



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

43rd PARLIAMENT, 2nd SESSION

Standing Committee on the Status of Women

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 044

PUBLIC PART ONLY - PARTIE PUBLIQUE SEULEMENT

Tuesday, June 22, 2021

Chair: Ms. Marilyn Gladu



Standing Committee on the Status of Women

Tuesday, June 22, 2021

• (1105)

[English]

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

Welcome to meeting number 44 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women.

Today's meeting is in a hybrid format and the proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website.

Witnesses, when it's your turn to speak, I'll recognize you by name, and you can click on your microphone icon to activate your mike. Comments should be addressed through the chair, and interpretation in this video conference is available. If you look at the bottom of your screen, you can pick English, French or the floor, which will give you whatever's being spoken. When you're speaking, speak slowly and clearly for the translators. When you're not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

You will see that, when your time is drawing to a close, I will gently remind you with this little card [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. Obviously, we wish we had more time, but in the time that we have, we try to make sure that we give everybody the chance to speak, and then we'll move along.

Let me just welcome our witnesses today. As an individual, we have Nafisah Chowdhury, who is a lawyer, and from Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at, Calgary, we have Faakhra Choudhry and a host of supportive friends as well. We're glad to have you here today participating in our study on eliminating hate crimes and violence against women in marginalized groups.

We'll begin with Nafisah Chowdhury for five minutes.

Ms. Nafisah Chowdhury (Lawyer, As an Individual): Good morning, honourable members of Parliament, standing committee members and other guests.

In preparing for today, I gave some thought as to what I could cover in the five minutes that have been allotted to me on this most important topic. If I could leave behind one message that the standing committee might remember when it prepares its report to the House, what would that message be?

Islamophobia is a disease that kills. For too many Canadians, it has resulted in serious injury or death, and unless we do something to address it, this disease will continue to spread.

I will tell you a little bit about myself. I graduated from the faculty of law at the University of Toronto in 2007. To my knowledge, I

was the first visibly Muslim woman to graduate from U of T law. After graduating, I joined Miller Thomson LLP, one of Canada's leading national law firms, first as an articling student, then as an associate and finally as a partner, a position that I continue to hold. In my 14 years on Bay Street, being among a very small minority of visibly Muslim women, I've had the opportunity to work with numerous Muslim community organizations on initiatives to help our community. I've also been called upon in an advisory capacity to provide support to community members at critical times.

One such time that will forever stay with me was a summer evening in 2018. I was asked to attend at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto, to speak to the family of Mohammed Abu Marzouk. Earlier that day, the young father and husband had attended a picnic with his family in a Mississauga park, where he was beaten within an inch of his life by two white men yelling racist and Islamophobic slurs. At the time of the attack, Mohammed was with his hijab-clad wife, who wondered whether it was the sight of her hijab that almost cost her husband his life.

That's the reality for Muslims in Canada, especially identifiably Muslim women. It doesn't matter how accomplished we are, how many degrees we've accumulated or how much we pay in taxes. Almost every single one of us has had an encounter with an Islamophobe—harassed, belittled and sometimes assaulted for simply being ourselves. How many of us try to mentally train ourselves to respond calmly if verbally assaulted on a subway or in some other public place? How many of us instinctively make mental notes of the exits in a mosque so that we know where to go if we have to flee? How many friends have I heard from—strong, professional women, leaders in their own right—about the burnout and exhaustion they face from the rampant Islamophobia? It shouldn't be happening, and yet, it continues. In fact, with the wild west that is the Internet, it seems to be getting worse. The more public-facing you are, the more nonsense you have to put up with. I know that many of our Muslim women MPs have had to deal with this, as have countless others.

I'd like to share a small extract from an article written by my good friend, Noor Javed, a journalist with the Toronto Star. Just a few short days ago, she wrote the following:

When I got my first barrage of hate mail as an intern at the Star 15 years ago, and turned to a colleague for support, he looked at my hijab and said: if you want to survive, you will need to have Teflon-like skin. Let the hate bounce off you. Don't let it stick.

But the truth is, even when you tell yourself it doesn't impact you, it still does.

Every email in your inbox with someone telling you they hate you because of your hijab.

Every letter calling you a "dirty raghead."

Every tweet telling you to go back to where you came from.

Every person who walks by and whispers "You're disgusting."

Every smear campaign calling you a terrorist.

Every time someone doubts your news judgment because you are a "lying Muslim."

Every time someone asks if you were a token hire.

Noor's words have resonated with Canadian Muslims far and wide. When the pandemic hit Canada, millions of Canadians understood first-hand what it felt like to be in danger of something that you cannot see but that continuously lurks. As a society, we've come together—and rightfully so—to tackle this danger and to minimize its effects. We need to do the same when it comes to Islamophobia.

• (1110)

I will conclude by repeating the same message that I started with: Islamophobia is a disease that kills. I call upon this committee to prepare a report with concrete strategies to stamp out this disease so that Canadian Muslims can just live our lives peacefully, free of harassment, injury and, most importantly, from the threat of death.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We now go to Ms. Faakhra Choudhry.

Ms. Faakhra Choudhry (Teacher, Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at Calgary): Good morning respected parliamentarians and staff.

Assalam alaikum. Peace be upon you all.

Thank you for having me present today to the Standing Committee on the Status of Women.

Thank you, Madam Chair, for convening today's meeting. I'm very grateful for this opportunity to speak today on such an important topic. I'm saddened that it comes in light of the horrific tragedy against the Muslim family in London, Ontario.

