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Chair: Ms. Marilyn Gladu



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• (1200)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC)): I call this meeting to order. Welcome to our witnesses.

Mr. Serré, you have your hand up.

Mr. Marc Serré: I just have a quick point of order.

I just want to—through you, Madam Chair, to the clerk—ask for an analysis of what just happened at the previous part of the meeting for redoing votes and prompting relating to the voting, and I ask that we reserve 30 minutes at the next meeting to go in camera with the clerk for a report on the procedures.

The Chair: Very good.

Mr. Serré, the clerk and I also discussed what happened. One of the difficulties was that I couldn't see everyone's hands in the gallery view. We may have some suggestions in the future to do roll call voting in order to make sure that we get everyone. I don't think it would change the outcome, but I do think that we would feel better about it.

I mentioned as well that we would do no more steering team, that we would do full-committee choices, but we will go ahead and book half an hour of committee business, then, at the start of the next meeting.

Mr. Marc Serré: Yes. I'm more preoccupied with the two votes. Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Perfect.

Welcome to all of the witnesses. Sorry about the technical difficulties. We are studying the challenges faced by women living in rural communities.

For those of you who haven't participated before, wait until I recognize you by name in order to speak, and when you want to speak, you can click on the microphone icon to activate your mike. All comments should be addressed through the chair.

Interpretation in the video conference will be very much like in regular committees. You have a choice at the bottom of your screen of either “Floor”, “English” or “French”.

When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly for the interpreters. When you're not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

I'm pleased to welcome today Dr. Vianne Timmons from Memorial University, Angèle McCaie from Femmes Fortes, and Fern Martin, who is here as an individual.

Each of you will have five minutes to make your remarks, and then after that we'll go into our round of questioning. Each member will have a certain number of minutes. I will try to gently end each of the questioning sessions fairly and kindly.

We'll start with Dr. Timmons for five minutes.

Dr. Vianne Timmons (President and Vice-Chancellor, Memorial University of Newfoundland): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm thrilled to be meeting you from the ancestral land of our indigenous people in Newfoundland and Labrador.

This is a subject that is close to my heart, both as president of Memorial University and also, more importantly, as a girl who grew up in a small rural town in Labrador. I'll tell you a bit about that childhood, because it is so relevant to today's discussion.

I was raised in Labrador, but my grandmother grew up on Cape Breton Island, raised by her grandmother. She was forced to leave school in grade 4 to take care of her family. She became a housekeeper at age nine in rural Cape Breton. It was the worst day of her life. She knew education was a path to a different life for her, and it was not possible. At 16, she married my grandfather, and immediately had my mother and three additional children.

My mother did finish high school, but she also worked as a housekeeper all through high school. She always wanted to be a teacher, but she was unable to afford to go to university. She didn't want that for us, so all six of us were the first in our family to get an opportunity to go to university.

I had a great childhood, growing up in the sixties and seventies in a small town. It was a wonderful experience, but when it came to post-secondary education, it was definitely a challenge.

I went back to my home town this summer. A lot of things were the same, but a lot were different. I learned a lot about education in rural Newfoundland and Labrador when I took this trip throughout the province this summer. I saw and met many students who were forced to move home when we had to close our campuses due to the pandemic. I did learn that students are resilient, but I also learned the importance of a reliable Internet. Without it, there's no access to education for so many people in our province.

A father in a small town on the great northern peninsula sent his three children 470 kilometres to Corner Brook so that they could have reliable Internet to access their post-secondary studies. I heard of students downloading course requirements after midnight every night because they couldn't get access otherwise. Memorial has 13 locations, including six campuses, but our students do not have equal access to education. It is a real challenge.

I also saw the challenge women face. Many of our female students were in the retail business and the service industry. That's how they earn money to go to university. The pandemic has been a real challenge for them. With so many jobs lost in the service and retail industries, they have been really struggling.

I saw lots of unemployment and a sense of despair. In those communities, I saw myself in many of the young women I met. I never imagined I would be a university president. I'm a product of the Canadian dream, and I want the same for our young women today.

It's important to provide role models for them. We stand on the shoulders of the women who came before us. As the first female president of Memorial, I want to make sure that the first is not the end. I want a young girl from Labrador to see a future in this beautiful province, in this beautiful country. We have to do all that we can to ensure that she does.

