are able to participate fully.

Before we get started, can everyone click on their screen in the top right-hand corner and ensure that they are on gallery view? With this view you should be able to see all of the participants in a grid view. This will ensure that all video participants can see one another.

During this meeting we will follow the same rules that usually apply to opening statements and the rounds of questioning of witnesses during our regular meetings. Each witness will have up to five minutes for an opening statement, followed by the usual rounds of questions by members.

Now it is time to welcome our witnesses. From the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and Two-Spirit People Manitoba Coalition, we have Hilda Anderson-Pyrz and Sandra DeLaronde. From the Native Women's Association of Canada, we have Lorraine Whitman. Actually, we're still waiting for Ms. Whitman. From Women of the Métis Nation, we have Melanie Omeniho.

We'll begin with five minutes of witness testimony, starting with Hilda Anderson-Pyrz and Sandra DeLaronde.

Please go ahead with your opening statement.

**Ms. Hilda Anderson-Pyrz (Co-Chair, MMIWG2S+ - Manitoba Coalition):** Thank you for the opportunity to present to the standing committee.

I wish to acknowledge the land and the people of Treaty 1 and Treaty 5 territory and the homeland of the Métis Nation.

My name is Hilda Anderson-Pyrz and I'm the co-chair of the MMIWG Manitoba Coalition. The coalition is composed of diverse indigenous representation from non-profit women and family serving organizations, indigenous governments, individuals, MMIWG2S+ family members and survivors. I am here because you really need to understand us as indigenous people and how COVID-19 is impacting indigenous communities and organizations.

Canada, you need to respect the sovereignty of nations and allow us the autonomy to make our own decisions. We need you settlers to listen, not because it is a nice thing to do, but because it is the lawful thing to do. What the pandemic is doing is exacerbating the inequalities that we already knew were there. We are seeing violence. We are seeing discrimination. Now we are seeing more violence. We are faced with challenges about how we provide front-line supports for people because of the physical distancing and the lack of adequate resources.

The pandemic is exacerbating our crisis. We knew the health care systems in first nation communities were poor before. Now we are seeing truly what a breaking point they are at when it comes to supporting survivors of violence and those impacted by the pandemic. We are living the impact of short-term, project-specific funding, which is detrimental to indigenous communities and organizations. Stable, long-term funding is critical to having the capacity and the ability to pivot quickly into something like a pandemic.

The communities know best where they need to pivot to meet the needs of that moment. What the pandemic is showing us is that we need to be nimble. You cannot simply ask indigenous communities and organizations to pivot all their funding to the COVID-19 pandemic, because the disparity that indigenous communities and organizations were dealing with before the pandemic is still there. In some areas there is even a greater need. Yes, we need COVID funding, and indigenous people still need the funding that was inadequate before the pandemic. Yes, we need the anti-violence funding. We now need that more than ever, and we need specific resources to respond to the COVID context.

Additionally, we have seen that there has been an increase in the number of gender and human rights violations, such as the lack of access to food security, shelter and medical care. We do not have the adequate resources to address and support victims of violence. If supports are not readily available, we will continue to die and experience alarming rates of violence.

It is time for this government to fully implement the 231 calls for justice. We cannot wait any longer. Our lives are sacred.

Thank you.

• (1410)

**Ms. Sandra DeLaronde (Co-Chair, MMIWG2S+ - Manitoba Coalition):** Good afternoon, Mr. Chair.

My name is Sandra DeLaronde and I'm also co-chair of the Manitoba Coalition. We thank the standing committee for the opportunity to present today.

We acknowledge this government and provincial and territorial governments for finally establishing a national inquiry in 2016, af-

ter more than 20 years of advocacy by families, survivors and indigenous women's organizations, although we are concerned about the lack of inclusion in creating a national strategy to end the violence.

This pandemic is highlighting the desperate, impossible situation our women and girls and 2SLGBTQIA find themselves in. Imagine the terror of being locked in with your abuser for weeks and now months.

We have three requests for this committee.

The first one is that Winnipeg is the only city without a low-barrier safe space for women and girls to protect them from staggering rates of violence by intimate partners and through trafficking.

Second, along with the violence walks homelessness, particularly for indigenous women who are fleeing. The lack of decent housing in the city and on reserve means that multiple generations of families live in a single family home in some communities. The count ranges up to 30 people in a two-bedroom home. This chronic underfunding and profoundly inadequate circumstances existed long before COVID-19, but the pandemic is more deadly because women have no housing options and nowhere to go.

Third, of the 634 first nations in Canada, there are only 46 funded women's shelters and only four shelters exist in Manitoba first nations.

The final quick point I'd like to make is about mental health and well-being. The long-term effects need to be addressed now and for the long term. As a coalition, we'd like to thank Leah Gazan, MP for Winnipeg Centre, for her efforts in supporting our community to ensure the well-being of indigenous women and, indeed, all women who are at risk for violence. We look forward to working with this government to end violence and make this country one where every human being is safe, because we deserve nothing else. We remember those many women—mothers, daughters and sisters—who have gone missing or murdered because of a lack of action.

*Meegwetch.*

• (1415)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

I see that we're joined by Ms. Whitman now.

Ms. Whitman, if you're ready to go, you have five minutes. You're next on the order paper.

Please go ahead, and welcome.

**Ms. Lorraine Whitman (President, Native Women's Association of Canada):** Thank you.

Good afternoon. My name is Lorraine Whitman, Grandmother White Sea Turtle, and I'm president of the Native Women's Association of Canada.

I am also here to represent the rights of first nations, Métis and Inuit women across Canada and internationally.

You have asked me here today to talk to you about the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting indigenous women. I appreciate the opportunity to be able to share NWAC's findings and also our concerns.

We have been working on our horrific problem of missing and murdered indigenous women, girls and gender-diverse people for decades, and we are the organization whose calls for action led to the inquiry that submitted its final report and recommendations in June of last year. I am here today to talk about the pandemic but I am also here to talk about the violence in our communities, and these two issues are fundamentally linked.

Canadians across the country are fearful about the health effects that the disease is having on their loved ones, and the financial and social toll it is taking on them and their communities. For indigenous women those fears are amplified many times over. I don't need to tell you that before COVID-19 hit our shores, indigenous women and their children were among the most vulnerable population in Canada, but I am going to say it anyway: We are vulnerable. We need help. We are worried, with all the other problems being created by this disease, that we will be overlooked by governments, that promises of help made months ago will be abandoned, and that many of us will die as a result of this virus and as a result of its incubation in this social poverty in which many indigenous women now live.

As the pandemic grew, NWAC conducted a needs assessment with its provincial and territorial member associations, all but two via phone, and it has resulted in painting a frightening picture. The federal government's own statistics show that spousal abuse of indigenous women is more than three times higher than that of non-indigenous women. Imagine being forced during a pandemic to self-isolate in a small house on a reserve with many family members and a spouse who is already prone to being abusive, a spouse who no longer has his usual outlet for letting off steam.

Statistics also say that before the pandemic struck, 53% of abused indigenous women feared for their lives. Imagine the depth of their fear now as they are confined in their homes day after day, dealing in some cases with a lack of clean water for basic hygiene.

In response to our needs assessment, our affiliate, the Nunavut Inuit Women's Association, said it is extremely concerned that levels of violence have been on the increase since the country went into lockdown. Self-isolation isn't possible in overcrowded housing or shelters, and the shelters in Nunavut were already full most of the time anyway. In the stress of the disease the Nunavut Inuit Women's Association is extremely concerned that many who were not already suffering abuse or mental illness may be subject to attacks or may resort to self-harm or even suicide.

You have probably heard the good news that so far there are no cases of COVID-19 in Nunavut, but we all know that we are on the downside of the first wave. What happens when the second wave

strikes, and the disease makes its way to the Far North? The single Nunavut hospital base in Iqaluit, with its 35 beds and seven ventilators serving a population of 38,000, is not equipped to deal with it.

Elsewhere in Canada, there are no medical resources on some first nations to test people who appear to be symptomatic. Support systems like community counselling and other programs have been withdrawn, and the mechanisms established to help other people cope with their special needs have disappeared. When our women try to reach out to each other with video or phone conferencing as other Canadians do, there is a lack of privacy, but of course the poorest among them do not have access to that kind of technology.

• (1420)

Our women are also resilient. In some communities, they are using donations to stock food banks and to ensure that the people who are most in need of help are getting it. In other—

**The Chair:** Ms. Whitman, I'm sorry to interrupt you. We're having a few technical issues with the translation.

That said, the five-minute time for your presentation is up. I'm sure you have more to say. Perhaps that will occur later on in our discussion, but for now we have to leave it there. Someone from technical support will probably give you a phone call while we go on with our meeting, and then we'll be back again.