May their souls find peace, and may their families and friends left behind find strength and fortitude.

My name is Faakhra Choudhry, and I belong to the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at. We are a revivalist movement within Islam.

I was born and raised in Canada. I have grown up in Canada's educational system, and now teach at Canadian [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. My parents emigrated here to escape religious persecution they were facing in Pakistan for being Ahmadiyya Muslims, and for the inclusive and cohesive society that Canada is.

I am extremely grateful for all of the blessings that Canada has given to my family and me, and so many other families that share a

story just like my own. It is, of course, important to highlight the positive things Canada has done when mentioning this topic. Some examples of the progress include Motion No. 103, a motion condemning Islamophobia in Canada.

Although not perfect in execution, it was a step in the right direction. The current caliph of our community, Mirza Masroor Ahmad, was invited to Parliament. He was also invited to speak to major broadcasters. Both are monumental steps, seeing a major leader of a Muslim community welcomed by the government and media, a Muslim leader on the front cover, and not as an attack.

We are grateful for these positives, but there are still so many steps that we have to take to become a truly tolerant and accepting society. Systemic racism exists and flourishes in the media, TV shows and movies, in the rhetoric politicians chose to adopt, and in schools and universities.

With regard to Muslim women, we are heavily targeted for looking and dressing differently. The hijab, niqab, burka, or other clothes Muslims garner as a form of modesty, are flashing arrows for anyone who may have prejudices against Muslims, such as Bill 21 in Quebec.

I can recount personal experiences facing discrimination in Canada, unfortunately. My own mother has been honked at numerous times for wearing a niqab, and yelled at to take it off. We have been shouted at to go home while wearing hijabs while walking around downtown. My friend was denied entry to a basketball court by the referee for wearing leggings under her basketball uniform in an attempt to comply with her Islamic beliefs. Cars have been keyed, windows have been smashed, and the list goes on.

Policies need to be created to ensure that racism does not have a place to show [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] in Canada. Online forums, videos, and articles are a big contributor to the radicalization of youth. Those who get Islamophobic ideas and misconceptions often get it online. There is a great need to monitor the cyber world. Greater task forces and resources need to be allocated here, so that tragedies are stopped at the root.

The legislation on hate crimes in Canada also needs to be revisited. The hate crime law does not go far enough to prosecute people who spread hatred, whether online or offline. The RCMP shared, during a meeting, that oftentimes there is not enough evidence to prosecute people who have committed hate crimes, so their actions go unpunished. Systems need to be in place to verify and provide consequences, for those who commit hate crimes, in a more efficient manner.

The education system is another place that needs major reform. We need to remember that the terrorist who murdered the family in London was only 20 years old. Curricula are changed and politicized due to whichever party is in power, which is very problematic. For example, in Alberta right now there is a lot of controversy about the new curriculum, which many criticize for missing the mark on indigenous and religious issues. When that curriculum is taught in classrooms in the future, those students will be misguided and begin to have a train of thought that leads towards possible discriminatory ideologies, sometimes with tragic consequences.

School curricula need to be created keeping in mind the diversity of students in our country. They especially need to involve experts from various groups during the creation process. Textbooks need to be reviewed by diverse voices to check for instances of unconscious bias and harmful language. Teachers and professors need to be held accountable for the personal biases they spread in classrooms. Many of us have experiences of teachers speaking out against Islam in the classroom or spreading what the media has falsely written.

• (1115)

I have had personal experiences while sitting in classes in university with 200 to 300 other students as a heated debate is led by the professor in class as to whether the niqab ban in Quebec was right and feeling like a spotlight is directly on me since I am the only person wearing a hijab. It feels as though my rights are being debated. Teachers need to be taught to include voices in an organic manner, and curricula need to have those voices integrated right from the start.

One way to combat this issue is to increase diversity training in education programs in university. From my personal experience, in the five years I spent at university gaining my education degree, we had only one diversity-in-classrooms topic, which is definitely not enough.

I would like to end my talk today with a quote from the fifth Caliph of our community, Hazrat Mirza Masroor:

If we truly want peace in our time then we must act with justice. We must value equality and fairness. As the Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him) so beautifully stated, we must love for others, what we love for ourselves. We must pursue the rights of others with the same zeal and determination that we pursue our own rights. We should broaden our horizons and look at what is right for the world, rather than what is only right for us. These are the means for peace in our age.

Thank you so much for having me here today and for listening to my remarks.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we're going to go into our first round of questioning, beginning with Ms. Sahota for six minutes.

Ms. Jag Sahota (Calgary Skyview, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here. We appreciate your presentations. I'm sorry to hear some of the personal stories that basically tell us that this is not the Canada that we want to be living in. We want improvements. We want to change how we look at each other so that visible differences—or other differences, for that matter—shouldn't be the basis of how we treat each other.

Ms. Choudhry, you spoke about your personal experience and how the teaching of equality needs to start at a young age. I want to tell you a bit about my experience with the Ahmadiyya community. My father ran a taxi company. We basically had people from all over the world who moved to Canada and drove taxis with him. To me, as a person, I don't look at people and their differences as the basis for how I treat them. In fact, it's the exact opposite. I've grown up with a lot of Muslim friends. Some of my best friends were Muslim friends. The way I see them is just as human beings—that's it. I'm hoping that eventually our younger generation doesn't focus

on the physical differences or the differences in religious beliefs—all of that.

