



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

43rd PARLIAMENT, 2nd SESSION

Standing Committee on the Status of Women

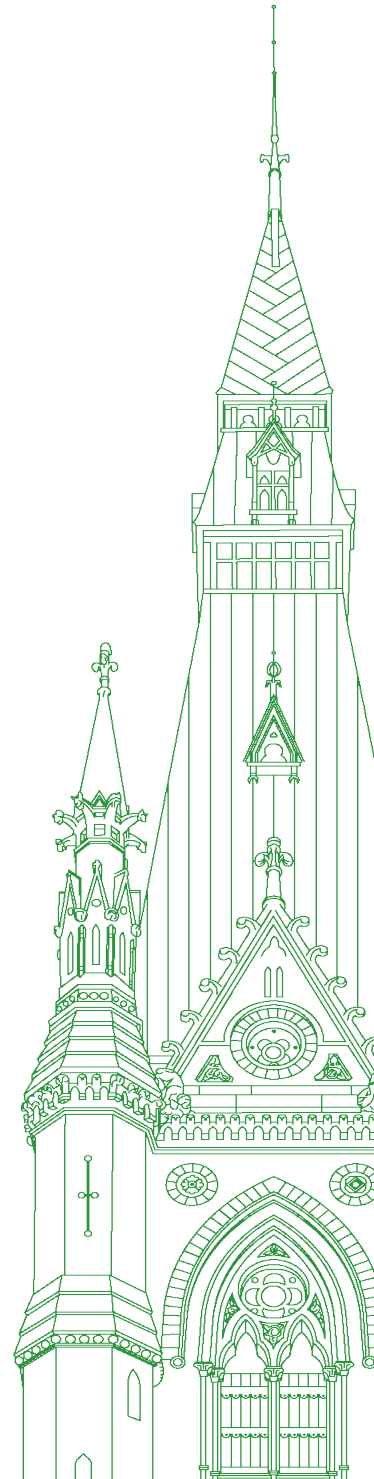
EVIDENCE

NUMBER 015

PUBLIC PART ONLY - PARTIE PUBLIQUE SEULEMENT

Tuesday, February 16, 2021

Chair: Ms. Marilyn Gladu



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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC)): Good morning and welcome to meeting number 15 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of January 25, 2021. The proceedings will be made available on the House of Commons website. The webcast will always show the person speaking rather than the entirety of the committee. If you're on Zoom—and everyone other than Stephanie is—please use the “raise hand” function.

Today the committee is resuming its study on challenges faced by women living in rural communities.

To our witnesses, welcome. Before you speak, wait until I recognize you by name. When we get into the questions, you can just answer as they're directed. Comments should be addressed through the chair. Interpretation in this video conference is very much like that in a regular committee meeting. You can select, at the bottom of your screen, whether you hear English, French or floor. When speaking, please do so slowly and clearly for the interpreters, and when you're not speaking, you should be on mute.

Let me welcome the witnesses. We have today, as an individual, Katie Allen.

[Translation]

We also welcome Renée Fuchs, from the Centre Victoria pour femmes.

[English]

We have, from Red Deer County, Jean Bota, who is a councillor there.

[Translation]

Also joining us is the Mayor of the Ville de Magog, Ms. Vicki-May Hamm.

[English]

Each of you will have five minutes for your opening comments, and then we'll go into our rounds of questions.

We will begin right away with Ms. Allen for five minutes.

Ms. Katie Allen (As an Individual): Wonderful. Thank you very much.

Good morning. My name is Katie Allen, and I am a Ph.D. candidate in rural studies at the University of Guelph. It's my honour to be here with you today. My contributions to this discussion today are informed by my academic studies as well as my experience as a leader in supporting women's participation in rural society. I will discuss access to services, employment and labour and accessibility for affordable housing and emergency and second-stage shelter space. I will follow up on these challenges with recommendations for your consideration.

Regionalization and the downloading of responsibilities to local government, non-profit and charitable organizations—without the matched support of funding—has had significant impacts on women's ability to access critical health, social and justice services. Additionally, the closure of schools and postal offices, the loss of local infrastructure like gas stations, and limited access to broadband and telecommunications infrastructure continue to further isolate rural women from critical services. Without access to these services in their local communities, rural women face poorer outcomes across the board in terms of their social and economic well-being, health and safety, and engagement in decision-making processes that impact their lives. A lack of public transportation options exacerbates these challenges and particularly impacts senior women.