**Ms. Lorraine Whitman:** All right. Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you. I'm sorry about that interruption.

Finally, we will have a five-minute intervention from Melanie Omeniho, from Women of the Métis Nation.

Melanie, please.

**Ms. Melanie Omeniho (President, Women of the Métis Nation - Les Femmes Michif Otipemisiwak):** Good afternoon.

I want to begin by thanking the standing committee for inviting Les Femmes Michif Otipemisiwak to speak here today. The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken up all of our lives, and it is critical that we come together to discuss the unique impacts it is having on Métis women and how to effectively respond to these evolving impacts.

I want to identify, too, that I'm on the land of Treaty 6 and Treaty 8 and the Métis homeland. I'm in Alberta.

One of the things that we believe, as women of the Métis Nation, that is really important is that we have a gendered, distinctions-based lens. That is absolutely needed in the federal government's response to this pandemic. The federal government has been responding to that distinctions-based lens, which has made it so that we, as Métis people, are able to develop unique things towards our dealing with this pandemic. Métis women need to be included in the decisions, conversations and work that is done as it relates to us. There can be nothing about us without us.

I want to take a brief moment to illustrate what we are seeing in our communities. In areas with limited access to medical care, Métis women risk contracting the virus when they use public transit. What compounds this even further is that many Métis women are caregivers to many family members, creating multi-generational households, and thus risk spreading the virus to at-risk individuals, such as grandparents and infants. This is especially true for the many Métis women who are front-line, essential workers and do not have the luxury of staying at home.

We are seeing in Fort McMurray further outbreaks of COVID-19 because of the man camps and the working structures around the oil and gas sectors. Fort McMurray is also the second Métis community to have experienced flooding during this pandemic, adding another layer of crisis on top of the one that the entire country is facing. Fort McMurray is one of the historical Métis communities in Alberta, along with Fort Vermilion, which also experienced the flooding.

We are seeing in many communities that certain software and technologies are required to participate in school programs, but because of funding limitations, the responsibility falls to the parents to provide these. Métis women and families who cannot afford this are concerned that their children are going to fall behind because school isn't going to be resuming before the fall, if it even resumes then.

Navigating this pandemic is especially challenging for those without a stable Internet connection or even a basic connection to the Internet.

In many of the communities, Métis women cannot protect themselves and their families because there is no soap, hand sanitizer or toilet paper to be found. Food insecurity is also a very real issue, and even flour is unavailable throughout many communities. This is increasing the already mounting stress, anxiety and depression that many Métis women feel.

It cannot be emphasized enough how important it is that a careful approach is taken to address the occurrences of domestic violence and the situations of abuse that are increasing because of the stressors brought by this pandemic. In fact, violence and abuse are made even more possible because of increased isolation, not just at home but in the rural communities where isolation is more acutely felt. Abuse is now going on without regular monitoring because of reduced reporting and the lack of community support, as many child protective services are temporarily closed. Better monitoring is especially important for youth who are aging out of care during this pandemic.

Our communities and families aren't in touch in the ways that they were before COVID-19 hit. When people aren't in touch, there is increased concern surrounding human trafficking and missing persons. If a Métis woman goes missing during this time, very few people will even know about it.

• (1425)

Canada's plan has expressly called for support for indigenous women, but rural and remote Métis women have considerably less access to shelters and sexual abuse centres. The federal government has prioritized funding supports for women's shelters and sexual assault centres, but more must be done to ensure that rural Métis women can reach their supports, during this time especially.

That said—

**The Chair:** Ms. Omeniho, we're at five minutes.

**Ms. Melanie Omeniho:** I can close at that for now.

**The Chair:** We'll have a lots of time through questioning to pick up any points we've missed.

Before we go to our six-minute question round, we had a couple of technical issues.

Ms. Zann, are you well connected once again? Okay, you're good.

Madam Clerk, are we looking after Ms. Whitman's technical issues?

**The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Evelyn Lukyniuk):** Yes. Perhaps we could hear a bit from Ms. Whitman right now so we can check the audio quality again to see if anything has improved.

Ms. Whitman.

**Ms. Lorraine Whitman:** Did you want me to continue?

We have some ideas in terms of what we can do quickly—

**The Chair:** I'm sorry, Ms. Whitman. We're just doing a sound check.

The interpreters are hearing you very well. It's better now.

**Ms. Lorraine Whitman:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** We'll go on with our questioning now.

For the six-minute round, we have Mr. Viersen, Mr. Powlowski, Ms. Bérubé and Ms. Gazan.

Mr. Viersen, please, you have six minutes.

**Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC):** Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

I've been engaged on the human trafficking file for as long as I've been elected, and what's concerning to me is that, particularly in Canada, 50% of the human trafficking cases involve first nations women. We are seeing right now, during the COVID pandemic, that many of the organizations that deal with helping the victims of human trafficking are, as is every organization in Canada, struggling with COVID and that their funding is no longer being continued going forward. I've just released a letter to the minister asking him to consider that.

Could NWAC in particular respond as to whether they have seen any increases in human trafficking cases during the COVID pandemic, and whether the funding is continuing to help them in this endeavour?

• (1430)

**Ms. Lorraine Whitman:** What we have noticed is more the violence, the domestic abuse. From what we have done with our surveys, our assessment as well as this online survey that we have, we've found 68% more abuse with our women, 64% more elder abuse, and another 64% more child abuse. It hasn't mentioned any more in regard to the human trafficking. It's more the abuse while being self-isolated and social distancing, where the individual is in the same home as their abuser.

**Mr. Arnold Viersen:** Okay. That's interesting.

Continuing on, have you heard from any of the organizations that you would typically work with in combatting human trafficking?

They've been reaching out to me. I just wonder whether you've been hearing anything from them.

**Ms. Lorraine Whitman:** No, I haven't heard any more about it, but I do know that the women are working more on the trafficking component.

With the social distancing, again, it's difficult to be able to be there to help them physically. We do have calls that are coming in. It's more in the line of abuse and domestic violence that we're seeing the increase escalate far more.

**Mr. Arnold Viersen:** How have the organizations been dealing with that? Given the fact that people aren't able to move around, have they been moving online or anything such as that?

**Ms. Lorraine Whitman:** We do have our survey that has been up, and in-house we have four of our elders answering calls online, whether they be from women experiencing violence or calls relating to suicide and what have you. We've been working in that area.

We've also put in proposals to assist us in being able to work with our grassroots. We have 13 offices in different provinces and we would mobilize the women so that they would be able to assist in whatever way they can, but the funding makes it difficult for the women on the ground to be able to mobilize. They take calls whenever they can from their area and give them best resources they can that are available to the women.

**Mr. Arnold Viersen:** Ms. Anderson-Pyrrz, do you have any comments around that?

**Ms. Hilda Anderson-Pyrrz:** I would say, especially from the perspective of indigenous women and girls from remote and isolated locations, it's really critical to ensure that supports that fund organizations that deal with human trafficking and sexual exploitation remain and increase. Many times when our women and girls leave our communities and go to urban populations, they're very vulnerable. Aside from COVID, the human trafficking is still proceeding but it's hidden much more now. We need to really ramp up our supports and do things a little differently to ensure that we're available to protect the lives of indigenous women and girls, and two-spirited people as well.

It's very disheartening to hear that funding is being cut to these very important organizations to help end human trafficking and sexual exploitation.

**The Chair:** We're right at time, Mr. Viersen.

Just before we go on to Mr. Powlowski, we continue to have some issues technically that may be resolved in part by having those who are not speaking click off their video. In that way, it really reduces the technical load and it allows for clearer translation. Perhaps we could do that.

I'll also keep an eye on the "raise hand" icons in case someone wants to come in, of course, anytime. As long as we can hear you, we're okay.

With those instructions, Mr. Powlowski, you have six minutes. Please go ahead.

• (1435)

**Mr. Marcus Powlowski (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.):** I don't know if I like this, Bob. It was bad enough to begin with. Now I'm looking at a bunch of names and hoping someone is out there.

Thanks to all the witnesses for coming.

In my recent lifetime—now it's changed and I'm a parliamentarian—I used to be a doctor and work in a number of fly-in communities: Nain, Labrador; Iqaluit; and Norway House for a few years, which isn't exactly fly-in but it's a very long road. I see Ms. Anderson-Pyrrz shaking her head. I don't know if she's from there. I know Anderson is a really common name in Norway House.