I've grown up like that. I see the name “Naem Chaudhry” here, under “Witnesses”. I call him “Uncle Chaudhry”. I remember staying at my dad's best friend's house, staying there overnight, and his children being our best friends. I'm saddened to hear these stories when this happens in the Canada that I grew up in, where we weren't necessarily taught these differences, and I appreciate the fact that we need to start very young in targeting our younger generation to teach them to treat everyone equally.

My question is going to be on the hate crimes. Can you speak to the meaning of the term “hate crime”? You alluded to that in your presentation, Ms. Choudhry.

I guess we have two Ms. Choudhrys, so the question is for both of them, please.

Our focus in this study is on how we move forward so that what happened in London, Ontario, doesn't happen again. Can you briefly speak about the meaning of the term “hate crime”? Then we'll go to how our government and we parliamentarians can make things better or how we can address and support Muslim women.

• (1120)

The Chair: Very good.

We'll begin with the lawyer—

Ms. Faakhra Choudhry: Thank you.

The Chair: Oh, okay. We'll begin with you, Faakhra.

Ms. Faakhra Choudhry: Thank you so much for your question and your kind remarks and sentiments.

I would say that a hate crime is any act that makes another group feel persecuted or hated. This includes big things like keying someone's car or smashing a window; however, it can also include things that isolate people or leave people out of something they have the right to fully...

For example, I brought the example of my friend who was on a sports team in high school, and the only reason she was not allowed to go and sub on at the last second was that she was wearing leggings under her shorts. I would also include that as a definition of a hate crime, or at least a hate act. Even when people are shouting out racial slurs or screaming them on the street when they're driving past you, or things like this, that's where hate crimes start.

If we don't nip them at the root right where they're beginning, oftentimes they can just become the climate of our society. There are many countries in the world where it has started with people going around and maybe insulting or shouting out hatred against minority groups. Then no one stopped that. The police didn't stop it or they felt like they didn't have the proper authority to do it and maybe the legislation wasn't there. It escalated and escalated to the point where it became systemic and part of the everyday world.

It would be just to nip it exactly when it's starting off. Anything that's spreading hatred should be stopped, especially online. It's very easy to find a lot of hate groups online. Some are hiding in the dark corners, as people have mentioned before, but there are many that are blatantly spreading their hatred, even on social media and things like that. It should definitely be monitored. Social media organizations should also be encouraged to stop this hatred.

There are a lot of things about freedom of voice and freedom of speech and things like that, but of course it goes to an extent.

Thank you.

The Chair: Excellent.

Nafisah.

Ms. Nafisah Chowdhury: Thank you, Ms. Sahota.

I think the question was what is my definition of a hate crime. As a lawyer, obviously I know that it can be a technical term. There are laws surrounding hate that are enshrined in the Criminal Code.

I know there are certain criticisms of the laws and the bars that have been set with respect to those laws, for example, the need for attorney general consent and those kinds of things. It can set high bars.

However, I don't really want to focus on the technical aspects of what amounts to a hate crime and the technical drafting and the language surrounding that. It's an important question to look into, but I leave that to the experts, who really practice in this area and can speak in a more educated way than I can.

What I do want to focus on is hate speech and the fact that words really matter. Words kill. We don't often think about that. As kids we grew up hearing, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." However, words hurt. We know that if we're not actively making efforts to ensure that the words that result in injury and death are not being used and are not proliferating and we do nothing to stop that, then it's just going to get worse. We see this happening.

I understand—again, as a lawyer—that there's freedom of expression and that it's a balancing act between free speech and regulating what people are able to say. However, as a society we've already understood and accepted that when it comes to certain types of speech, it is unacceptable and there's no place for it in society, because real harm is associated with those kinds of hateful speech.

Also, it's proliferating online in particular, where people can come out with a cloak of anonymity and feel free to be able to radicalize people and send out these messages of hatred that others are consuming. The other witness, Ms. Choudhry, referred to social media platforms. There is a place for government in all of this in regulating what's being allowed, what's being permitted and what we're allowing other Canadians and other people to consume and then to act upon. If there's a message here of what to take a productive focus on, or something that's critical to focus on and that needs further attention, it's regulating hate speech online.

• (1125)

The Chair: Very good.

Now we're going to go to Ms. Zahid for six minutes.

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thanks to Ms. Nafisah Chowdhury and Ms. Faakhra Choudhry. We'll have to use the first names to distinguish you before the committee. I've known Nafisah Chowdhury for a long time and have been at different events where I have heard her views on important issues.

Thank you for your important testimony today.

My first question is for Ms. Nafisah Chowdhury. You have previously stated in one of your interviews that legal problems require a multi-faceted approach. Similarly, you've said that it's important and very much needed to bring multiple perspectives to address issues like hate crimes and violence against women.

Can you please explain how to bring forward these multi-faceted approaches to address issues like hate crimes and violence against women? How can we challenge ourselves to look at these issues from multiple perspectives? What do you feel acts as a barrier to bringing the [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] be broken?

Ms. Nafisah Chowdhury: Thank you, Ms. Zahid. I appreciate the question. It's a very big one, which is tough to address in a short period of time.

I think maybe I'll start there. It's such a big issue that I think sometimes we're caught as deer in the headlights. We see the impacts, right? We saw the Quebec mosque shooting. We've heard the stories. The Mohammed Abu Marzouk story was widely reported. We heard about the security guard at IMO who had his throat slit, and now the London...I don't want to call it a "tragedy". It is tragic, but it shouldn't have happened, and calling it a "tragedy" makes it seem like it was out of our control. These kinds of things shouldn't be happening. I think, as a society, if we're acting together and if we're actually putting things in place, we can avoid these kinds of things from happening.