As Senator Murray Sinclair said, "Education has gotten us into this mess and education will get us out." I met many first nations young women who have additional challenges in access. The things we can do and need to do are to provide reliable Internet access, make sure education is affordable and accessible, make sure we have child care options for our young women, build solutions with communities for communities, be role models, listen, learn, and work with the women in this country.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

• (1205)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

We will now hear from Angèle McCaie from the Femmes fortes program.

Ms. McCaie, you have the floor for five minutes.

• (1210)

Ms. Angèle McCaie (General Manager, Village of Rogersville): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Good afternoon. First, I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak about my community and the challenges faced by women in my rural community.

Before I begin, I would like to stress and acknowledge that I am on the traditional, ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq. I am fortunate to learn, work and live here today.

My name is Angèle McCaie. I am the executive director of a small francophone and Acadian municipality in New Brunswick called Rogersville, where I am also originally from. My community has a population of 1,066 and is geographically isolated in the southeastern part of the province.

I would like to tell you about the "Femmes fortes" program that we have created in Rogersville, which addresses many of the issues facing women and girls in my rural community.

Two years ago, I was very troubled by the comment of a recently widowed woman. She told me that, since the death of her husband, she felt powerless and useless. She told me that she realized how dependent she was on her husband for traditionally male tasks, such as mechanics and home maintenance. As a result of this discussion, I realized how the reality of rural women can cause significant challenges, since many services are not readily available, both nearby and in their language. As a result, many women can feel isolated and alone. Although independence and self-confidence can be challenges for the public at large, it seems to me that rural women are particularly likely to encounter barriers to their development and that their particular needs may go unnoticed in society.

Our "Femmes fortes" project was born out of a need identified by one woman, but it was able to grow when we realized that the need was much greater than we had anticipated. We consulted with a large portion of our population, and women and girls of all ages expressed their needs to us. The concept of "Femmes fortes" is simple: to provide free workshops, courses and sessions in French to all the women and girls in our community on a variety of topics that address many facets of an individual's physical and mental health. Workshops on construction, mechanics, depression, bereavement, LGBTQ2+ issues are just a few examples of the more than 100 sessions that have been provided and continue to be provided free of charge over the past two years in Rogersville.

Our municipality has a certain social responsibility towards its women regarding their development. The “Femmes fortes” project is a tool for the municipality to support our women and girls to ensure a next generation of more confident and independent individuals, while valuing the knowledge of women of various ages and backgrounds. In my opinion, it is unacceptable for a woman to feel unable to perform a task simply because certain gender norms in society have been pre-determined. We can and must do more for our women. By equipping our women and girls, we ensure the continuity of our community action. These ladies will pass on new skills acquired during the workshops to their loved ones, who will then be able to use the tools to become involved in the community.

The “Femmes fortes” program seeks to find innovative ways to make a rural community more resilient in these times of economic and social instability. In addition, providing the sessions free of charge increases the opportunity for women of all levels of economic, psychological and physical health to participate and have the same services that might be offered in urban centres.

It is easy to see the impact of this project on the people of our community. Many participants and presenters have told us how reassuring it was to realize that they were not alone in their insecurities and vulnerability. This project has created a community of women who support and sustain each other, rather than judge and criticize each other. When we empower our women, we are all winners.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[English]

Ms. Martin, you'll need to unmute at the bottom. There's a microphone icon. Click on it and it will unmute you.

There you are.

Ms. Martin is next, for five minutes.

Ms. Fern Martin (As an Individual): I've got it. I just didn't hear you.

In 1979, two women's groups, The Hub in Almonte and The Exchange in Carleton Place, worked together to establish Lanark County Interval House. I volunteered in the shelter and served on the board. Later I was hired as a counsellor and public educator.

Working in the shelter opened my eyes to the violence rural women were enduring. I didn't know that friends were being abused. No one talked about it until there was a safe place for them and their children. The following is a stark example of such hidden abuse.

My eldest daughter's best friend—I'll call her Mary—was raped for years by her father. I'll call him Robert. We were friends of the family. Robert was the photographer at our wedding. Mary was a vivacious, smart, athletic and delightful girl. We had no idea of what she was enduring. At age 14, Mary became pregnant. Robert took her to the Ottawa Civic Hospital for an abortion and then bought her birth control pills. That is when Mary ran away from home. She told her mother, who took the children and left him. We knew about the separation but didn't find out about the abuse until

years later, when Robert was charged with the rape of his new wife's sister. Both women had immigrated from the Philippines. He actually said to the police, “I don't know why she complained. My daughter never complained.”