I really enjoyed working in those places, but I can see that if you have family problems, an abusive spouse, it's particularly difficult in isolated communities, partly because a lot of people are related, partly because everyone knows everyone. Maybe you have an abusive spouse but your spouse's cousin or brother is on the police force or in the band council, so it makes it that much more difficult. Maybe you could comment on that.

Before you do, let me go on to something I really wanted to get to. I think if you're in a difficult situation, in an abusive relationship, in those kinds of communities it's hard enough to begin with, partly because getting out of the community can be really hard. The cost of a plane ticket is beyond a lot of people's means. In my experience as a doctor, I've seen people so driven to despair that they've actually attempted suicide because at least then you get a flight out of the community. Even at the best of times, getting out of these communities when you're in a difficult situation is hard. It's that much harder now because of COVID-19 and the attempts to block off the communities for the sake of the safety of people in those communities, but once you block them off, it's harder to get out as well.

Maybe I could ask a bunch of the witnesses to comment on the problems faced under COVID-19, in particular by those isolated communities.

**The Chair:** Who would like to answer?

Ms. Anderson-Pyrz.

**Ms. Hilda Anderson-Pyrz:** Sure.

It's very difficult when indigenous women and girls and two-spirited people experience violence when they live in a remote, isolated location, particularly when it comes to providing adequate supports and resources and a shelter.

In Manitoba, we have only four shelters in all of the first nation communities, so that makes it more difficult. Many of the violence prevention programs are severely underfunded, as well as many of the other services, whether it be mental health or health care in our communities.

The remoteness and the isolation make it much more difficult to access outside supports and resources, and given the context of COVID, it's very challenging with flight schedules and the blockades that exist in our communities to prevent the spread of COVID.

We've done a lot of work within the Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak as well to share a lot of information on pandemic teams about including domestic violence plans in all the pandemic plans in our communities to ensure it is addressed. There are safety mechanisms that we can use to the best of our ability, given the underfunding that we receive and the lack of resources we're able to provide as a result of severe underfunding.

**The Chair:** Ms. Omeniho, did you want to respond as well?

**Ms. Melanie Omeniho:** Yes, I did. It is a significant issue for many of the women in our communities. They are not allowed out of their communities in most cases. In fact, there are even RCMP to keep them on curfews. They are extremely isolated, which creates really dangerous situations for some of these people.

As far as organizations receiving funding are concerned, we do believe there were a lot of organizations that were getting reduced funding. There aren't that many organizations actually on the ground delivering services at the best of times, but because of COVID-19, many of those that people had been relying on have actually closed their doors because they didn't have the necessary resources to deliver services. It has made it extremely challenging and somewhat dangerous for some women.

We're hearing about deaths in our community, and it's very disturbing and very concerning. We believe there needs to be ongoing, secure, stable funding for anybody who is delivering services to indigenous women, and that's part of what we are pushing forward on with the implementation of the missing and murdered indigenous women and girls process in the near future.

We are hoping there is more security, more access and more availability.

This is the other little plug that I want to do. I recognize that right now, because of the pandemic, we can only react to what's going on, but in the future there should be a lot more work done toward prepared planning for emergency response for indigenous women. It shouldn't be just us reacting to what's going on; we should be actually prepared to address issues in a more stable environment all the time.

• (1440)

**The Chair:** That brings us to time. Thank you very much.

Now it will be six minutes for Madame Bérubé,

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Sylvie Bérubé (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses here today. We really appreciate your presentations.

I represent the constituency of Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou. The constituency is very large and is home to many indigenous communities and indigenous women. I want to let you know that I was in Val-d'Or last September during the tabling of the report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, or NIMMIWG.

The report clearly states that indigenous women in Quebec most often experience indifference, and sometimes even contempt, while former colonial policies have infiltrated Quebec institutions.



Ms. Whitman, the pandemic is making things difficult for indigenous women. According to an APTN report, the current pandemic is increasing pressure on women's shelters and creating complications for these facilities because of physical distancing measures.

Can you elaborate on this reality, particularly with regard to the situation in Quebec?

[English]

**The Chair:** Who would like to answer that?

Ms. Whitman, go ahead.

**Ms. Lorraine Whitman:** Thank you.

I did get part of it by the time I found the translation. In regard to the violence that's occurring, you're certainly correct that with the shelters and what have you, it makes it far more difficult for our women to be able to find accommodation and make use of some of the services, especially with some of the shelters.

Some of them are not culturally related to the indigenous women, the Métis and the Inuit, so it makes it uncomfortable. At the same time, the shelters are facing this pandemic, which means they aren't able to take as many people into the shelters, in protection of the women and the children who are already in the centres. Of course, with new women coming in with children, it makes it even more distressing that some of the women's needs are not being met. Although I do understand there have been some rooms in hotels made available to accommodate the women, there are still women who are missing in these gaps that are occurring with this pandemic and the violence.

It's as though we're struck with two crises: the pandemic, and then the increase in violence.

[Translation]

**Ms. Sylvie Bérubé:** Thank you, Ms. Whitman.

What more could the government do—I'm thinking in particular of Indigenous Services Canada—to better help women who are victims of domestic violence? On that note, how could this department prevent domestic violence and violence against women?

[English]

**Ms. Lorraine Whitman:** We need sustainable, reliable income. As was mentioned, we're reacting to this, and with the murdered and missing indigenous women inquiry, we should be proactive and there should be dollars here so that we can start having preventive messaging and ways that we can meet the needs of our women. This isn't going to happen overnight, because this goes back to the colonization and back to the conclusion of the inquiry that this was genocide.

We need stable, immediate funding that will help. We know that, with the pandemic, if we have a second round, it could be worse than the first, from my understanding, so we need dollars and sustainable funding in order to meet the needs of our women, our children and our gender-diverse people, as well as a national action plan.

We're willing to be inclusive and give our ideas. We did a round table with the MMIWG. We had suggestions there that we submit-

ted to the government. However, we haven't heard anything back on the suggestions we made.

Thank you.

• (1445)

[Translation]

**Ms. Sylvie Bérubé:** Thank you, Ms. Whitman. On May 5, you expressed your disappointment with the Liberal government's implementation of the 231 calls to action in the NIMMIWG report.

In your opinion, how does the failure to implement these recommendations worsen the issue of domestic violence for indigenous women during this crisis?

[English]

**The Chair:** Ms. Whitman, you have one minute. Go ahead.

**Ms. Lorraine Whitman:** It makes a big difference in the line of violence that's occurring, because we need sustainable dollars. We need to be able to work together, and we need the inclusion of indigenous women to be able to make a step forward, with a plan that is made by the indigenous people for the indigenous people, a plan that is culturally related.

We have been given no dollars, even last year with the commemoration. In 2019, we had applied for commemoration dollars and we were refused. We had sent in proposals.

This is disheartening, when we have people who give their testimonies and open their hearts to what has happened. We have a 1,200-page inquiry report, yet we were told that we didn't meet the criteria. NWAC, the native organization, was at the very forefront with Sisters in Spirit, and we were at the forefront of the inquiry going ahead. I am still baffled as to why we were given no dollars in regard to the commemoration or dollars so that we could move forward for our betterment.

I do realize that the government has given more dollars out. The Prime Minister mentioned, just the other day, violence against Canadian women in Montreal and the event that just happened in my community of Mi'kmaq, but is there a gender base regarding our indigenous women, our children and our gender-diverse? I didn't see anything mentioned in his speech.

**The Chair:** I'm sorry to interrupt. We're at our time.

Ms. DeLaronde wanted to speak. I saw her hand go up, but perhaps it will wait until the next question.

Ms. Gazan, you're next. You have six minutes.

**Ms. Leah Gazan (Winnipeg Centre, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My questions will be directed at the coalition. I want to start by commending you for your presentation. It was powerful, and certainly important for this committee.

My first question is for you, Sandra. You spoke in your presentation about the need for a 24-7 low-barrier safe space. Could you expand on the need and tell us a little more about what that would look like?

**Ms. Sandra DeLaronde:** Thank you, Ms. Gazan.

First, I would like to say that there has been a pandemic of violence against indigenous women and girls for as long as this country has been in Confederation, and that pandemic did not receive any licence from government until the national inquiry. The failure to act on the calls to justice from the national inquiry has provided licence to individuals across the country, whether it be in domestic partnerships or in trafficking situations, to continue to devalue the lives of indigenous women and girls. That needs to be said.

Second, on your question about the 24-7 low-barrier safe space, what a safe space looks like is that it's not constrained by the barriers of shelters, which are generally for people in domestic relationships. A low-barrier safe space would be available for people who are not in domestic situations: LGBTQII individuals, people who are homeless, or people who are trafficked. Those individuals, today, cannot access a shelter.