What happens when you're dealing with an issue as big as that, which has so many sources and so many institutional reasons that create them? There are also individuals and their upbringing, and things that fall outside of the public sphere. We sometimes get a little frozen in trying to figure out how we even begin to tackle this issue.

When I talk about a multi-faceted approach, I think it can't just be a legal approach. You can't legislate away hate. We know that. We can't just set a law and expect that people are going to abide by it, that it's a panacea and we're living in a post-racial society. We know that's never going to happen.

If we know that the laws are not sufficient, does that mean that we do nothing from a legal perspective? Absolutely not. There's still a place for government and legislation when it comes to trying to minimize and deter those who are inclined to engage in hateful acts and hateful speech and to proliferate hate. There's a place for a legislative response.

There's also a place for a policy response. It's [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] that policing, the RCMP. We have CSIS, our spy agency. We've got the CRA. There's been a report recently about the unfair targeting of Muslim charitable organizations. These kinds of things set a tone in society. When our government agencies are seen as targeting Muslim community institutions or being unfair to Muslim community institutions, there's a psychological impact of that, as a society, which sort of underscores or reinforces this messaging that Muslims are scary, Muslims are suspicious, Muslims are bad. We have to be conscious of that.

From a government policy perspective, multi-faceted means setting aside the legislation. That needs to be addressed. Also, looking from a policy perspective, it's addressing these systemic issues that exist in our government agencies and addressing institutions and the unfair targeting of Muslim community organizations. That's one issue.

Then there's the [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. We have the media. Of course, the government doesn't regulate the media, nor should it, but perhaps, from a government perspective, what can we do to help change the narrative? There are programs. Help young Muslims come up through the pipelines. Create opportunities for folks who want to get in and who have a different perspective on these kinds of issues. If you're not at the table, then you'll never be able to tell the story, right?

I will say that it's not all gloom and doom. We've seen a number of young Muslim journalists, for example, who have been rising through the ranks, who have done well for themselves, but we need more of it. There's a place for the government to step in and to encourage people.

The education component is another sort of multi-faceted approach—which Faakhra referred to—from a curriculum perspective, teaching young people from a young age that these kinds of issues matter.

Going back to the cultural piece, at the Institute of Islamic Studies at University of Toronto, for example, Professor Anver Emon there is hoping to put together an archive. They're in the planning stages of that for a Muslim community archive. We can get our stories together and gather them and preserve our history, which will be of benefit, hopefully, to Canada, so that Canadians and journalists and media and cultural institutions can draw upon our narratives to hopefully recast the stories and the images of Muslims in Canada.

• (1130)

There are many pieces to this. In my view, we should be pursuing them concurrently; we can't just focus on one at any given time. At the same time, it's important for the government to know that there is a role for it to play in those pieces that it can assist with.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: We'll now go to Ms. Normandin for six minutes.

Ms. Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you very much.

I'd like to thank the witnesses, Nafisah Chowdhury and Faakhra Choudhry, for their testimony. I think that simply talking

about it is already a step in the right direction. People need to be more alert when they see something unacceptable.

I'll draw a parallel with what I heard in a very good report yesterday on the CBC about elected officials and people being harassed online. What struck me was that we realized that people who commit these acts often don't have a criminal record. They're just ordinary people, and it takes us by surprise.

Do you feel that Islamophobic gestures come from the average person, or is there a typical profile of an attacker, harasser or hateful person?

[*English*]

The Chair: We'll start with Faakhra.

Ms. Faakhra Choudhry: Is the question on hateful behaviours? Sorry, I just wanted to clarify it.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Yes, I'm talking about hateful behaviours.

[*English*]

Ms. Faakhra Choudhry: There are definitely people who make good choices in society and people who make not so great choices in society. I definitely don't think it's everyone in society who's going around spreading hate and making hateful comments.

For example, I can remember at university that there was a time when someone decided they were going to put Islamophobic posters all around the campus. They decided after school one day that they were going to print out hundreds of these posters and put them around the university. Of course, when we saw those posters, we were not surprised, because this is the narrative that we've been living in. We see it in the media and all these things, but we were silent, of course. What came out of that is that every time there's a tragedy—something comes out in the media or something negative happens—a lot of positive comes out afterwards as well. We've seen this with the London, Ontario tragedy as well, where we've had a chance to see the amazing things that happen, the amazing people in the world and the amazing acts they do.

A lot of times people are just holding their opinions in, even if they're positive. Many times when they're negative, they like to proclaim them and shout them out, but many times when they're positive, they don't feel the need to stand with people, hold vigils, give support or be an ally. When things like this happen, then you really see the beautiful fabric of Canada and the beautiful multiculturalism get together.

I definitely do not think that everyone has these hateful thoughts in their mind. Maybe they have prejudices that come from birth. Some people are trying to unlearn them; some people are accepting them, but there are many people in Canada who are, in fact, being allies, whether it's for Muslim groups, whether it's for Black communities or whether it's for indigenous groups. We saw that with the indigenous community when that horrible gravesite was found. I see so many people in my neighbourhood now who have orange shirts in their windows. That's amazing to see as well.

Thank you.

• (1135)

The Chair: Go ahead, Nafisah.

Ms. Nafisah Chowdhury: Thank you, Ms. Normandin. *Bonjour.*

I agree very much with the comments of Faakhra. I think that the majority of Canadians are not hateful people or are not intending to cause harm, but we're all human. This goes for every single one of us on this call, myself included. We have our own prejudices and we have our own biases. They are informed by our surroundings, our environments and our upbringing, to the extent that if we're not examining what our biases are and if we're not having conversations about them, then unfortunately, we can act out on them.