The police interviewed Mary. They charged Robert with the sexual abuse of his daughter but not the sexual assault of the immigrant woman. Robert was convicted and served two years less a day.

Mary is still a delightful person and holds a responsible position in the Government of Canada.

My book, *A Narrow Doorway: Women's Stories of Escape from Abuse*, was published in 1996. It contains interviews with 10 women who had been in our shelter, as well as updates written several years later, because it took me nine years to find a publisher.

Recently I reread my book. What is stark is the fact that nothing has really changed. Men are still beating their wives, raping their girlfriends, committing incest against their daughters, abusing pets, etc. Our society, and especially our judicial system, has yet to find appropriate measures to address this reality and stop it.

Rural women face significant barriers. In rural communities, everybody knows everybody. An abused woman would be concerned about the reaction of her partner's parents, who probably live next door, or concerned that others would not believe that Joe, a favourite on the local hockey team, could be abusive. The police officer who plays hockey on the same team may be reluctant to get involved or to believe the woman's story. Neighbours of Joe, knowing that he was abusive, might be afraid to support his partner for fear of reprisal. Sometimes there is no telephone or Internet service in the home. Winter plays a special role in isolation in rural areas. Some women have no transportation. There is a higher ratio of guns in rural homes. A woman told us that after an argument, her husband would clean his gun. She took that as a threat.

The status of the abuser in the community is significant. Sometimes he is the employer and his employees are dependent on him and can't support his wife, or he is the landlord and a friend of the abuser and doesn't want to get involved by renting to the wife. He may be the reeve of the township and highly regarded by many.

The number of church ministers who were abusive was a revelation to me. One minister immediately cleaned out his wife's bank account on the day she left him. The teller didn't question his action. After all, he was the local minister.

A group of rural ministers used to meet with me in the shelter. There were four women and two men. I eventually learned that both men were sexually abusive. One was sexually abusive to one of the female ministers.

• (1215)

She puzzled about how to deal with this man. She didn't want to upset his wife or damage his reputation.

A public health nurse told me that when she was in training in Toronto in the mid-1960s, the students were sent to North Lanark, where there was the largest percentage of people in Ontario with congenital heart anomalies, an indication of a small gene pool. She said it could be due to the result of isolation, intermarriage with cousins or incest.

I used to assist the local health unit in finding transportation for women who needed abortions. Some of these women were new immigrants working as nannies. I was curious as to how they got pregnant. I am sure that some were raped by the man of the house, but couldn't risk losing their job by revealing their condition to his wife.

The Chair: I'm so sorry—

Ms. Fern Martin: Yes, I'm done.

The Chair: I'm sorry. You're at your time. What heartfelt testimony.

Ms. Fern Martin: Yes, I know.

The Chair: I'm really sorry to have to cut you off.

We'll start our round of questions. Hopefully we can hear more as we go.

We're going to begin our six-minute round with Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Jag Sahota (Calgary Skyview, CPC): Thank you to all the witnesses for your presentations and the personal experiences and stories that you have shared. As Madam Chair said, it's very heart-touching. Thank you for your time here.

I'm going to start with my first question. Pretty much anybody can answer this of the three of you, or all three may want to give your views.

We've heard throughout this pandemic that telling everyone to stay home has resulted in women being trapped with their abusers. In the urban areas, there are shelters and other sorts of emergency service locations that women can go to. However, in the rural parts of this country, your nearest neighbour can be a few kilometres away, which means access to emergency services is not an option.

My question is this: What sort of training should our first responders receive to better identify and help address this issue?

Dr. Vianne Timmons: I'll begin.

I think this is a huge issue, and anti-bias training is critical for all people because of that bias that many people have, in particular people who grew up in rural communities. Just as Ms. Martin said, there's the idea that "He's a good man; he wouldn't do anything bad." They're all biases. I think that would also be really important.

I think they need to also be trained in trauma and understand how trauma affects in particular women who experience violence and sexual violence. It's critical that they understand how to approach, how to deal, how to listen, how to look for the signs.

I also know Ms. Martin would have information that's very specific to this.

• (1220)

Ms. Fern Martin: Again, I don't have any solution. That's the problem. I've often thought that it makes sense to remove the man from the household and allow the women and the children to stay in the home and to take him to a place where he learns a better way of living and how to cook and has counselling. He would be in a women's shelter, but it would be a men's shelter for men who abuse.