Often, social and health-related programs and services are downloaded to local non-profit charitable organizations or local governments in an attempt to fill gaps in service delivery. However, this process is often not supported by increased funding to these agencies, resulting in pressure on sectors that do not have the financial capacity or the human resources to adequately and appropriately deliver on their new responsibilities. COVID-19 has intensified the fragility of these sectors and exacerbated gaps in capacity and financial instability.

The composition of rural economies and labour market landscapes impacts employment quality, often producing conditions that lead to precarious employment and significant out-migration of rural youth. Precarious employment, particularly in care and service industries, continues to create challenges for women in finding secure, stable, full-time employment in their home communities. The lack of affordable transportation and housing further compounds these dynamics. Financing options for women engaging in entrepreneurship can be limited or difficult to obtain. With limited options for diverse, stable employment and post-secondary education and training required to attain higher-paying employment, rural women and youth are often stuck with making difficult choices about where and what education and employment opportunities they can access, creating a vicious cycle of low wages, few opportunities, unsuitable housing and insufficient transportation. These factors, combined with limited emergency and second-stage housing for women and children, also produce significant health and safety risks for rural women looking to leave unstable home environments and gender-based violence.

I'll now briefly discuss three recommendations for your consideration to address some of the challenges that I have overviewed.

The first is the essential need for access to broadband and telecommunications infrastructure. In some instances, service providers have digitized services and created space for online or telephone cellular support meetings. This is beneficial to those who have access to broadband and telecommunications infrastructure and technology. However, this is not the reality for many rural women. Access to broadband can also provide opportunities for professional development, training, and education.

The second recommendation is for stable and secure operational funding sources that allow for flexibility and pivoting for organizations delivering essential services. These would provide increased resource capacity to deliver essential programs and services, as well as the stability and flexibility required to respond to challenges as they arise. As we look to the future and shift towards recovery from COVID-19, long-term secure funding sources for organizations delivering those critical services to communities are imperative to ensuring that women do not fall through the cracks of various jurisdictional configurations.

The third piece for consideration is the need to address rural data gaps. Canada is a data-poor country, with a significant deficit of rural-specific data. It is impossible to produce evidence-informed responses if there is insufficient data and understanding of the unique needs and contexts of rural Canadians. Data must be publicly accessible and provided across not only socio-economic strata but gender and race as well. Open data on federal funding provided to address gender-based programming in rural communities should be clearly available in order to address barriers in applying for such funding programs. This is a particularly critical time to gather data on the unique impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on safety and emergency services. Data collection on the different stages of the pandemic can offer insights into how to strengthen the support for women during emergencies and in times of crisis.

• (1110)

Gender equality is a cornerstone of inclusive and sustainable growth. Policy-makers across all orders of government must dedicate time and resources to understanding rural women's issues if we are to develop effective and targeted solutions. Closing the data gap will help inform the use of gender-based analysis plus policies. It is essential that decision-makers like you integrate GBA+ and a clearly articulated rural lens to post-COVID-19 economic recovery policies for rural communities. As realities change, integrating GBA+ and a rural lens will provide opportunities to address some—

The Chair: I'm sorry. That's your time.

Ms. Katie Allen: I was just finishing anyway. Those were my last few words.

Thank you.

The Chair: Very good.

To help us keep to our time, you will notice that when you have one minute left, I will be holding up a yellow pen.

We'll go now to Renée.

[*Translation*]

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

Ms. Renée Fuchs (President, Centre Victoria pour femmes): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Good morning.

Before I begin, I would like to respectfully acknowledge that I am on the territory described in the Robinson-Huron Treaty, part of the traditional territory of the Atikameksheng Anishnawbek First Nation.

My name is Renée Fuchs, and I am the president of the Centre Victoria pour femmes. I am also a lawyer specializing in criminal law and family law. As a francophone woman born in Sudbury, I must thank you for inviting me to share with you the successes of the women using the services of the Centre Victoria pour femmes, as well as the challenges they must face.

The Centre Victoria pour femmes is established in a number of rural areas in the Sudbury and Algoma District regions, with a large number of francophones. The Centre Victoria pour femmes has just celebrated its 25th anniversary. So, for 25 years, it has been offering francophone women a complete range of services in cases of violence against women, including sexual violence. These services include individual and group support, practical assistance, group counselling, and advocacy.