Drawing it back to online again, what's happening is that people are finding their echo chambers. Where you already have a predisposition to a particular viewpoint—even if, in the past, you may have not been inclined to do anything about it—when you find your echo chamber that's encouraging you and goading you on, unfortunately, that's creating situations for people who might not otherwise have spoken out about their personal prejudices. They're finding that the Internet is a safe space for them and they're encouraged to put that out there. That, in turn, encourages other people, so it proliferates that way.

I like to think that people inherently are good and that, given a choice, most people wouldn't want to harm their neighbour, their friends or their colleagues. If you know someone and they've been humanized to you, it's much more difficult to hate them, dislike them or to see them as foreign, suspicious and scary. Some of overcoming these barriers requires us to know each other and get to know each other. That means we need more participation in every aspect of society.

I started on Bay Street 14 years ago and there was nobody who looked like me. It just didn't exist in the Bay Street firms. I saw this as an opportunity to speak to my colleagues. I was always very open and I encouraged people to ask me questions. I know if they don't ask me questions, then they're probably assuming and that's not good. I found the discussions to be really eye-opening. People just have questions. They don't know any better and assumptions are made, yet when they have an opportunity to have an honest conversation with someone, people are open to expanding their horizons. Once you become friends with someone, those things fall away and we're just two people having a chat. It would be good to have programs that encourage people to get to know each other.

I do think that as a society—as Canadians—we also have to be aware that just because we pride ourselves on being a multicultural and diverse society that lauds diversity, this somehow means that Canadians don't harbour these racist sentiments. Unfortunately, many Canadians, both in cities and in rural neighbourhoods, continue to harbour these unfortunate sentiments. I don't think they do so maliciously. I think a lot of it is in ignorance, but it exists. I think we would be silly to think that we're a post-racial society. We're not.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

Now we're going to Ms. Mathyssen for six minutes.

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

Thank you to the witnesses for coming before us today and sharing your thoughts.

I want to build from this past conversation. We've had a lot of conversations here at this committee on a variety of issues, but we just finished the study on sexual misconduct in the military. We were talking about women not being hired or brought into the military. The military has been trying to ensure that it has more women, not only as leaders but also just as service people, and ensure that there is a greater mix and that greater attention is drawn to this.

Mrs. Chowdhury, when you talk about getting to know the people within your workplace and ensuring that there is a multicultural workplace, at least at a federal level, there is—

• (1140)

The Chair: I'm sorry, Ms. Mathyssen, could you raise your microphone closer to your nose. We're getting some popping sounds.

Thank you.

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen: I thought I had done that well before.

Within the workplace, of course, the federal government has an employment equity strategy and act, but there continue to be a lot of racism and accountability problems within that Employment Equity Act.

Can you maybe talk about strengthening that equity act? I know it's only at a federal level, but it would have lots of implications for provincial levels as well, by setting that bar or that standard... What would be the benefits from that investment in under-represented groups and bringing more of them into that Employment Equity Act?

Ms. Nafisah Chowdhury: Those are the types of strategies that are critical, because they send a message. I think there is a symbolic benefit to it apart from the practical benefits. When the government sends a message at the highest level of government that this is something that's important to our country, that's important to us as a society and actually legislates it such that there are consequences for... You can pay lip service to something, and they say that talk is cheap. You can talk the talk or you can walk the walk. Sometimes people need to be given that additional push in order to walk the walk.

That's why I think these programs are very important. They're going to draw criticism. Balancing and all those kinds of things always have to happen. From a symbolic perspective and from a practical perspective, there are huge benefits to those kinds of programs.

Most of my practice, about 90% of it, is employment law. I don't practise at the federal level. Most of my practice is provincially regulated. I see issues and challenges that come up in the workplace all the time. I mostly manage [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] side. I act for employers and businesses, and understand the day-to-day challenges that employers face. At the same time, it's so important to have diverse workplaces and to have employers who are empowered to know how to manage diverse workforces.

To the extent that there are resources available.... Big corporations that I represent do okay in this sphere. The smaller businesses struggle a little bit more. They don't have the resources and they don't have the time to understand. Often, people will hire from their own communities or those kinds of things.

That being said, I'm seeing more and more that workforces are becoming more diverse. That's just a reflection of Canadian society. We'd like to see management start to reflect Canadian society as well so it's not just the entry-level positions. That's a whole other topic that I could get into sometime, but it's a very good one, so thank you for raising it.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: In getting rid of a lot of the barriers that people of colour, Muslim people, indigenous people and Black people face, but mainly when we talk about new immigrants and the removal of barriers in terms of the requirements within a specific profession, both of you would see that within your individual professions. Perhaps you could talk about the impact that has on the community as well.

The Chair: Faakhra.

Ms. Faakhra Choudhry: Thank you for the question.

It's really important to remove those barriers. I was thinking while Nafisah was talking and I agree with all the points that she brought up. It is important to increase the diversity in the workplace. It is a symbol and gives power to all the diverse groups, just in Canada in general, when we start seeing more diverse workplaces, more diverse schools, more diverse [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. It is really important that the people hired are not just viewed as diversity hires, because often they can receive backlash for that from their management, from their co-workers, from various other groups. They might be feeling that as well.