Ms. Angèle McCaie: I think that for my area, something that is missing is mental health services, urgent care to hopefully address it before it gets to a paramedic issue.

I know that right now in New Brunswick, if you actually go to the step of asking for help—and we all know it's difficult to even ask for help—the waiting lists are long and the help is not necessarily close by. Regionally, communities would need to have resources to address these mental health issues at their base, at their core, and sooner, which I know is not an easy task, but there definitely is something that could be done locally that could certainly help.

Dr. Vianne Timmons: I'll also mention that it's not just first responders but also the judicial group that needs special training. I know there's been some discussion about that nationally. My sister was in an abusive relationship in a small rural community, and she did go to court to try to get support and help. It was awful. She was re-traumatized, and they did not put a restraining order on her husband, so even though she separated, she continued to be verbally abused and harassed until the day she died in 2009 of H1N1, actually.

I think we must also get the courts to really be better trained and understand the challenges women face.

Ms. Fern Martin: I would add to that. Too often abusive men are given access to the children. I did a talk one time to law students at Ottawa U, and a defence attorney was also making a presentation. When I suggested that abusive men not have access to their children, he lit into me. It was as if I were in a courtroom. He said there's no way you can do that, and that men must have access to the children.

I think it's something to consider.

Ms. Jag Sahota: Just to follow up on what you said, Ms. Martin, in regard to the story you were telling us when the husband cleaned out the joint account after he continuously abused his wife, law enforcement cannot be aware of and notice every situation. How can we train and support local establishments on what to look for and when to notify law enforcement?

Ms. Fern Martin: It's education. That's it. We have to listen to people who are telling stories like I've just told.

Ms. Jag Sahota: Do you have anything to add, Dr. Timmons?

Dr. Vianne Timmons: I would agree. I think the only solution is education, and also to ensure that advocacy is provided for women when they meet with the police forces so that they are able to bring an advocate, a support, to help counter the re-traumatization. I think it would be an important support to women in rural communities to have trained advocates who can help.

• (1225)

The Chair: That's very good.

Now we will go to Ms. Hutchings for six minutes.

Ms. Gudie Hutchings (Long Range Mountains, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Welcome to all of you three powerful women today, bringing your stories from different parts of rural Canada and your examples. Thank you. You've all touched a different part of us.

Dr. Timmons, first of all, congratulations to you on being the first woman appointed president of Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador, my home province. Well done.

Dr. Timmons, as you know and as my colleagues have heard me say many times, I represent a large area, a land mass bigger than Switzerland, with literally hundreds of tiny communities, many of which you've seen.

One thing I do love about Memorial University is your many remote campuses throughout the province. As you mentioned in your speaking notes, there are 13 campuses.

If you can, I want you to expand a little on the importance of that and how we now have women attending classes in their own communities so that child care is not such a huge issue. They can still raise their children at home. Adult children who are helping in the family business or the local fish plant can still take classes nearby to upgrade their skills and get a new skill set.

Can you share how important these small outlying campuses are?

Dr. Vianne Timmons: They're critically important, and they'll be even more important as we look at the need for microcredentialing and retraining in careers.

When I travelled the province—and I travelled your beautiful part of the province—I went into many of those small communities. I listened to the concerns of the town councils and the concerns of our alumni who run the small businesses in those communities. Everywhere I went, people talked about access: access to training, access to education.

I mentioned my mother and six of us children growing up in Labrador. She did finish high school, but when she was pregnant with her sixth child in eight years, she decided she had to do something. She did distance education. At that time it was all through the mail. She got a degree doing it at home, cooking and helping the family with all her children. That was the only way we could end up all going to university. It was because she had access to distance education.

I mentioned earlier that the Internet is critical. In some communities there is not even cellphone service. Imagine the vulnerability without cellphone service, but the lack of access is the biggest chal-

lenge in education for working women, young mothers or women in mid-career who need to pivot and change.

It's critically important, and I'm glad you brought it up, absolutely. Thank you, Ms. Hutchings.

Ms. Gudie Hutchings: We listened and we heard on the connectivity issue. Connectivity was an issue long before COVID-19, but COVID certainly brought it to the forefront. I'm delighted with our government's new universal broadband fund and the rapid response stream. I think that's where we're really going to see the differences in rural Canada.

Angèle, I have a quick question for you.