Also, we know that violence is not limited to indigenous women and girls. It's across the country and across ethnicity. We want to ensure that safe space in Winnipeg is inclusive of all women and women-identifying individuals.

• (1450)

**Ms. Leah Gazan:** Thank you so much, Sandra.

I know you're very familiar with the calls for justice in the national inquiry. I want to speak specifically to call for justice 1.2.v.

As you know, the national inquiry is framed around human and indigenous rights and international conventions. How has the government fared in honouring its international obligations, such as its obligation to uphold human rights and indigenous rights in relation to respecting the dignity of indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQIA people?

**Ms. Sandra DeLaronde:** Historically, since Confederation, Canada has failed to acknowledge and adhere to basic principles of human rights when it comes to indigenous women and girls, hence the finding of genocide in the national inquiry. What's important to note is that any adherence by Canada to international human rights conventions has been because indigenous women have fought for their rights and have been recognized for the inclusion of those rights through the implementation of Bill C-31 and Bill S-3.

What's really important and critical right now is that this government has committed to implementing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. It's saying we can't do it now because there's a pandemic. This is the time to be doing it, and I call on the government and all parties to ensure that this declaration is implemented into law in Canada now.

**Ms. Leah Gazan:** Thank you very much, Sandra.

I'll move on to you, Hilda. As you know, we're coming up to the one-year anniversary of the national inquiry. The government, and let's hope it keeps its promise, has indicated that the national action plan would be released in June. Do you feel that families and organizations have been adequately consulted during this process?

**Ms. Hilda Anderson-Pyrz:** Absolutely not.

I can speak as someone who is on the front line in my role as manager of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Liaison Unit for the Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak, and

as someone who sits as the co-chair for the Manitoba MMIWG Coalition, hearing from families, survivors and two-spirited people in Manitoba.

Everybody is wondering what is happening. There has been little to no consultation, considering that Minister Bennett has often referred to Manitoba as ground zero with respect to the national tragedy of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls. It's very disheartening. Families and survivors shared stories with the national inquiry, which was put into motion by many women fighting for years and years. Not to be consulted and not to know what's happening really devalue the women and girls, survivors and two-spirited people who shared their testimony.

We need to ensure that these voices remain at the forefront, because these are the stories of their loved ones. These stories are sacred, and they should be consulted throughout the entire process, including in the development of a national action plan.

Shame on the Liberal government.

**Ms. Leah Gazan:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** We're at time, Ms. Gazan.

Thank you very much.

I'm sorry that I missed you again, Ms. Omeniho, but we're—

**Mr. Arnold Viersen:** Mr. Chair, I want to point out that I was very interested to hear the answer to that last question on the national inquiry and the consultation with family members, and things like that. I would just note that when we try to stray from COVID, we typically get shut down immediately, and so I—

• (1455)

**Ms. Leah Gazan:** I have a point of order, Mr. Chair. This is the only meeting that's dedicated to indigenous women, girls and two-spirit people. I hope the Conservatives choose not to, once again, waste their time with their own personal agenda and go astray from what this committee has agreed to do.

I did have a follow-up question; I did not have the time. I would ask him to respect the witnesses and the women here who are sharing their stories of violence and not use this as a time for a political platform.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We'll now move on to a five-minute round. We have Mr. Schmale up first.

Mr. Schmale, please go ahead.

**Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, for all your contributions here with us today.

I'll ask my first question, and I'll open it up to whoever wants to respond.

As we all know, health authorities in all three levels of government are encouraging people to stay at home, self-isolate, keep to their immediate family and not intermingle. I think we all agree that this is sound advice, particularly in the opening stages of this outbreak. But as many of you mentioned in your testimony, it didn't take into account the women and children who face domestic abuse. There has been some recognition of this by the federal government. Some of you, in your comments and your testimony, said that more needs to be done.

While money is available, can you tell the committee how exactly this money has translated into safe places for indigenous women and children? Again, I open this up to whoever wants to speak first.

**The Chair:** Who would like to reply?

Go ahead, Ms. DeLaronde.

**Ms. Sandra DeLaronde:** Money has not been made available directly to women and women-led organizations, indigenous-led women's organizations. I think that needs to happen. It hasn't happened yet, but it needs to happen now.

Thank you.

**Mr. Jamie Schmale:** Anyone else before I...?

**Ms. Lorraine Whitman:** Yes.

**The Chair:** Ms. Whitman, please go ahead.

**Ms. Lorraine Whitman:** I would also like to stress, with this... I mentioned the children, the women and the elder abuse.

Yes, the funding is so important, and we did sign an accord in 2019 in which the government, under the Crown, said that we would be at the same tables as those of our indigenous men leaders. That has not materialized. When we have gone for funding and have spoken to the ministers, we then have to go to a proposal base, and we still didn't receive any proposal-based funding. We are very resilient women and organizations.

Has a gender-based analysis been done on the funding that is going out to the different organizations? I believe that one should be done on the indigenous women for the funding that's going out.

**The Chair:** Mr. Schmale, Ms. Omeniho would like to respond as well.

**Mr. Jamie Schmale:** Okay, and then I have another question.

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Ms. Omeniho.

**Ms. Melanie Omeniho:** One of the issues I'd like to raise is that there has been funding going out to indigenous communities, and I recognize and acknowledge that. Within the Métis nation, there has been a tremendous amount of work done by our Métis nation governing people to try to address some of the issues of COVID-19. I mentioned before the issues of the flooding in our northern communities and the outbreak of COVID-19 in La Loche, in Saskatchewan, where there has been a great deal done.

However, you will note that none of the funding in relation to indigenous people has actually gone towards violence against indigenous women or the protection and safety of women and children.

Therefore, I do support my other indigenous sisters who are on these calls to state that there have been no resources brought for-

ward that are specific to indigenous women in relation to violence, with the exception of a small amount of money that has been given to shelters on reserve, and I think that's very shortsighted in many ways.

• (1500)

**The Chair:** Mr. Schmale, you have just about one minute.

**Mr. Jamie Schmale:** Okay, so I'll pivot off.

There was someone who was speaking in answer to the question of my friend from the NDP. I don't know who it was. I was trying to get my camera on. It was my fault.

Whoever that was, would they like to finish their thought?

**Ms. Leah Gazan:** On a point of order, that was Hilda.

Thank you, Jamie.

**Mr. Jamie Schmale:** You're welcome.

**The Chair:** We're right at time now. I'm sorry about that. Perhaps we'll come back to it again.

**Mr. Jamie Schmale:** I did have one minute. My preamble wasn't that long, was it?

**The Chair:** Well, I was being generous. Sorry about that. We'll move on. I'm sure we'll have an opportunity to get back to it.

Mr. Battiste, you have five minutes. Please go ahead.

**Mr. Jaime Battiste (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.):** Thank you.

First of all, Lorraine, you didn't get a chance to finish your overall comment. Before I start my question, I want to give you the opportunity to finish your statement at the front. I'm sure you were coming to the conclusion, with some recommendations for the government. Would you like to finish that?

**Ms. Lorraine Whitman:** Thank you.

I just want to make sure that when we're working within funding and whatever, we're inclusive, as indigenous women, Métis and Inuit. Because we work with those women, we know where we're going, and we need to have that inclusivity with the government.

We're also urging members to put pressure on the government to listen to us and keep its commitment to release the action plan. We are asking the members of this committee to pressure the government to respond to the needs of indigenous women, girls and gender-diverse people, and with urgency, as it has been responding to the plight of other Canadians who have also been affected by COVID-19. We have gone through this for hundreds of years. We need that respect, and we need to be able to work and be inclusive with the funding mechanism and a GBA.

*Wela'lin, Jaime.*

**Mr. Jaime Battiste:** I'm from a Mi'kmaw reserve. One of the things I often wonder about is whether the communication is getting to the people who need it, the most vulnerable, when you talk about indigenous women on reserve and indigenous women in the municipalities.

How are we communicating with the people who are the most vulnerable about the options they have in terms of safe places they can go to? Would you be able to give me a sense of how that is communicated? What is the strategy for communicating with those people who are the most vulnerable, whether it be urban or on reserve?

Anyone can answer.

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Hilda.

**Ms. Hilda Anderson-Pyrz:** I would like to answer that.

Infrastructure for communication in many of our remote, isolated communities is very difficult, when we think of the Internet, cellular service and telephone lines, so it makes it extra difficult to get messaging out there. We have to be creative in how we're able to get messaging out. You build community contacts on the ground that you're dialoguing with in any way you can, because many times, even if there are telephone services, they're interrupted.