The Centre Victoria pour femmes provides its services in the Greater Sudbury region and in all of the Algoma District, including Sault Ste. Marie. To give you a point of reference for how big the Algoma District is, I can tell you that it is almost the entire size of Ireland. In the Algoma District, more than one person in every eight is francophone and, here in Sudbury, one quarter of the population is francophone. That is why I would like to highlight a major deficiency in these regions in terms of access to justice in French.

I will give you one recent example that made the headlines. A woman living in the Algoma District reported to the police that she had been sexually assaulted. The Centre Victoria pour femmes was one of her supporters. In 2019, she was expecting to testify in French before the court in Sault Ste. Marie. However, her testimony never could be heard, because the judge declared a stay of proceedings due to the unreasonable delay. The unreasonable delay was mainly attributable to the fact that, because of a number of failures in the system, no francophone interpreter had been scheduled for that trial. In her reasons for decision, Justice Dunn said that, in terms of providing services in French, local practice in the Sault Ste. Marie court was “flawed”.

The judge had a little room to manoeuvre in her decision to declare a stay in proceedings. As you perhaps already know, in the Jordan decision of 2016, the Supreme Court of Canada set the entire duration of a criminal prosecution in a provincial court at 18 months. The case in Sault Ste. Marie had gone beyond 19 months.

Testifying about a traumatic event in one's own language is not a privilege, it's a right. Ontario's Courts of Justice Act and French Language Services Act require that the services provided in French be of the same quality as those provided in English and that they be equally accessible. Despite the fact that the need for an interpreter was indicated from the start of the proceedings, this woman obtained no justice. This is a systemic failure.

Although the example I have just given is more in provincial jurisdiction, it very clearly demonstrates that the rights of minority groups can sometimes be trampled on because they live in rural regions far from major centres. These fundamental rights should not be in competition.

Moreover, the Algoma District has just lost its only official bilingual judge position. A unilingual anglophone judge obtained the position.

Let me quote former Supreme Court Justice Michel Bastarache: “...a community must fight for certain fundamental rights and, to do so, it must have the courage to persevere”.

Thank you for your attention.

• (1115)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[English]

Now we are going to Jean Bota for five minutes.

Ms. Jean Bota (Councillor, Red Deer County): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the committee for the opportunity to speak this morning.

My name is Jean Bota. I'm a Red Deer County councillor. For anyone not familiar with Alberta, Red Deer is halfway between Edmonton and Calgary. In addition to being a councillor, I also sit on the Red Deer/Lacombe rural crime watch as a director, and I chair the Alberta Community Crime Prevention Association, which is a provincial board with representation from around the province.

Today I speak to you about the challenges faced by women in rural communities from the perspective of rural crime and the fallout I am personally seeing for many women.

I have seen a lot of fear: trauma fear, fear of criminal harassment when perpetrators have been released from prison or are out on bail, and fear of reprisal after being robbed or violated more than once. I've seen psychological fear, being a distance from an RCMP detachment, and I've seen a greater, very deep fear of disconnect to the community and feeling unsupported.

Our victim services units that work with the RCMP detachments tell us that domestic violence is of course on the increase, and with COVID this is really an issue right now, especially in the indigenous and Métis settlement communities. Many perpetrators also move out to the small rural areas in order not to be detected due to lack of communication between law enforcement and agencies. Again, transportation and isolation are the biggest barriers for the abused and, in a lot of cases, their children. Then there's the physical abuse, the psychological abuse and a lot of elder abuse—older people being taken advantage of in the rural areas.

Again, supports for rural women, such as shelter, counselling, day care and infrastructure for transportation and education, are not as they should be. Many times there is no family or even friend to support them, and agencies do not have the wherewithal or the money to provide extra for these people.

Funding and capacity in rural areas for women's shelters—including trained staff to accommodate and provide programs for the women and children—are a problem. The Internet connection, as noted previously, and the means to access online counselling or meetings, especially during COVID restrictions, are also a big issue. You don't have to go very far into rural areas to have very poor Internet.

One thing I am very concerned about and I'm seeing a lot of issues with is opioids, the increase in drugs and overdoses within rural communities. To me this is a two-edged sword. The opioids are driving the rural crime by way of gangs and gang activity, and on the other hand the opioid crisis continues to take its toll on a lot of residents, with Alberta being no different.

Again, it's the result of isolation, long distances from emergency services and limited access to support, resources and education. The opioid crisis has had a heavy toll on rural and first nations communities. There is a stigma and many times discrimination for the treatment of the addiction in the communities and the addicted. The women in these communities, whether they are doctors, grandmothers, mothers or just community connectors, are ringing the alarm bell.