The work you're doing with your Femmes Fortes is amazing. Of all the courses you're doing, what is the most popular and why do you think that is the case during this time?

Ms. Angèle McCaie: We've done over 100 sessions at this point. We measure success in various forms. There are some sessions that do not have a lot of participants, but the participants who are there very much appreciate it. I think of a session that we had for LGBTQ rights, where there was just one participant. It was a mother whose son had just come out to her as a homosexual, and she was able to ask all these questions in an open and safe environment. I can just imagine the difference that one person made in her family and in the community and then so on and so forth.

As for the success that we've had with sessions like those, we've had varying participation, but the women who do participate find a lot of value in them. The ones that are very popular that we have waiting lists for are anything about manual labour, construction, mechanics, how to change a tire if you're stranded on the side of the road and anything that they feel that they maybe missed out on learning earlier in their lives and might be dependent on someone else in their lives to accomplish. We've seen that widows particularly appreciate these sessions.

• (1230)

Ms. Gudie Hutchings: Thank you.

Ms. Martin, you'll be delighted to know that we have made changes in the judicial training bill. It was passed unanimously in the House. We call it Bill C-3. It was brought to the floor by the Honourable Rona Ambrose, who did some phenomenal work on this issue. You'll be pleased to know that it's now in the Senate and progressing.

Ms. Martin, you spoke about connectivity, and we all agree that's such an issue. Can you just tell us how important connectivity is in rural communities, especially with women looking to escape violence at home?

Ms. Fern Martin: It means total safety for them that they can connect with who can help them. What did I say about connectivity?

Ms. Gudie Hutchings: You said how important it was.

My issue with connectivity for women in need in these really rural communities is whether they are going to be able to access it. How important would you think it is for them to have a safe spot in a community in a town hall, in a church basement or in a Lions Club where they could go and access secure and safe a Internet connection without having their abuser watch everything they're doing?

The Chair: I'm sorry, but we're going to have to wait for that answer, because that's your time.

Ms. Fern Martin: Okay.

The Chair: We're going to go now to Madam Larouche for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Thank you very much to all the witnesses.

You have been absolutely extraordinary this morning. Your testimony was very moving.

I would like to continue to talk about high-speed Internet connectivity. We feel that this issue reinforces the differences between men and women, particularly in rural areas. Women don't have enough access. There has been talk about making high-speed Internet available throughout the regions. Where I live in Shefford, this is not the case, but next door, in Brome—Missisquoi, it has been shown that the plan for broadband Internet will not be able to cover all the needs.

I would like to hear what Ms. Timmons has to say on the issue. A good Internet connection is already considered an essential service.

What would it take to be successful in helping women have access? What more can be done?

[*English*]

Dr. Vianne Timmons: I can begin with that.

It goes back to what Ms. Hutchings said. Until we get high-speed Internet in all the communities, we need to find Internet nodes for people. I think exactly what was said was that it could be in local libraries or in a Lions Club, but every small community's church hall should be able to have a place, a node. We're looking at that to be able to provide retraining.

I'll give you an example. Down on the southern peninsula, there are a lot of people who work in the fisheries, and they need training, ongoing training. Many have to travel quite a ways to get it, but if we could have nodes in those communities with desks, computers and access, I think it would be wonderful for women who are seeking support in the community and women who experience violence in the community. For women who are looking at upgrading a microcredential, that's wonderful for them.

I think it is critical in today's world that we have those Internet nodes in every small community in Canada as we move towards the high-speed Internet.

Ms. Fern Martin: In Almonte, the local library has computers for people and people to help with using the computer.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Ms. Timmons, you talked at length about education.

How serious is the gap between urban and more remote areas? How does it affect the women's education level in terms of graduation, and consequently in terms of the quality of jobs?

Do we really see differences in literacy? Is this what you mean when you talk about the importance of working towards the same access to education for both rural and urban areas?

[*English*]

Dr. Vianne Timmons: There's a huge impact in many of our rural communities and northern communities. This is for both male and female students. They cannot access the courses that get them into the different academic streams in university. I met high school students in Labrador who had to go online and access high school courses online to be able to get the proper courses to be able to get into university.

In terms of gender, there is a real challenge. Many in the north and in some of those communities.... Where I grew up, my brothers got jobs in the mines in the summer. They were able to make money to help pay for their university. I didn't. I wasn't able to get the jobs in the mines, so my jobs always paid way less, had long hours and were very tough. I was planting trees, babysitting, doing everything I could to make money.