You also build meaningful relationships with individuals who have experienced violence. There's a trusting relationship, so there's an open line. Many times, once you have that established relationship, they share with other women and girls, and other individuals who are experiencing violence, that you're a safe place to come to. It's the same in many urban environments, too.

Right now, what's really impacting communication out there is that many services are impacted by COVID-19, with the physical distancing, working remotely and such things. That has created a real challenge, and we need to try to look at how we can deliver the services better.

As an essential worker myself, I'm still out there and I'm still connecting with communities and doing what I can to help support indigenous women, girls and two-spirited people who are experiencing violence or losing a loved one through a homicide. It's very challenging.

**The Chair:** Ms. DeLaronde, did you want to add something? I see your hand.

• (1505)

**Ms. Sandra DeLaronde:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I also want to add that there is a real disparity in access to the Internet, to Wi-Fi. Even this week, as we were dealing with an individual in a situation of violence who did not have access, we had to speak through a third party in order to support her.

As Hilda noted, it becomes really challenging to meet with and support women in communities, whether the community be in a remote and rural area, or, as it is also the case in terms of accessibility, in an urban environment. That needs to be addressed, and it can be addressed.

**The Chair:** Mr. Battiste, you have less than one minute.

**Mr. Jaime Battiste:** I just want to thank the people who are on right now for their important work.

As a last question regarding women's shelters, what type of relationship do they have? Do they have a collaborative effort where they have a national voice through NWAC, or through any type of

institution or advocacy, where they can directly make recommendations to government?

**The Chair:** We're beyond the five-minute mark right now. That will take a bit of an answer. Maybe we can come back to that.

We'll go to Mr. Zimmer now, for five minutes.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC):** Mr. Chair, thank you for the opportunity.

I have a question for Ms. Omeniho. You brought up some really concerning problems that we had actually seen. I'm the northern affairs critic, so it's part of my responsibility to see what the PPE situation is for the territories and northern Canada. I was very alarmed to see that the national emergency strategic stockpile had somewhat seemed to evaporate.

The problem you brought up is that there was this assumption in many of our communities that there was this stockpile they could rely on, so if they made the request from the stockpile, the masks and the ventilators would arrive. Then, even one of our reserves just north of Fort St. John, where I live, was left scrambling to get hand sanitizer, masks and cleaning supplies from Canadian Tire, Walmart and all these other places, when we were all of the understanding that there was this equipment waiting for us.

You also brought up one thing that affected one of our reserves too. As you mentioned, many of these community members are caregivers for their elders, so not having this equipment really puts them at risk, and the elders as well. I'm really alarmed by that.

I just want you to speak to that, and I guess the next question after the response is, where do we go from here? We certainly don't want to see this happen again.

Go ahead, Ms. Omeniho.

**Ms. Melanie Omeniho:** Thank you.

Being Métis, we had a significant issue, because many of the resources that were available through Indigenous Services Canada actually went to the first nation treaty places. I have no idea how they were disbursed or if there were even that many, because there were also crises in the hospitals and things were being collected for there. But it did create a significant issue in our communities.

I know that many of our Métis women throughout western Canada have been busy making masks and sending them out to people, trying to prevent issues, but things like hand sanitizer.... To this day, actually, I don't think people can buy disinfectant wipes, even if they want to. Those things are causing serious issues.

In some of our communities, as you well know, the messages are mixed. We talked about communication earlier. There are mixed messages. Do we isolate or don't we isolate? Are we protected? Some of the northern communities thought that if they isolated and didn't let other people into their communities they would be okay, and we've had massive outbreaks in some of those communities. In fact, we've had young people dying, which is very traumatizing for us as well.

I do support and understand...but we need to be better prepared for anything, moving forward. We are still looking for resources, even thermometers. We can't get thermometers. For people who are at risk and need to take their temperatures to make sure they're okay, those resources are not even available.

• (1510)

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** As a follow-up question to what you said, again, I think we are all alarmed by.... There's been some speculation that what was given to China was our complete national emergency strategic stockpile. It was all given away, essentially, and it left us with no supplies for our own people.

That said, we are looking forward and we need to make sure this doesn't happen again.

What would you suggest we do? We talk about the groups as being somewhat separate: the Métis who are not necessarily affiliated to a band and don't have that same sort of governance. We really need your solution to this, because we need to make sure it doesn't happen again. What would be some of the solutions?

I know you only have a few minutes left to say what you're going to say, but can you submit your ideas to my office or to this committee? Often the people who know how to fix it best are the ones who are in the trenches with the problems right now.

**The Chair:** That's a good suggestion. Thanks, Mr. Zimmer.

Melanie, I'll give you one minute for the response.

**Ms. Melanie Omenihō:** We absolutely can make some suggestions, because we have some ideas about how we need to make sure that going forward this never repeats itself again.

We will do a written submission to you to make sure that those things are addressed. We actually have a few other things that we'd like to bring forward, which we just haven't had the opportunity to do today.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** I'm happy to help you do that and to be a part of that.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We have a five-minute round once again, with Ms. Zann. Go ahead, please.

You're on mute.

**Ms. Lenore Zann (Cumberland—Colchester, Lib.):** Sorry, it takes a while to get that mute thing off.

Hello, everybody. Hello, ladies. It's really good to see all of you. Thank you so much.

*Wela'lin*, from the unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq here in Truro, Nova Scotia, close to Millbrook First Nation.

As you know, we've been going through a terrible time here with a recent awful shooting that, bit by bit, we are finding out had very much to do with somebody who had violent tendencies—domestic violence—on many occasions and was not reported. In the end, it led to a massive shooting where 22 innocent people were killed.

Many of the women I'm working with and speaking with here in the province are very concerned about domestic violence. Many of us have experienced abuse ourselves, and we are well aware and well experienced, unfortunately, with domestic abuse. We feel that for generations now, society has not looked at this issue as an important one. They feel that whatever happens inside the domicile, the house, is the land of the king of the house and the women are part of the chattel.

I would say that it goes right across this country, and to other countries as well.

So, I think it's time that we all worked together on the issue of femicide. Missing and murdered indigenous women and others is a huge problem. To be honest, I believe that femicide is a huge problem here in Canada. I think it's time we all worked together on coming up with a solution.

I know that the minister for the status of women, Miryam Monsef, is very keen to help with this, as am I, as is Carolyn Bennett as the Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations. Anything we can do to try to put an end to this other pandemic, as you called it, we're only too willing to do and to listen on if it will make things better and change the way things are done here in Canada.

One thing I noticed in my particular area, Millbrook First Nation, is that they are having trouble accessing funding for women who are escaping violence on reserve. They can tap into the funds for off reserve quite easily, but because the council is actually closed, and the council members are not in council right now, they're having difficulty trying to access that funding.

Lorraine, are you finding that as well across Canada? Is that part of the problem? How can we fix it?

• (1515)

**Ms. Lorraine Whitman:** That is a problem. We're finding that the resources and the services that are normally available in our first nations communities aren't available due to the closures. The women are feeling like, "Where do we go from here?" Because of the social distancing, they're not able to....

We have been working at our national level to try to have resiliency centres. We need support there for our resiliency centres for our women.

**Ms. Lenore Zann:** Right. You've got it.

**Ms. Lorraine Whitman:** We would like to have one in every province and territory, because of the importance of the vulnerable women, girls and two-spirited people. That's another area we certainly need to look into, to be able to give the support and the services to the women.

**Ms. Lenore Zann:** That's a very good point. Thank you.

If you would like to take a meeting by Zoom or something at some point maybe next week, with me and with the Nova Scotia Native Women's Association, I would be really happy to talk to you about that one here.

**The Chair:** Ms. Zann, Ms. DeLaronde had her hand up.

We have a minute left. Would you allow Ms. DeLaronde to respond to you?

**Ms. Lenore Zann:** Please.

**The Chair:** Go ahead.

**Ms. Mumilaaq Qaqqaq (Nunavut, NDP):** On a point of order, Chair, my apologies, but can I just confirm that we're at five-minute times?

**The Chair:** My five minutes shows 3:18, which is within—

**Ms. Mumilaaq Qaqqaq:** It's been very wonky today. Some people have been under and you're cutting them off. Some people have been way over and have not been cut off.

My thing says five minutes, and I just wanted to bring that to the attention of the committee.

**The Chair:** I'm sorry about that, but it's very difficult to coordinate everyone while looking at a digital clock, looking at the raised hands, and not wanting to interrupt some answers that are very important. I'm doing the best I can. I would appreciate your tolerance of my ineptitude.