It's important. Thank you.

• (1120)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'm going to check with the clerk. Do we have the mayor from Ville de Magog?

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Stephanie Bond): Yes, Mayor Hamm is here.

The Chair: Welcome. You have five minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Vicki-May Hamm (Mayor, Ville de Magog): Good morning, Madam Chair.

Thank you for inviting me to appear before the committee today.

I speak to you today as the mayor of the Ville de Magog but also as a past president of the Canadian Federation of Municipalities. My comments to you will be in both languages.

[English]

First, let me talk a little about rural Canada. As we've seen, rural Canada is extremely diverse in terms of population size, density and degree of remoteness or proximity to urban centres. For example, a rural township of 11,000 in the greater Toronto area, compared to a community of 13,000 in northern Alberta, will experience very different lifestyles, opportunities and challenges. Therefore, a one-size-fits-all approach to rural policy will not work.

[Translation]

Rural communities, which are often very attractive to retired Canadians, are facing major demographic challenges. Those retirees need specific access to social services or housing. While the aging population is not a factor only in rural regions, those are the regions that have fewer resources to deal with it.

In addition, the vitality of our rural communities depends on their ability to attract and retain youth. The exodus of young people to larger centres, for opportunities in either education or employment, is a challenge.

[English]

Rural municipal leaders are working hard to address this demographic shift. To secure the talent and skills needed to generate local economic growth, these communities must attract and retain new residents, including young people, immigrants, indigenous people and women. Retention requires having the right support in place. For example, immigrants, in particular women, who find themselves unemployed or underemployed often turn to local governments for help, and if they don't find the resources that becomes a big problem.

Now let me say a few words about FCM's program toward gender parity.

At FCM, we believe that being part of the solution starts at the local level. To ensure more inclusivity, part of that solution needs to be about electing more women to municipal office. We need to help change the face of leadership, so that people elected to make decisions reflect the people they serve. We also have to identify systemic bias, recognize and acknowledge racism, and tackle gender-based violence in all its forms. There is a growing momentum and discussion about not only the impact of discrimination in society, but the need to do better.

[Translation]

Despite our efforts in recent years, women remain underrepresented in municipal politics. Only one fifth of our mayors are women, with a few provinces around 30%. Only the Yukon and the Northwest Territories have attained parity.

Much work remains to ensure that women are represented all across the country. This is particularly true for young women in rural communities.

[English]

FCM's program called "Toward parity in municipal politics" launched two new tools in 2020 that outline strategies and tangible ways to achieve parity: our pan-Canadian framework, which we've called "Run, win, lead", and our knowledge hub, a collection of more than a hundred resources. Both were developed through consultation and collaboration with many of you on this call, and others across the country.

An additional factor that rural women in leadership face is that being a councillor is usually a part-time job, and you have to combine that with your workload, family responsibilities and a poor salary.

• (1125)

[Translation]

I would now like to talk to you about violence against women.

Women who live in rural areas are also victims of a number of forms of violence. In addition, they are isolated and have less access to resources than elsewhere.

[English]

The real cost of gender-based violence is this. Half of all women over the age of 16 in Canada have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence. Approximately every six days, a woman in Canada is killed by her intimate partner; indigenous women are killed at six times that rate. In April 2020, seven out of 10 women reported being concerned or extremely concerned about violence at home as a result of COVID-19.

[Translation]

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the isolation of women in rural communities. They have experienced more economic hardship than elsewhere, either because of job losses or more difficult employment situations. These are often the women who provide health care to the public. Their access to services is limited, with the closure of a number of shelters for victims of violence against women, as those centres are sustained by volunteers. They have problems with transportation, not to mention that some transportation services have closed down, and with connectivity, leading to difficulties in employability and education.

[English]

I would like to end with recommendations and reflections.

In order to address challenges faced by women in rural Canada at the local level, particularly in the response to COVID-19, we need to collectively uphold and fund services to reduce gender-based violence; ensure that women's voices and interests are reflected in the decision-making around the pandemic and the response; collect and analyze data by gender, age, race and other vulnerability factors to underpin policy, service design and budget decisions; improve the working conditions of women; involve women in COVID-19 specialized groups or task forces; promote women's and girls' access to information; and put gender equality policies at the forefront of the recovery plans.

Thank you very much for your attention.

The Chair: Excellent.

We will begin our first round of questioning. Each person will have six minutes. At one minute left, they will get the yellow pen.