There's inequity in job access in rural and northern communities. There's inequity in pay in rural and northern communities. There's inequity in access, even at the secondary level, in these communities. That inequity for high schools affects both the young men and the young women. I want to be clear on that.

Then when we look at our indigenous women in this country, we all know what they face. Many times we have let them down as a country. One of the most shameful public policy failures in our country is our support for our sisters in those indigenous communities.

I'll stop there.

• (1235)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Ms. McCaie, you talked about LGBTQ2+ communities.

How is it that these communities are even greater victims of prejudice in rural areas? What makes their situation a little more acute?

Ms. Ang le McCaie: Traditionally, a lot of LGBTQ2+ people in rural areas, as soon as they graduated from high school, moved to the larger urban centres to find a community. Inclusivity is certainly a challenge in rural areas.

There is no public awareness when it comes to this type of thing. It is not common. It is certainly better now than it was before. Every year, there are improvements, but there is a lot of work to do in terms of education in the regions.

LGBTQ2+ people don't always want to move to urban centres. It's nice to have the option to stay in one's community and feel accepted. I think these are special needs, but they are improving over the years.

[English]

The Chair: Very good.

Now we'll go to Ms. Mathysen for six minutes.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I too want to extend my appreciation to all the witnesses today for some really important testimony.

Dr. Timmons, you told a story very similar to one I grew up with. My grandmother couldn't go past grade 8. She had to work on the family farm and other farms to contribute to the income of the family, to feed the family, which made it so important for my mother, seeing that inability of my grandmother to access education, to strive and to work so hard to ensure that this wouldn't happen—and certainly, as her daughter, for me as well.

In terms of access for education, I'd like to build on that. There are numerous studies pointing to the importance of early access to education and what that early learning and child care mean. Certainly, for women and people who are in a lower income, access to early education increases lifelong prospects of earning capacity, increased productivity, reduced use of health and social services, reduced criminal justice costs and improved social determinants of health.

With regard to that extension of education, how do you see it impacting the students who are going into higher learning? We've talked a lot, especially over this pandemic, about the cost of tuition and the impacts on students who, as you said, aren't able to earn as much money to afford that education. I would like you to comment on the importance of not only addressing what we are trying to talk about here in the House of Commons—about eliminating interest that students pay on those extreme student loans—but also the importance of addressing the cost of tuition, the loans themselves, and the ability for students to not have to worry about such a debt sentence when they're trying to achieve something like higher education.

● (1240)

Dr. Vianne Timmons: My background is as an educational psychologist, so I will be the first to say that early childhood education, early childhood intervention, is critically important in this country. It's not only for the children; it's also for the mothers, who then are able to go ahead and look for meaningful work or for education.

I will mention that my son was looking for child care and wasn't able to get child care. When he did, it was \$1,000 a month. For a young family, that is atrocious and very challenging. In rural communities, it's not just access to it; it's to ensure that it's quality child care and that the people running the child care centres have the qualifications and the training to make sure it's very successful for the children involved.

I think you hit the nail on the head. It's one of the most important things. I think in the closing comments of my opening speech, I

mentioned child care as critical, as an equalizer in our country for women.

With regard to the cost of tuition, well, I'm in a province where the tuition is \$2,500 for a full year. I think a \$20,000 investment in a university degree is a great investment, but I also spoke to, as I told you, the father in St. Anthony who has three children going to university. With the travel to the St. John's campus and the cost of accommodations, the cost was much more than tuition. I think when we talk about the cost of post-secondary education, we have to look holistically and beyond the tuition.

I think it's critical that we look at bursaries for students in financial need, non-repayable bursaries. I think the federal government has done a fabulous job on that. I hope they continue to do so. There should be no student in this country who cannot go to university because of finances. We always have to make sure that university is accessible to all of our youth. I think what you said is critically important.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Some things have taken place during COVID. In terms of the government getting involved, I believe those temporary solutions need to become permanent, absolutely, so we'll continue to push for that.

In much the same vein as ensuring that education, no matter who you are or how much you have or how much your family has, is not based on how much you can pay, it's the same with child care: No matter where you are, child care should be universally accessible. Would you agree that the government, in order to achieve this, could move forward on legislation for both education and child care that would be much like the Canada Health Act, which is supposed to provide to anyone, no matter where they are, equal access to health services?