The time is up on this round.

Our next round is two and half minutes, with Ms. Michaud and Ms. Qaqqaq.

Ms. Michaud, from the Bloc, you have two and half minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Kristina Michaud (Avignon—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, BQ):** Good afternoon.

I want to thank the witnesses for joining us.

My question is for you, Ms. Whitman.

At this time, we aren't yet able to properly document the impact of the pandemic. However, based on our experience, we know that this type of crisis increases the level of violence, particularly violence against women. We saw that the Fédération des maisons d'hébergement pour femmes in Quebec is expecting the worst. The number of calls to the SOS domestic violence line has increased by 15% in recent weeks. My constituency is home to two Mi'kmaq

communities, Listuguj and Gesgapegiag. In the past 30 years, four indigenous women have been murdered in these communities. We know that violence occurs in these communities, particularly in times of crisis.

Earlier, my Bloc Québécois colleague, Ms. Bérubé, asked what more we could do in this time of crisis, what more could the government do. You also spoke about an immediate investment and a national action plan. You said that you had suggestions for the government, and I'd like to hear them.

[*English*]

**Ms. Lorraine Whitman:** Thank you very much.

First of all, I know we mentioned the action plan, what we've been doing with the dollars that we have at our national office. We have been taking dollars from other areas. To deal with this COVID crisis, we wanted to start making masks, which we have done. We have purchased material for the women to make the masks so that there will be some protection there, so that they will have that ease of protection, but we haven't been given any dollars. In answer to that, we need to be included when dollars are given out. We need to be included in the plans, and when there are dollars given out. We need significant dollars to be able to be proactive, not reactive, and those are the areas we're trying to be as proactive in as we can.

That's why these resiliency centres...and that's following 7.1 to 7.9 of the calls for justice. That is to be able to give the support, the need and the empowerment back to the women so that we will be able to work together. There's another area, the financial component, so that they can increase their financial situation and the standard that they're in. We certainly need the funding and the resiliency centres to be able to support our women in all the provinces and territories. That's for the day programs, as well as an increase in indigenous shelters, to meet the cultural component of the women, girls and gender-diverse people who we—

• (1520)

**The Chair:** Thank you. We're at time.

Ms. Qaqqaq, you have two and a half minutes. Please go ahead.

**Ms. Mumilaaq Qaqqaq:** Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to all of the witnesses who have given us your wonderful knowledge and experiences. As a fellow indigenous woman, I know that these are very difficult things to talk about, but we must talk about them.

My questions are for the coalition, just to get us started off. These challenges sit right at the intersection of multiple departments at the federal level. Can you talk more about the difficulties you have faced with getting the departments to work effectively together?

Ms. DeLaronde, if you could reply, that would be great.

**Ms. Sandra DeLaronde:** Thank you.

It has been difficult. We've had, for many years, a proposal for a 24-7, and we had not received any support for that 24-7 prior to the pandemic. This pandemic has exacerbated the need, and it's a challenge for us, because we do this work as volunteers on behalf of our community. I would say it's near to impossible. It has been near to impossible.

**Ms. Mumilaaq Qaqqaq:** Ms. Anderson-Pyrz, is there anything you would like to add to that?

**Ms. Hilda Anderson-Pyrz:** Yes, I would like to add that many times when we work with different government departments, they are very paternalistic and they do not respect the indigenous knowledge that we carry as indigenous women, girls and two-spirited people, and do not allow us to lead many projects. It's very restrictive. I think it's really time for governments to recognize that we have the answers within us as a community of indigenous women, girls and two-spirited people. Given our cultural practices and our knowledge, we know what we need and how to go about creating that change.

That being said, we also need adequate resources that are long term and sustainable. The lives of indigenous women and girls should not be dependent upon project funding. That is unrealistic and it's killing our women, girls and two-spirited people.

**The Chair:** I believe—

**Ms. Mumilaaq Qaqqaq:** Thank you both so much.

Mr. Chair, if I have the time—according to my clock I have about 30 seconds—I'd like to give a notice. On a future date, I will move the following motion:

That, given the recent resignation of Cathy Bennett from the federal government's COVID-19 Supply Council due to a conflict of interest since she is Chair of the Board of Dynamic Air Shelters, a company that currently has a contract with Indigenous Services Canada; the continued lack of transparency for predominantly Indigenous communities with respect to the delivery of supplies and resources—

Sorry. I clicked something....

**The Chair:** I'm sorry. You're well over the time, Ms. Qaqqaq.

**Ms. Mumilaaq Qaqqaq:** Okay. That will be sent out to the committee.

Thank you, Chair.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We have five-minute rounds now, with Mr. Dalton, Mr. van Koverden, Mr. Viersen and Ms. Damoff.

Mr. Dalton, you are up for five minutes. Go ahead, please.

**Mr. Marc Dalton (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge, CPC):** Thank you very much. I'm pleased to be here.

Thank you to all the witnesses who are sharing their knowledge here today.

I'm substituting for Gary Vidal, and I'm glad to be joining the committee today. I'm the member of Parliament for Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge in the greater Vancouver area and the traditional territories of Katzie First Nation and Kwantlen First Nation. I am Métis and a member of the Métis Nation base B.C., and locally, the Golden Ears Métis Society.

As we find throughout Canada, and in B.C. in particular, about 75% of indigenous peoples live off reserve, particularly in the urban centres. In my riding, surprisingly, the indigenous people are the largest, if you want to say it, group of people, more than the Chinese, Indo-Canadians or anything like that. It's really very surprising for a suburban riding. It's about 4,000 people, of which about two-thirds are Métis.

I was talking earlier with Chief Grace Cunningham of the Katzie First Nation, and she expressed the concern that funding and supports for her people are not for those off the reserve. For example, they might reside a few blocks away, but the funding, the supports, are not there. They feel that they're being left behind.

Lorraine, I'm wondering if you want to perhaps make a few comments regarding supports for urban indigenous peoples, particularly women.

• (1525)

**Ms. Lorraine Whitman:** Thank you.

Yes, I believe that with the dollars base for our women, there has to be a gender-based analysis when it comes to dollars. We're seeing funding that's being given out, but it's to just one source. It doesn't give the definite area where the funding is going. With regard to our indigenous women—our children, our girls and our gender base—we need to be able to make sure that each and every one of them are taken care of and not forgotten.

As it was mentioned earlier, we're always running through hoops to get proposals in, and then not to be able to hear from the proposals that have been given.... I know when anything comes on my desk, I will let them know that, yes, I've received it. However, it's not that way when we put in proposals. We don't hear from them or we're not given the dollars, yet when we receive what funding we do receive, when our report is due, they're on the line asking us for the report or our funding will be disrupted. That adds extra stress on the added stress that we have as well, working with our women, our girls and our gender-diverse. It makes it difficult that the funding is not there for us women. We need to be inclusive in order to give our women what they need.

We need to go back to the matriarch society that we once were and know that we are important in the whole scope of this.

**Mr. Marc Dalton:** That's great, Lorraine. Thank you very much.

There are about 600,000 Métis in Canada, of which about 75,000 are in British Columbia. There was recently an announcement of \$305 million for supports for indigenous people in this time of COVID, of which only \$15 million was for off-reserve indigenous people and Métis.

I'm wondering, Melanie, if perhaps you can share how you feel about this. Is it an appropriate distribution, allocation of the funding? Maybe you could make a few comments on that.

**Ms. Melanie Omeniho:** Thank you for that opportunity.

There have been very few resources that have been able to go to urban indigenous issues and urban Métis people. I recognize that there have not been the necessary supports to even deal.... I live in Edmonton. I appreciate the British Columbia issues as well. However, we're in one of the largest indigenous urban centres in Edmonton, and there's been very little, if any, funding at all.

I know that when the federal government came to us as a national indigenous women's organization, we supported the money for COVID-19 going to grassroots community organizations. We were pushing for that and hoping there was going to be more of that, so that people delivering services on the ground would have those resources available to them.

**The Chair:** Thanks for your answer. That brings us to time.

Sorry, Ms. DeLaronde, I didn't have an opportunity to respond to your hand.

We go to Mr. van Koeverden now for five minutes. Please, go ahead.

• (1530)

**Mr. Adam van Koeverden (Milton, Lib.):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

It's a privilege to hear your stories. I want to thank the four strong indigenous women witnesses today for their contributions.