We'll start with Ms. Wong for six minutes.

Hon. Alice Wong (Richmond Centre, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses. In the past 12-plus years, serving as the proud representative of Richmond Centre in British Columbia, I've had the privilege of visiting all the provinces and territories from coast to coast to coast. I've been all the way from Victoria on Vancouver Island to Newfoundland and Labrador. I've been listening to people, especially women, in all those rural areas. As the former minister for seniors, seniors are close to my heart. All of the issues you brought up today are so important.

My questions are for any one of you who might want to shed some light here. You talked about seniors in those areas. Caring for seniors and also other people in the family who are in need is a very complex issue. What support do you think we need to give these people? You also talked about immigrants and racism, and I have to

also mention ageism. Elder abuse, of course, is a very important issue, not only in rural areas but in cities as well.

I'm throwing those questions out to all of you. Whoever wants to shed some light on them, please do so.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Who wants to take that one first?

Ms. Hamm, go for it.

Ms. Vicki-May Hamm: It was my smile, eh?

[Translation]

I would especially like to go back to the issue of seniors.

What the COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally revealed is that we were not doing a good job looking after our seniors and a lot of work remains to be done, especially in our residence facilities.

Furthermore, those looking after our seniors are often women, both as professionals and as informal caregivers. There are also more elderly women than men. So we are making women's lives worse in all respects.

I feel that the seniors issue must begin with a conversation about working conditions, about adequate infrastructure and, in rural settings, about accessibility to resources.

So I submit those topics to you for your consideration.

• (1130)

[English]

The Chair: Ms. Bota.

Ms. Jean Bota: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would agree. We need the resources. We need to make sure we have the proper people and infrastructure in place. I agree with the previous speaker that one thing we've found through COVID is that we are definitely not taking care of our seniors. It's almost like we want to shove them away in a corner and just leave them there. I don't think it's well advised. I think we need to do a lot better than what we're doing.

The Chair: Ms. Fuchs.

[Translation]

Ms. Renée Fuchs: Thank you, Madam Chair.

As Mayor Hamm said, employment categories such as nursing staff and support workers are often made up of women. In general, they are underpaid, especially the support workers.

In addition, they often work on contract, with no possibility of obtaining full-time positions. Sometimes, they have several contracts, moving from one location to another so that they can earn enough money to get by.

In my opinion, that is a major shortcoming in workplace safety. We should pay all the workers in this field more, but especially the women.

[*English*]

The Chair: Very good.

Ms. Allen.

Ms. Katie Allen: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Not to reiterate the great comments from the other panellists, with which I couldn't agree more, but we need to address issues of precarious employment. I think that is critical. COVID-19 has only exacerbated these issues.

Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Wong.

Hon. Alice Wong: Thank you very much.

As we go deeper into the actual needs of our women in rural areas, we look at law enforcement. Domestic violence and abuse are all very common, not only in rural areas but in urban areas as well.

Since we have to go deeper, can any one of you comment on what more we can do in order to protect those women of all ages, especially in rural areas?

Ms. Jean Bota: I agree that we have to go deeper. We need to start looking at the root causes. Why is there domestic abuse? Why is there elder abuse? Why is there physical abuse in these homes? The resources, education and funding capacity have to be there.

The Chair: We will now go to Ms. Dhillon, for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anju Dhillon (Dorval—Lachine—LaSalle, Lib.): First, I'd like to welcome all the witnesses.

My first question is for Ms. Fuchs.

Ms. Fuchs, you told us about a woman who was sexually assaulted and was unable to testify in court because of her language, as no French interpreter was available.

That is truly unfair. I find it appalling and shocking that she didn't get—

[*English*]

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): On a point of order, Madam Chair, the translation is not working, and I don't know if that's fair to all of our witnesses.

The Chair: No, for sure.

Madam Clerk, can you let me know what the technologists are saying?

The Clerk: They are doing their best, but if it's not possible, they cannot continue.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Do you want me to ask the question in English?

The Clerk: If you could repeat the question, that would be fine.

Madam Chair, perhaps we can give a bit more time.

The Chair: Yes, we'll give you a little bit of time and then you can translate back and forth while we wait.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Okay. Do you want me to ask it in English or in French?

The Chair: You already asked it in French, so you can ask it in English.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: My first question is for Ms. Fuchs.

I found it very shocking and unacceptable that a victim complainant was denied justice because of language. It's very disturbing that somebody cannot testify or be represented in their language. As Ms. Fuchs said, that is our right; it's not a privilege. It's a right to be able to speak in the language of your choice.