That is for anybody to answer.

Dr. Vianne Timmons: I'll let one of my colleagues answer that.

Ms. Fern Martin: It's obvious.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Okay, that's clear.

Do I have time?

The Chair: No, you're out of time. Now we're going to Ms. Shin in our second round for five minutes.

Ms. Nelly Shin (Port Moody—Coquitlam, CPC): Thank you.

I'd like to thank all the witnesses today for sharing your testimonies. I'm disturbed and moved at the same time.

My first question is for Ms. Martin. I am very disturbed by your testimony on the entrenched culture in remote communities, where fear because of power dynamics prevents people from speaking up and prevents justice from happening. It creates a code of silence that's intergenerational and perpetual.

Do you have any suggestions in terms of how those kinds of communities...? It's cultural corporate behaviour, isn't it, really? What are some ways that we can break that silence and that stronghold?

Ms. Fern Martin: As well as being negative, it has positives, because everybody knows everybody, so hopefully you can find the one person who will support you, help you, give you the transportation you might need, or at least listen to you and maybe share resources.

What I would really like to say is that I think our government system shows abuse. In question period, I would really like to see the government give an example of working positively together. When somebody stands up and says that this is what they think we could do, then the other party could say, "Gee, what about that?", rather than saying it's a really stupid idea.

I would like it to start at the top, where we should show respect and listen and care about other people.

Sorry. That's my little political bugaboo.

• (1245)

Ms. Nelly Shin: Thank you. Point taken on that. I would agree in terms of being more positive in the House.

My second question has to do with Clare's law. I don't know if you're all familiar with it. I know it has been enacted in Saskatchewan, and there's a loophole. For those in favour of Clare's Law, if amendments are made to the Privacy Act, then the RCMP would be able to disclose violent records of perpetrators to their intimate partners. Is this something that you see is worth pursuing for amendments in Parliament?

I leave that for anyone.

Ms. Fern Martin: Absolutely.

Ms. Nelly Shin: Thank you so much.

I have time for one more question.

What are some success stories in terms of men who are educated? Obviously, that's a very critical piece in terms of getting rid of violence against women and these types of issues. What are some success stories we can walk away with?

Dr. Vianne Timmons: I think you've hit on something that is critically important. Gender violence and violence against women is not a women's issue and it's not a gender issue; it's a societal issue. We have to educate men, as well as women, in disclosing it, on being bystanders, on how to step in and how to handle it and work with it.

I think there are many positive stories of men who have stood up and who have supported women in these situations, but there is still the old boys culture and club, particularly in sports and in universities. There's a culture around the male team bonding and things like that. We still have a lot of work to do. We need to educate our young men to be able to make sure that we reduce violence against women. Our young men are critical.

Ms. Nelly Shin: Thank you so much.

Ms. Fern Martin: I have a cute story to add to that. When I worked at the shelter, sometimes we sheltered Inuit women from the north. I had a friend who was a pilot at the Carp Airport, and he would deliver food to the north. When we did have Inuit women in the shelter, I would get in touch with him, and he would bring back roasts of caribou for them. He was a good guy.

The Chair: Excellent.

Now we'll go to Ms. Hutchings for five minutes.

Ms. Gudie Hutchings: Madam Chair, I thought it was Monsieur Serré.

The Chair: I stand corrected, then.

Go ahead, Mr. Serré.

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you, Madame Chair; and thank you to the witnesses, the three of you, and especially Ms. Martin.

Your testimony is one of the big reasons I've been part of the status of women committee for the past four years. MP Shin mentioned the intergenerational aspect, and I hope we can spend more time on this. As indicated, the injustices we've provided to our first nations women are atrocious, and many of the same issues apply to women in rural areas.

Ms. Martin, you talked about the family secrets and the intergenerational and rural aspects. You painted a picture that things haven't changed in 50 years, but this is where we're at in trying to move things forward.

In 2018, we had a \$1.8-million strategy for men and boys, but we are also now, as a government, getting involved with provinces, indigenous communities and municipalities on developing a national strategy action plan for gender-based violence.

I'll be asking Dr. Timmons also, but Angèle McCaie, from a rural perspective, hopefully you can be engaged and provide some feedback. You mentioned education. Today, what would you recommend in terms of that action plan to address more of these systemic issues in rural Canada in your neck of the woods?

• (1250)

Ms. Angèle McCaie: Thank you.