I want to acknowledge the intersectionalities of the impact and also say that I know I speak for everybody on this committee when I say that we are eager to help. We want to try to make things better, and your feedback and perspective and insight, and the feedback and perspective from the two indigenous women who serve on this community, Ms. Gazan and Ms. Qaqqaq, are super valuable in that pursuit.

The purpose of these forums is to provide feedback and criticism and recommendations, and I thank you for that so far. I don't want to talk for the duration of my five minutes. I want to hear from you and if I could, I'd just ask for some feedback on youth mental health.

I am the parliamentary secretary for youth, and I would love to hear from you on what we can be doing better to serve this very vulnerable section of the population in Canada, because youth mental health is something that comes up on every one of my youth calls.

Thank you so much for your feedback today, and I thank you in advance for your answers.

**The Chair:** Who would like to respond?

**Ms. Hilda Anderson-Pyrz:** I would.

I think youth mental health is really critical, especially when we look at indigenous girls and our youth who are living in remote, isolated communities as well as in other first nation communities. There was a mental health crisis in many of our communities even

prior to COVID-19, with the high rates of youth suicide. In order to address that, we need to ensure that adequate supports and resources are put into place and that they are culturally based, because western programs do not address the needs of indigenous people, and we must start to recognize that.

I reiterate that the answers rest within the communities. We need to ensure that there is access to culture, to language and to education that is based on traditional knowledge. We need all these really important things. Poverty plays a huge part in the challenges related to mental health and youth, so we must address poverty in our communities.

**The Chair:** Ms. Omeniho, do you want to respond?

**Ms. Melanie Omeniho:** Yes, thank you.

Actually, thank you, Hilda, for that. I absolutely support what you said.

It's really important when we're dealing with our youth to understand that a lot of the communication even for them to be able to resource or find supports has not been youth friendly. Many people don't understand the messages and haven't been getting the communication to youth necessary to help protect them through COVID-19, which is very disturbing and concerning because some of them are at extreme risk.

**The Chair:** Ms. DeLaronde, you have your hand up.

**Ms. Sandra DeLaronde:** Yes, thank you.

There are a couple of things I want to note, particularly in the time of COVID deaths.

In addition to what my colleagues have said, additional support is needed to assist children and youth with their school work. That means having access to infrastructure and to tutoring but also supporting the parents as they support the children as they learn from home. It also means focusing from birth forward on supporting families in positive ways that integrate culture and love and learning into their daily practice, rather than trying to fix things at the end. Work on preventative processes. That is what I would recommend.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** You have one minute left, Mr. van Koeverden.

**Mr. Adam van Koeverden:** Ms. Whitman, did we have a chance to hear from you on youth?

**Ms. Lorraine Whitman:** It's very important that we look at the youth, especially where the violence is. Youth and the children are still in the home where the violence exists. We need to really take charge and be able to implement and be proactive so that we can assist our youth, because they are our future. They need proper tools to be able to deal with what we're going through.



Again, I don't think the education or the systems are out there to be able to support our youth at this time, and we need a lot of work to be done in that area.

• (1535)

**Mr. Adam van Koevorden:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Mr. Viersen, I have you on my schedule. I'm not sure if there was a change.

Mr. Viersen, are you there, for five minutes?

Mr. Dalton, would you like to step in for Mr. Viersen?

Go ahead.

**Mr. Marc Dalton:** I have a question regarding accessibility to PPE and masks. I know there were some comments on that a little earlier.

These are getting to hospitals and other locations, but as we open up our country from COVID, economically and in a variety of ways, what are the needs? Are there significant gaps? One of you mentioned Métis women who are making masks and all that.

Can you elaborate as far as how prepared we are? Are we ready to go forward in these practical ways? What can the government do on this?

I'll open it to anyone who would like to address this. Thank you.

**The Chair:** Ms. Whitman, I see you have your hand up.

Go ahead, please.

**Ms. Lorraine Whitman:** We have put in dollars from our own funds to be able to do masks, but those are the medical masks. We need to be able to give our women, our elders, that peace that at least they are being comforted by the mask.

As well, we have single moms who may have three or four children. In order for them to go out, they need a mask, because they are afraid of bringing the virus home to their children. It's not economical to take the children with them because they can't go in shopping as well, so there is this seriousness.

I don't think we are equipped if we have a second wave. This virus has been what was expected, and there should be dollars available for the women at home, the moms and the elders and the vulnerable, as well as the ones with addictions. We need to be able to take care of all of our people, and I don't think we're equipped at this time.

**The Chair:** Ms. DeLaronde, you had your hand up.

**Ms. Sandra DeLaronde:** I want to note that there is no support for indigenous women in any urban area, and probably not in remote areas, but Hilda can speak to that.

There is no PPE and there is no distribution process. If we are talking about reopening, then we know indigenous women and their families will maintain that vulnerability and will be at the highest risk for contracting the virus.

We are not prepared. Indigenous women need to be protected, and they need those resources in order to provide that protection.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** You have another minute or so left.

**Mr. Marc Dalton:** We've talked a bit about the urban side. What about in the rural communities, maybe up north? Do you have any comments about that?

With regard to support, would you say it's the same story on the rural side and northern communities as it is on the urban, as far as the needs, or is it even more pronounced?

**The Chair:** Ms. Anderson-Pyrz, go ahead.

**Ms. Hilda Anderson-Pyrz:** I would say it is even more pronounced. When we look at urban areas, there is access to different stores that on occasion will have PPE equipment, but when we look at remote isolated locations, it's difficult to adequately resource even essential services.

When we look at providing community members with masks and PPE equipment, if borders and stuff are starting to open up, there is a big risk there. We really need to lobby the federal government to ensure that PPE equipment is made available and is readily accessible to all indigenous people, regardless of where they live, because it will protect their lives.

• (1540)

**The Chair:** Thank you. That brings us to time on that.

Ms. Damoff, please go ahead for five minutes.

**Ms. Pam Damoff (Oakville North—Burlington, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to start by acknowledging that I am on the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation.

I want to thank all of you ladies for joining us today. I wish we had a lot more time, and I wish I had more time.

To the ladies from Manitoba, Minister Vandal's office has reached out to you. Please watch for that. He'd very much like to speak to you both with regard to your concerns. Ms. Gazan brought them up yesterday in the House.

I also want to clarify that PPE off reserve is distributed by the provincial government. I know that's frustrating. We try to support them by accessing the material for them to distribute, but the actual distribution in urban settings and off reserve is provincial.

What I want to talk about ties into that, with the different jurisdictions. We've provided \$55 billion over 10 years for a national housing strategy to try to end homelessness. That flows through the province and then to the municipality. We know there's a desire to end homelessness in local areas. I was speaking to Jesse Thistle on the weekend, and he said people want to end homelessness but they don't want to end indigenous homelessness. I would argue that when you talk about indigenous women who are homeless, it's even worse.

We've done an okay job of providing funding to violence against women shelters, but not shelters that cater to homeless indigenous women or women who may have an addiction or other things that mean they cannot access them.

I would love to hear from all of you on how we could better support and get more acceptance of the need to support indigenous women who are homeless, because they end up murdered, missing or in prison.

**Ms. Hilda Anderson-Pyrz:** We immediately need to look at implementing the call for justice 4.5, the guaranteed annual livable income. We also need to look at colonization and its impact.

Many of those women are homeless as a result of the impact of colonization. We need to start supporting families from a very young age, and providing all the resources that are needed before women and girls end up in vulnerable situations and are homeless. If we can do that as a country, we will be doing something very powerful. We can't look at why they are on the streets now and why they are homeless. They're very vulnerable there and susceptible to all forms of violence.

We need to look at how we can do better as a country and not try to address something after it becomes a really high-risk situation for indigenous women and girls. We need to start at a very young age and provide adequate resources. It breaks my heart that we're always looking at trying to save our women and girls. Why can we not give them an environment they can thrive in and not have to worry about where their next meal is coming from and where they're going to sleep? We need to do better as a country.

**Ms. Pam Damoff:** There are two parts to the problem. One is preventing women from getting there in the first place but if they don't have access to culturally appropriate places to go to heal, it's very difficult for them to get out of that cycle of poverty and homelessness.

**Ms. Hilda Anderson-Pyrz:** Many times, as indigenous women who are leaders in our communities, when we want to develop our own programs, because we know in our hearts many of us have had similar experiences to our sisters who are homeless and have found ways to heal, when we try to share those ideas and try to access long-term sustainable funding, we're continuously denied to help our sisters who are struggling and to provide culturally based programs that are indigenous-led. It's time the government really hears our voices, takes what we're saying and puts it into action.