Can you tell us why you think this happened? The victim complainant asked for an interpreter from the beginning, and these processes in court take time. It takes months to come to trial. Was there an explanation as to why there was no interpreter, even after it was asked for from the beginning?

Maybe we could start with this.

• (1135)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Louise Chabot (Thérèse-De Blainville, BQ): Madam Chair, I have a point of order.

The Chair: You have the floor, Ms. Chabot.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Asking the question in English does not solve the interpretation problem. I understand the trouble the interpreters are having; it has to do with the equipment.

The fact remains that we had no interpretation into French, and I don't feel that solution is appropriate.

[*English*]

The Chair: I think the interpretation just came back on.

Let me recap for everyone. The question was about a person not receiving justice because of the inability to have it in their language. They requested an interpreter at the very beginning of this 19-month process, so why is that?

Ms. Fuchs, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Renée Fuchs: Thank you.

I understood what the speakers said in both languages. However, I understand the need for French interpretation, especially since we are talking about access to services in French.

Ms. Dhillon, you asked why a situation like that could occur. It's a good question. The judge didn't explain the reasons in detail.

I can say that the issue exists in Sudbury as well. It's sometimes difficult to get interpretation services because there may be only two interpreters available in the whole city. An interpreter may not be able to get to court because of bad weather, such as a snow-storm. Another may be unavailable due to illness or for other reasons. Because the date and duration of a trial is set in advance, you can't do much about it.

It is very unfortunate, but it is neither fair nor acceptable. It's a systemic failure.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Thank you.

Do you have any recommendations to help improve the system and ensure that no victims are denied justice in the future?

Also, do you have data on other cases similar to the one you just mentioned? If you don't have the data on hand, you can send it to us later.

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry. We don't have interpretation on the question.

[Translation]

Can we do anything about the shortage of people able to speak both official languages in this country?

Ms. Renée Fuchs: I assume the question is still directed at me. So I will answer it.

First of all, we need more people in designated bilingual positions. This applies not only to judges, but also to lawyers, Crown attorneys, lawyers working with Legal Aid Ontario, for example, court clerks, court staff and interpreters.

Actually, I'd like to point out that we had a pilot project in Sudbury focused on access to justice in French. We took a regional approach. Participants in the project included people from the Superior Court, the Ontario Court of Justice and victim services. The Crown prosecutor was also involved.

I thought it was a really great project because it led everyone to discuss the issue together, to exchange information and to break down barriers. In the end, we saw an improvement in Sudbury.

I don't have precise data, but I can say that, even in Sudbury, those facing charges—I'm not talking about victims here—who don't have access to an interpreter, judge and staff who speak French, have to stay in prison for one or two more days. Unfortunately, it happens a lot.

• (1140)

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Thank you.

The Chair: We now go to Ms. Chabot for six minutes.

Ms. Louise Chabot: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm not sure, but I believe my colleague from Shefford is back. I can ask the first question and then give her time to ask more questions.

First of all, thank you for your testimony, ladies. It is very informative. We would like to delve into some of these issues much more deeply.

You all agreed that it's hard to get high-speed Internet service and broadband, in rural areas specifically. We continue to strongly advocate for this across all regions of Quebec and elsewhere in Canada.

More specifically, what problems does this lack of access cause for women?

Can Ms. Allen and Ms. Bota answer the question?

[English]

The Chair: I think Ms. Hamm also has her hand up.

[Translation]

Ms. Vicki-May Hamm: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I touched on this topic briefly. It's certainly difficult to provide a lot of details in five minutes.

I spoke of connectivity. It's not just access to the Internet and broadband. We often forget access to the cellular network. A poor network affects education. As we have seen, children are at school half the time in virtual mode and half the time face to face.

It also affects work—whether or not you can telework—and access to resources. The difficulties caused by this reduced connectivity make women and seniors more isolated and vulnerable, especially in rural areas. As Ms. Bota rightly said, you don't need to go very far out in the country to have connectivity issues.

[English]

The Chair: Ms. Bota.

Ms. Jean Bota: Thank you for the question.

Yes, I agree with the previous speaker. Connectivity is a broad topic. We could spend a lot of time on it. In education, we've seen with COVID restrictions how chaotic school has been with teaching children online. Supports, resources, education...it's numerous. It's the way of the world, so rural, urban, whatever, it needs to be there.

The Chair: Ms. Allen.