It's having the resources in smaller communities and having access to programs and funding. It doesn't need to be large funding, but having it readily accessible is very important. The Femmes Fortes program started with a small wellness grant for \$5,000 and developed into this large system that we have, and other municipalities as well throughout New Brunswick. Sometimes it's just that seed and that encouragement for local government and local resources to get something started, because all of rural Canada is not a one-size-fits-all. Everyone has specific issues they need addressed. In Rogersville, we don't necessarily have that Internet access issue, but we have that language barrier.

Consulting with the communities and giving them resources is so essential to develop what they need in communities for women and girls.

Dr. Vianne Timmons: I'll add also that investing in women's organizations is critical, and our government has done that. When we took money away from women's organizations in this country, we left a lot of women vulnerable.

Women's shelters that include children, shelters to which they're allowed to bring children, are critical. Many communities have homeless shelters, but they're for men; we need homeless shelters for women also. We need transition houses and we need to make sure that we support and fund them.

When I was in Regina, I was stunned at how many women had to be turned away from the shelter because of the waiting list. They didn't have the room. When you turn women away, you often put their children in jeopardy. If we want to make sure we support women in our communities, we need to support those organizations that are front-line workers, who work every day, as Ms. Martin did for so many years, supporting vulnerable women.

Mr. Marc Serré: Dr. Timmons, you would probably recommend that all our workers in shelters should be classified as essential workers across every province and every country moving forward.

Dr. Vianne Timmons: They are essential.

Mr. Marc Serré: I want to congratulate you on being a university president. Fewer than 20% of university presidents are female; so we have to do better.

Thank you.

The Chair: Excellent.

Now we go to Madame Larouche for two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I will continue my tour of the witnesses. I have not yet had the opportunity to speak with Ms. Martin.

Ms. Martin, in your testimony, it is clear that, for a woman living in a rural environment, access to services related to good reproductive health may not be adequate. I hear you loud and clear. Good reproductive health ranges from free choice to proper pregnancy monitoring.

I would particularly like to hear your views on the lack of specialists to support women in rural areas.

[English]

Ms. Fern Martin: I'm not a specialist in women's health in rural areas, but certainly the abortion issue is critical for many women, and I guess public health units are critical. They're the people who, when I was telling the story about north Lanark and the congenital heart anomalies probably due to incest.... In 1992 or 1996, a health unit was built in that area. I think that would make a huge difference. They would have access to education and all of that, including abortion services.

• (1255)

[Translation]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Ms. Martin, perhaps better health transfers for Quebec and the provinces could create a better situation in rural areas as well.

It is probably more difficult to reach women, particularly in situations of domestic violence and prostitution, because they are isolated.

What tools could help these women—who ask for help and don't really know how to leave their communities or where to seek help—to find a way out?

[English]

Ms. Fern Martin: It probably comes back to emergency services. The police are most likely to be the intervenors, and they need to be educated.

They need to have the support. They probably need to have women go with them—shelter workers or female officers—to some of these situations so that they can talk with the women.

The Chair: Ms. Mathysen, we'll go to you for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Let's see what I can get in.

My questioning will probably stem from that of my colleague Madame Larouche. I had been talking about universality and about the Canada Health Act.

Ms. McCaie, in New Brunswick, Clinic 554, for example, is the only abortion services and reproductive health clinic in your entire province. What has its closing meant, for you and the women you interact with, for accessing those services rurally?

Ms. Ang le McCaie: I think it's a huge step backwards for women. It was a real blow to women's confidence in the health system. It shows a real lack of support for women's health. It's unbelievable. The conversation it started around what should be accessible to women is certainly important. Unfortunately, though, the services aren't there, and their lack causes large societal breaks in our community. It's unbelievably sad.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Let me squeeze one more question in.

One thing we've been hearing is about rising domestic violence incidents. They're characterized by serious harm to the victims. There's overt violence, but there's also the beginning behaviour of controlling or coercive conduct.

My colleague has a private member's bill to provide such information to police services in order to support women who are facing domestic violence. Do you believe this would be of assistance? Anybody can answer.

Ms. Fern Martin: Yes.

Voices: Yes.

The Chair: What a great way to end our panel discussion—on a unanimous “yes”.

I want to thank the witnesses for all their testimony today and for what a great round of questions it was.

With that, committee members, we will see you on Thursday for committee business at the start of the meeting, and we'll go on from there.

This meeting is adjourned.

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