Removing those barriers is very important so that they're able to receive the education, receive the same quality training, receive the same opportunities. Then when they go to those workplaces, they feel confident in their ability to execute whatever their job requirement is, and it's not about, "This one person is Black, and this other person is Muslim. They were hired, but they might not have the qualifications." Every single person who is in the workplace must have confidence as well, not just the person who is going in.

It's amazing that the workplaces are getting more diverse. Of course there are some that are still plainly one type of ethnic group or [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] the first person who is entering that workplace. It is really important to have those conversations. Many times that person might not want to be the person who is answering all the questions, representing the whole faith or the whole race, or whatever the situation might be.

When they have that confidence, then removing those barriers is very important, as was mentioned.

Thank you.

• (1145)

The Chair: Very good.

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

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

I was really impressed by all of the witnesses. Having been a teacher myself and having had a lot of my own students go to law school and having met a lot of wonderful female lawyers, I will say that your performance in fighting for something worth fighting for, because we can all—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Ms. Wong. Can you raise your mike closer to your mouth? It's popping.

Hon. Alice Wong: I'm sorry. Yes.

I think it's important to note that education plays a very important role. You can see that, even with young kids. Some of my own relatives, both boys and girls, come home and say, "They call me bananas" or "They tell me to go back to China." Actually, they were born here.

I'd just like any of the witnesses today to comment more on the importance of really having that education done. What can the communities do, for example, on the true meaning of different religions? Definitely the international media hasn't helped at all because they only tell horror stories and yes, unfortunately, there are lots of [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] in the world, but then we were educated by the international media to actually, unfortunately, build our own biases.

Would any of you like to comment more on the education part and on how your community can actually get involved in the classrooms or schools so that they truly understand what Muslim means or how the religion itself is about peace and harmony?

I belong to a multi-faith group in Richmond, and we work so nicely together. We have kids reciting their own literature. It was a beautiful scene, and that whole Number Five Road in Richmond is called the "Highway to Heaven". We have all religious groups with their temples and schools on the same street. We are very proud of that harmony, but that harmony needs to be built right from a very young age.

Please, any of you, feel free to comment on that.

The Chair: I see Nafisah.

Ms. Nafisah Chowdhury: Sure, I'm happy to speak to the issue.

It's been a while since I've been back in the school system. Look, I went through the public school system, right from junior kindergarten through to high school. I grew up in Scarborough, east of Toronto. I guess it's part of Toronto, but on the east side. I don't know if the curriculum has really changed a lot since I went through the system.

What really stood out to me is that it wasn't really part of the curriculum at all. You don't learn about other people's religions, faith systems or cultural practices and those kinds of things. Maybe you pay some lip service here and there for a celebratory event, but in terms of an actual deep dive into what are people's belief systems and these tenets that Canadians live their lives by...

The only time I learned about it was when I was a high school student and I signed up for an elective class, which was [*Technical difficulty—Editor*], one of my favourite classes. I absolutely loved it. I loved learning about.... I obviously know my own faith tenets, but learning about others was so eye-opening. It was a learning experience that continues to pay dividends now in my career decades later. But it was an elective course. It was me and 25 other students who happened to be in the course. Nobody else was in it. I'm hopeful that from a curricular perspective that more attention will be paid to this for young folks who are coming up through the system so that they're learning these things from a younger age and it's not just 30 people out of a 2,000-person school who are getting this kind of education.

I think that is important. The multi-faith events happen and certainly those who participate I'm sure get a lot from it, but often-times you're preaching to the choir. I think that's also true of the world religions classes, for those of us who were interested in taking it, because we obviously had an interest in it and we wanted to learn. We wanted to not be ignorant, wholly ignorant, of these kinds of things.

How do you get to those folks who are not part of this choir? That's the challenge. From an interfaith perspective again, you can't force people into those kinds of programs.

I think, Ms. Wong, you spoke about how we get a lot of training by international media. That's just the reality of our society. If that's the case, the folks who are not in the choir, if that's how they're being educated, then we have to start thinking about how we can ensure that where they do get their education from reflects the education they need to be getting. If that's going to be the source, let's do what we can to ensure that source has the right messaging in it, or at least counter-narratives to the harmful messaging that it contains.

• (1150)

Hon. Alice Wong: Chair, how much time do I have?

The Chair: None.

Now we're going to Ms. Sidhu, for five minutes.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu (Brampton South, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all of the witnesses for joining us today.

My question is for Nafisah Chowdhury.

You said in your statement that hate and racism is a disease that we we need to stop. A recent study found that more than 6,000 right-wing extremist channels, pages and accounts on social media are linked to Canadians. I have spoken to members of our local Peel Islamic Cultural Centre, other Muslim community groups, many ethnic groups, and they have expressed concerns about these right-wing groups.

Can you tell us if you believe that the toxic online environment contributes to the recent hate incidents? What are your recommendations to combat that?

Ms. Nafisah Chowdhury: The short answer is yes. I think that the online toxicity is a huge contributing factor to the rise in Islamophobia and the rise in racist conduct, quite frankly, beyond Islamophobia.

Again, it's just going back to these echo chambers where people are finding themselves in groups, online discussions or social media channels where the worst elements of their prejudices are being spoken to and being encouraged. Then they're being given a platform to come together, to organize and to attack, unfortunately, upon this hateful messaging. It really is unfortunate that these platforms exist, and it's a very difficult task that government has in terms of trying to regulate it. I understand that it's a difficult task. I understand the challenges that come with it, particularly when we're living in a free and democratic society where freedom of expression is something that, rightfully, we hold dear in our society. We need to toe that line between censorship and tackling things, again, that are actually resulting in death.