Ms. Katie Allen: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

To begin, I agree fully with the other witnesses. Reduced access to services really impacts women's vulnerability, and it impacts women's ability to access those critical health, social and justice services. It also puts additional pressure on organizations that are attempting to fill those gaps without the matched support of funding or capacity development. It also creates additional challenges for rural women attempting to access the services within their local communities without having to leave the community, especially with limited access to transportation.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Ms. Larouche, you have the floor for two minutes.

Ms. Andr anne Larouche (Shefford, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to thank my colleague for replacing me and addressing this important issue of connectivity. It is about access to broadband Internet services, but as Ms. Hamm pointed out, it's also about access to cellular networks. Where I'm from in Shefford, we still have several areas where it's hard to get service. For some women in rural areas, access to resources to resolve situations of violence can be complicated because access to a means of communication is difficult.

Given the current disparities in Internet and cellular connectivity, I'd like to hear from the witnesses about the problems this can create for women in emergency situations.

• (1145)

[*English*]

The Chair: Who would like to answer that?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: The question is for any of our witnesses.

Ms. Ren e Fuchs: I can start answering the question.

It's true that women living in rural areas are finding they are in a very delicate situation, especially because of the pandemic. I can mention at least one way in which our little organization succeeded, and that is in implementing a 24-hour hotline for francophone women who are victims of violence. The model accounted for the very different situations faced by francophones in each region and for their specific realities. Our model was also used to help design a similar, but not identical, service for Indigenous communities in the North. The service is called Talk4Healing.

[*English*]

The Chair: That's your time. I'm sorry.

We'll now go to Ms. McPherson for six minutes.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for joining us today. This has been extremely interesting and very important testimony.

I'd like to extend a special welcome to Ms. Bota from Red Deer. As an Albertan, I know she's been going through a very cold snap like the rest of us, so congratulations on surviving.

The first question I have is around data. I'm going to ask everyone, but I'd like to start with Ms. Allen, if I could.

Ms. Allen, you spoke about Canada being a data-poor country. That's very interesting to me, but I'm curious. Could you expand on that a little? Why do you think that is? What attempts have been made to Statistics Canada and to the federal government to increase our data? What are those key pieces of data that are missing? If you could expand on that a little bit, that would be wonderful.

Ms. Katie Allen: There is a significant lack of information and data about rural communities. In particular, there's a real lack of difference between the information on rural, rural remote, and remote. They're not well defined in the data. There's also a lack of understanding about urban communities and rural challenges, because those are quite unique.

There's an inability to publicly access gendered federal data on funding. That impacts organizations that are looking to apply for funding opportunities but don't have those quantitative statistics that can help inform and strengthen funding applications. That has proven to be quite a barrier for rural organizations, in particular rural organizations supporting women's services.

I don't want to take up everyone's time here, but there's one other piece I would like to add. There's really not a lot of data on indigenous peoples, particularly recently formed bands. That has also been an incredible barrier for funding opportunities in particular.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Bota.

Ms. Jean Bota: Madam Chair, I concur with the previous witness. There's a definite gap with statistics.

I just want to talk to you about a project that we have going on in Alberta on building capacity in rural crime prevention. To build a framework—for which we thought it would be quite easy to gather some of this data—was very, very difficult. Further to the other witnesses' comments, there is a definite gap with data, and also with the indigenous peoples. With M tis settlements as well there is a big difference.

• (1150)

Ms. Heather McPherson: Yes—between the data you can access.

Ms. Hamm, in terms of our recovery from COVID-19, how important will it be to get that data in terms of our evaluating whether or not we've had a good GBA+ recovery from COVID-19?

Ms. Vicki-May Hamm: Thank you for the question.

Well, it's not my domain of expertise.

[Translation]

I would say, however, that it's certainly important to be able to accurately interpret the gender and age data, but also the data on many other factors, some of which have already been mentioned. This helps us target vulnerable individuals, target the right projects when applying for funding and direct them to the right people.

Today, technology makes that possible. People are talking about artificial intelligence in the business world. Data plays an extremely important role in ensuring that we are providing adequate service in our regions, determining where we want to spend our funds, what programs are going to be put in place and what policies are going to be developed. Recovering from this pandemic is going to become a budgetary issue.

[English]

Ms. Heather McPherson: That is very important.

On that question, Ms. Fuchs, do you have anything you'd like to add?

The Chair: If you do, Ms. Fuchs, could you raise your mike? Thank you.