**Ms. Pam Damoff:** I only have 30 seconds left, if someone wants to jump in.

**The Chair:** Ms. Omeniho, you had your hand up.

**Ms. Melanie Omeniho:** One of the issues I'd like to raise at this point is that we find many of the women who struggle with the issue of homelessness generally also end up involved in the child welfare system, because they cannot afford to maintain homes for their kids. Living in urban environments, where they very often run to from rural communities, they can't afford the rents and things that are available. There is not enough housing support for indigenous women within many areas and centres.

• (1545)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. We're at five minutes there.

We'll go to a round of two and a half minutes now, with Ms. Bérubé.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Sylvie Bérubé:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have a question for you, Ms. Omeniho. What should the federal government do to ensure the safety of women, girls, LGBTQ2 people and indigenous families during the pandemic?

[*English*]

**Ms. Melanie Omeniho:** I think they have to work with the organizations at the grassroots level, and I think they need to fund them. There have been a lot of resources given to other counterparts who are doing many things. We hear about that all the time, whether it's business loans, resources from various other institutions or wage subsidies, but there has been no work done towards ensuring that the people in service delivery processes can continue to deliver services to our communities. They're not being funded and supported.

I really support the fact that it has to happen. Money needs to go to these organizations that are at the grassroots level so that they are able to deliver services to the people who are there.

**The Chair:** We have about a minute, Ms. DeLaronde, if you'd like to carry on.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Sylvie Bérubé:** In your opinion, are the current financial resources or the resources announced by the federal government enough to meet the need for shelter spaces for women, girls, LGBTQ2 people, first nations, Inuit and Métis people?

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Ms. DeLaronde.

**Ms. Sandra DeLaronde:** Thank you for that question. The resources that have been designated for COVID-19 and for shelters—and I have to say “shelters”, not spaces—is not reaching the indigenous women's community. In order for change to occur, I think these processes must be indigenous-led processes. Even now, for the amount of money received, between federal or provincial shelters there is a disparity in that amount of money, and they are always at capacity and they need renovations, etc.

**The Chair:** That brings us to our time. Thanks, Ms. DeLaronde.

Ms. Gazan, you have two and a half minutes. Please go ahead.

**Ms. Leah Gazan:** Mr. Chair, my last question is for the coalition again, and specifically for you, Hilda. You mentioned that there are only 46 women's shelters in the country and only four in Manitoba. Clearly, this is a crisis. I know. I live in Manitoba.

Where are the gaps? What needs to happen immediately to protect indigenous women and girls and 2SLGBTQIA people?

**Ms. Hilda Anderson-Pyrz:** The gaps exist in the infrastructure to provide these safe spaces, as well as capacity development, especially when we look at our first nation communities, even in urban environments. Many of the same challenges we experience in our communities exist in urban environments too. Indigenous women and girls and two-spirited and gender-diverse people are often forgotten in program development or in accessing those resources. Ending poverty.... I always say this, because we need to end poverty. Many of our women and girls end up in these vulnerable situations because of poverty.

I want to reiterate that the federal government needs to immediately implement call for justice 4.5 for a guaranteed annual livable income. If you can find safe spaces to live, if you're able to thrive and to grow and to access different resources that are readily available or are currently being developed, that is so critical.

If we can't have that, and if we can't develop those from an indigenous lens so that we're at the table and we're making those decisions and we're developing those plans, you're going to continue to see extreme levels of violence, because we cannot accept paternalistic approaches anymore. We have our own ways, and they need to be respected to protect our women and girls and two-spirited people.

• (1550)

**Ms. Leah Gazan:** Thank you very much for that.

Does anybody want to add to that?

Ms. Whitman, would you like to add to that?

**Ms. Lorraine Whitman:** Sure.

I agree with what was just said. Truly, we do have to look at it through a matriarchal lens and not the paternal one, which we've done so much of. It has caused so many problems within and it's one area we really have to look at. That was mentioned at the end of the national inquiry report as a finding. Of course, genocide was mentioned as well, and I have to go into that as well because that's an important component.

I think in Canada we can be a shining light if we work together with women and are able to nip it in the bud now and start moving forward in a positive way.

**Ms. Leah Gazan:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Gazan and Ms. Whitman.

Committee, we have not enough time to do the next five-minute round, but we can get in one more questioner. That will be Mr. Schmale. Then we'll wrap up the session.

You have five minutes, Mr. Schmale, starting now.

**Mr. Jamie Schmale:** Thank you, but I think it's Mr. Zimmer, believe it or not.

**The Chair:** His name wasn't on my list, but okay.

Go ahead, Mr. Zimmer.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** Thank you once again, Chair.

My question is again for you, Ms. Omeniho. We talked about the PPE situation with regard to the Métis being that unique group that

sometimes has difficulty in terms of getting resources. I almost feel like asking Ms. Damoff a question, as she said that PPE is the responsibility of the provincial governments off reserve. On reserve it's the responsibility of the federal government, and we haven't seem much PPE get to those reserves. That also needs to be part of the plan to fix, because we saw some of our local reserves scrambling to find their own PPE during the crisis.

Ms. Omeniho, what do you see needs to be done right now? We've seen some of the programs, the CERB and different other things. What would help with the everyday lives of Métis women and girls? What could be done right now? Do you find that the programs currently offered are fitting the bill, or are there some gaps there as well? We've heard about gaps from citizens, from constituents in my local riding, but what specific gaps do you see, especially with regard to Métis women and girls?

**Ms. Melanie Omeniho:** There are considerable gaps when it comes to Métis women and girls. There are food security issues that are going on that are still affecting them. Maybe in an average world, if everybody had access to money and resources, they could try to access those kinds of things. You know, people can say what they want, but groceries are going up. I feel like I'm a more privileged person than some, because I'm able to buy my own groceries. If you can't find them in the store or if they hike the prices so high that you can't afford them, what are people who don't have that kind of income doing to be able to supplement what they have?

Going forward into this new transition, where they're trying to open things up, we do still need PPE. I know that some small amounts have been leaking out from different places, but we need to be able to educate our people about the importance of protecting themselves as things open up. I agree with what Lorraine mentioned earlier, that in the second round things will be a lot worse if we don't have people able to protect and defend themselves against this virus.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** Ms. Omeniho, would you say the distribution network is there? Again, I hope you will write to the committee as soon as you can on the broader answer to this, but in terms of that distribution network, where should that PPE go specifically so that essentially the equipment gets into the hands of the Métis, to the people who need it, to the caregivers you mentioned and to the elders? Where's the best place for that PPE?

• (1555)

**Ms. Melanie Omeniho:** I'll be really honest and say that the last place should be the provinces. The provinces very, very often tend to work with the treaty organizations, even though they're supported federally by Indigenous Services Canada.

Number one, I think there can be a coordinated effort amongst our Métis communities and our Métis organizations. There are lots of them. I know that they're trying really hard to do food hampers and grocery cards, things that are tangible for people and that make a difference. If they have access to those resources, it will be far easier to get things out to our communities rather than have them go through a large bureaucratic process.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** Thank you again for that. I think that's the answer I was looking for. We can have an answer that looks great on paper, but if that mask, that N95 mask, isn't making it to that 23-year-old nurse who is caring for an elder, then it all doesn't matter. We need to make sure that they get to people in a timely fashion.

Again, we look forward to your response. You can reach out to either my office or the chair's so that we all get this information. Then we can get it done. We know it needs to happen.

Thank you for your time today, Ms. Omeniho.

**The Chair:** That brings us just about to time.

**Ms. Pam Damoff:** I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Zimmer implied that Indigenous Services Canada is not getting PPE onto reserves. That's simply not true. While I wish that the federal government could send PPE down to women like Melanie, we just can't. There's a province in the way, and we have a constitution.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** I think—

**The Chair:** That's a point of debate, and I'm going to interrupt at this point.

**Mr. Bob Zimmer:** I would debate her on that point every day because our indigenous in the north are simply not getting it.

**The Chair:** I want to thank, first of all, our committee because these are difficult and profound issues. I thought that we had very useful questions and comments from our committee for the most part.

Of course, I want to thank our witnesses from the Manitoba Coalition, Hilda Anderson-Pyrz and Sandra DeLaronde; from the Native Women's Association of Canada—we finally got you on and connected, and it worked out very well—Ms. Whitman; and from the Women of the Métis Nation, Les Femmes Michif Otipemisiwak, Melanie Omeniho.

We're so lucky to have people like you involved in trying to solve these problems, which are only exacerbated by the current pandemic. Once again, thanks to everyone.

Our next meeting will be next Friday. Until that time, thank you for this committee meeting.

I call this meeting adjourned.

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