There's a harm principle here. As a society... Decades ago when we first came up with our hate speech laws, these discussions happened. It was recognized and accepted that words can kill. I remember learning in my first-year constitutional law class about screaming "Fire!" in a crowded theatre and the impact that that has. You cause a stampede and people die just from one word. Words do have an impact. When people are finding these forums online that are unregulated and that allow them to, with the cloak of anonymity, proliferate these very, very harmful messages and recruit others into this hateful ideology that they're teaching, it's a problem. There are going to be impacts. There are going to be consequences. People will continue to die, unfortunately, unless we do something about it. We can't expect that, if we just turn a blind eye and pretend that it's not happening, things are going to be better. It won't. It won't get better.

Even though it's a difficult thing for the government to do—to have to regulate, to figure out how to regulate it—it's something that the government must do. I don't envy the task of government, and your task as legislators. You have a difficult road ahead, but it's a critical road that needs to be taken immediately. It can't be sort of put on the back burner.

As a society, as Canadians, we don't shy away from things just because they're hard. We have to do them. That means talking to the people who are experts in this field to come up with a way to have laws, regulations and policies in place that curb that harmful stuff that's going on in a way that still respects our liberties.

• (1155)

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: Thank you.

My next question is for the representative of Ahmadiyya community. We have an engaged and committed Ahmadiyya community here in Brampton. I commend their work across Canada in fighting hate. We have a vaccine clinic at Masjid Mubarak...raising funds for the community, and we are always grateful for their work.

However, Ms. Choudhry, another aspect of this study is focused on cyber-bullying, which is more frequently experienced by young Canadians. Are you aware of young members of your community being cyber-bullied for their religion?

Ms. Faakhra Choudhry: Many times, with regard to cyber-bullying, those who are going through it keep it private. Many times, even parents.... It can be happening in the same household. Their child can be feeling so many types of emotions and going through so many breakdowns, and they have no idea because when you have a phone, a tablet or whatever you use, you can keep your life very, it seems, in categories: your online world, your impersonal world, your home life, your school life.

In my personal experience, I know that there are people who, when they post things, for example, on Twitter, will get a lot of backlash just because they might be Muslim or just because they might be Ahmadiyya Muslim—especially on Twitter. If you go on Facebook, if you go outside of just your friend group and you post on another forum, if you go on any other type of social media like Instagram, if you're posting on a public picture, there are many, many people who will reply back with hateful things. Oftentimes, it's the same people who are just going to the different social media accounts and going to different posts just to copy and paste their same hateful comments over and over again. They don't want to have a reasonable dialogue with you if you try to engage with them. All they want to do is spew their hate.

I've had that personal experience for sure, but I do believe that the extent of it is not understood by myself or even parents, teachers or whomever it may be because many times people just keep it inside or just accept it as a normal thing that happens online, which is one of the worst things. It shouldn't be accepted as normal.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go to Ms. Normandin, then to Ms. Mathysen.

Go ahead, Ms. Normandin.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Ms. Chowdhury, I'd like to come back to the comment you made in response to my last question. You talked about the preconceived notions that we may sometimes have unconsciously, that can resonate with others and that may be ignored or, worse, condoned.

I'd like your perspective [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. The concept of “ordinary sexism” has been developed, which covers small, everyday gestures that go unnoticed but contribute in an insidious way to hatred in general. Our study is on violent crime and online hate. Would it also be appropriate to address what we might call “ordinary Islamophobia”, if such a thing exists?

[English]

Ms. Nafisah Chowdhury: Yes. Absolutely. I think we call it the unconscious bias or microaggression that folks deal with on a day-to-day basis. As women we've all experienced it. I'm sure everyone in this group discussion has experienced what it feels like, as women, to have to deal with these microaggressions. When we're having these kinds of discussions and we're talking about intersectionality,

a woman from a marginalized group or racialized community has to deal with the same sorts of microaggressions that may impact them as a woman. Compound that with having to deal with the fact that, on top of that, they are a visible Muslim. If they are a Black Muslim woman, it's one step even worse—they're Black, Muslim and female.

Yes, there absolutely are day-to-day things that we women have to put up with to begin with, and all of the other difficulties or the microaggressions that come with it are layered on. If the government already has a strategy to deal with these things or to look at these things and come up with ways to overcome them, then I would absolutely encourage that. There are other categories, like microaggressions, that come from being a visible Muslim. It's not just women. Muslim men also face it. As diverse communities, we also have to be careful about.... Faakhra has talked about being from the Ahmadiyya community. She's a minority within a minority. That further compounds the issues.

Certainly, there are challenges that we face by being Muslim. I can only speak for myself, but as part of my identity, I feel that more as a Muslim person, as a visible Muslim person, than as a woman. If I had to rank which one I feel the impacts of more, it would be the fact that I have this cloth on my head, which sort of screams to the world what my religious beliefs are, and some of the fallout from that.

I don't know if that answers your question.

• (1200)

The Chair: That's very good.

You have the final question, Ms. Mathysen.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I think that is key, that intersectionality, and understanding it and applying it to the legislation, ideally, that we bring forward. Certainly, legislation on online hate is well overdue and much required.

This is for both of you. I had put forward what was long asked for by the Muslim community, the national action summit on Islamophobia, which hopefully will occur this summer. I'm asking you to maybe each put forward a couple of recommendations that you would like to see come from that summit, and then the actions taken by the government to fulfill them.

The Chair: We'll start with Faakhra.