[Translation]

Ms. Renée Fuchs: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I am no expert in this area either, but I support what Ms. Allen said.

I would like to say that Legal Aid Ontario has begun collecting data on its clients, including race, gender and sex. The idea is to find out for whom we are litigating, and who we are penalizing. We feel it's pretty obvious, but we need to collect this data to support our position.

[English]

The Chair: We have enough time remaining to do three minutes each.

Ms. Shin, please go ahead for three minutes.

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

Thank you to the witnesses for being with us today.

My question has to do with domestic violence. From what we've heard from other witnesses, first nations women don't have the kind of access that other areas might have. Are there enough shelters and transition houses, and if not, how are their needs being met to help them leave the perpetrators? Is there a system of sensibility among the community groups there that can assist them with something as simple as transportation? Is there an emergency service available through public safety measures from the Government of Canada that are in place to help women leave if they don't have services in their area? I guess that could also apply to rural areas.

That would be my first question, for anyone. Thank you.

Ms. Jean Bota: No, there is not. Speaking of my area, there is no transportation provided. A lot of the agencies operate on shoestring budgets, and they cannot afford the extra cost of transportation. It becomes a very vulnerable situation, especially if you

have children involved. In some cases, when you're talking about indigenous, you also face discrimination in some of the neighbouring communities.

• (1155)

The Chair: Ms. Allen, go ahead.

Ms. Katie Allen: Thank you very much for that important question.

I very much support what Ms. Bota said. From my experience, working with rural shelters, there is an extreme lack of affordable housing and second-stage shelter space. It is an incredible challenge. In terms of transportation, COVID-19 has created some unique barriers, which have impacted the ability of women to leave situations, but also to access services, like justice services. That has been flagged a number of times through the different discussions I've had with practitioners working in rural communities.

I have one last piece to add to that. I've also been hearing that there is not enough flexibility, funding and budget lines to reflect a rural lens for transportation. There is not enough funding for gas, because in rural communities there are much larger geographies to travel, so this has also caused a barrier for accessibility.

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Serré, you have the floor for three minutes.

Mr. Marc Serré (Nickel Belt, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

It's a shame we only have three minutes to talk with the witnesses.

I hope that the four witnesses will continue their work by engaging in provincial and federal politics. We need people like them in politics. I urge them to follow in Ms. Bota's footsteps.

Our government has invested \$50 million in cellular telephony and \$150 million in projects to be completed in the next few months. We have invested \$1.7 billion in high-speed Internet access. It's the largest-ever federal investment in that area. I encourage all the witnesses to share this with private companies. It's really important.

My first question is for you, Ms. Fuchs. Thank you very much for the work you do at the Centre Victoria pour femmes. Francophone minority communities in Northern Ontario face enormous challenges, particularly because of the distances.

I'd like to highlight the fact that, according to your organization's annual report, you are very involved with high schools and have developed ties with the community.

We have been looking into developing a national gender equality strategy. In 30 seconds, can you suggest two or three factors that should be part of the consultations to develop such a strategy?

Ms. Renée Fuchs: Thank you for your question.

I would need some time to think about recommendations. As far as we're concerned, our programs are adapted and a provincial organization helps us train social workers. I would like to see that continue.

In addition, raising awareness of LGBTQ community realities and transgender rights is a very important area that deserves to be explored further.

I would start with those factors.

Mr. Marc Serré: Ms. Hamm, it's a pleasure to meet you. Thank you for the work you do with municipalities.

Quickly, do you have one or two recommendations for our national strategy?

Ms. Vicki-May Hamm: Thank you for your question, Mr. Serré.

I would have to think about that too, but, off the top of my head, I would say that our programs need to be adapted to rural realities, but they also need to include gender-based analysis. For each of the programs and policies we put in place, we need to think about how people will be affected based on their gender. Women's groups have developed tools that could really help. I hope that answers your question.

I'd like to talk about connectivity as well, if I may, since you raised it in your comment. It's true that we've never spent so much money, but what's holding back projects is the relationship with the private sector, particularly the relationship with Bell Canada. It's hard to reach agreements with them, and it's a long and painful process. The money and the political will are there, but we can't get the projects off the ground.

• (1200)

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm so sorry. We could have done so much more with more time, but we're out of time for the panel.

Thank you to all the witnesses for their participation today. If you do have other ideas or comments, feel free to forward them to the clerk.

For the rest of you, who are going to go into the second part of the meeting, we'll suspend while you go and log in.

Thanks so much, and have a super day.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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