Ms. Faakhra Choudhry: Thank you for the question.

I'm so glad to hear there is a summit happening in the summer on this topic, because it's so important.

Some of the recommendations I made in my introductory remarks as well, so I can just repeat them quickly.

For me and for my community, monitoring online hate and online hate groups, hate speech, social media and having restrictions on things like this is really important to discuss at the summit. We have gone through those throughout our talk, so I'm sure everyone here is aware of that.

As well, it's really important that in education—we've talked about this as well—we talk about the curriculum, how teachers, professors, are trained, that they be trained properly, and that the curriculum incorporate diverse voices, which doesn't just mean having a math textbook and having a diverse name or having a diverse picture. That is not really diversity in the curriculum. It's having diversity in the curriculum in a proper way, like Nafisah mentioned before.

When I was attending school, kindergarten to grade 12, and university as well in Alberta, there were not many diverse topics. It shouldn't be up to the teachers to sometimes bring in a topic, or sometimes talk about current events, because oftentimes maybe the teachers are also not fully aware of all of the diverse groups of students that are around them and all the diverse groups that are in Canada. They also bring their prejudices and biases. Oftentimes it can feel as though your teacher is misrepresenting your group. When you're a child, when you're a student, you do not feel great at all when your teacher, whom you look up to, who is in charge of 30-plus students in the class, is maybe spewing hate about Muslim groups or Black communities or indigenous groups, or whatever the situation may be.

Teacher training definitely needs to happen, as well as professor training, curriculum changes, and looking at online hate. Thank you.

The Chair: Very good.

Nafisah, have you a brief final comment?

Ms. Nafisah Chowdhury: Thank you so much.

Thank you to all the attendees today for the opportunity to speak.

Ms. Mathysen, thank you for being a proponent of this national summit. I really appreciate it.

I echo what Faakhra said. Regulating online hate is really critical. I really do see that as being a very important piece that the government needs to move on, because only the government, really, is empowered and able to address this in a way that can make a difference, that needs to make a difference. That would be number one.

Number two, I know there has been some discussion about the appointment of a special envoy. I like that suggestion, provided that it's resourced, because we don't want just the envoy who is sitting there in a symbolic way so that we can say, "Okay, we have an envoy." It would be nice to have someone who is dedicated to addressing this topic and to helping the government address this topic, who is properly resourced to be able to provide the feedback and be the guidance that the government can use on this topic. There are other community groups who will have other suggestions, and I'm sure they will have very good suggestions.

Very briefly, those are my comments.

• (1205)

The Chair: Wonderful.

Before I do my final thanking of the witnesses, we have Monsieur Serré.

Mr. Marc Serré (Nickel Belt, Lib.): Just quickly, Madam Chair, can you ask the witnesses to provide any other additional recommendations in writing to the committee?

The Chair: Yes.

If there are things that you wanted to say that we didn't get to, I would invite the witnesses to please send that to the clerk, and it will be part of our report.

I want to thank both of you for excellent and amazing testimony today. We are going to do great things together, and I appreciate it very much.

While we're in the public realm, I also want to thank the clerk and the analysts, all of our interpreters and those technicians who have worked in the room throughout this long session so much for their work. You've done excellent work in the committee. You've been amazing.

Now we are going in camera for our final committee business.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

Published under the authority of the Speaker of
the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

The proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees are hereby made available to provide greater public access. The parliamentary privilege of the House of Commons to control the publication and broadcast of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees is nonetheless reserved. All copyrights therein are also reserved.

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the Copyright Act. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the Copyright Act.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Also available on the House of Commons website at the following address: <https://www.ourcommons.ca>

Publié en conformité de l'autorité
du Président de la Chambre des communes

PERMISSION DU PRÉSIDENT

Les délibérations de la Chambre des communes et de ses comités sont mises à la disposition du public pour mieux le renseigner. La Chambre conserve néanmoins son privilège parlementaire de contrôler la publication et la diffusion des délibérations et elle possède tous les droits d'auteur sur celles-ci.

Il est permis de reproduire les délibérations de la Chambre et de ses comités, en tout ou en partie, sur n'importe quel support, pourvu que la reproduction soit exacte et qu'elle ne soit pas présentée comme version officielle. Il n'est toutefois pas permis de reproduire, de distribuer ou d'utiliser les délibérations à des fins commerciales visant la réalisation d'un profit financier. Toute reproduction ou utilisation non permise ou non formellement autorisée peut être considérée comme une violation du droit d'auteur aux termes de la Loi sur le droit d'auteur. Une autorisation formelle peut être obtenue sur présentation d'une demande écrite au Bureau du Président de la Chambre des communes.

La reproduction conforme à la présente permission ne constitue pas une publication sous l'autorité de la Chambre. Le privilège absolu qui s'applique aux délibérations de la Chambre ne s'étend pas aux reproductions permises. Lorsqu'une reproduction comprend des mémoires présentés à un comité de la Chambre, il peut être nécessaire d'obtenir de leurs auteurs l'autorisation de les reproduire, conformément à la Loi sur le droit d'auteur.

La présente permission ne porte pas atteinte aux privilèges, pouvoirs, immunités et droits de la Chambre et de ses comités. Il est entendu que cette permission ne touche pas l'interdiction de contester ou de mettre en cause les délibérations de la Chambre devant les tribunaux ou autrement. La Chambre conserve le droit et le privilège de déclarer l'utilisateur coupable d'outrage au Parlement lorsque la reproduction ou l'utilisation n'est pas conforme à la présente permission.

Aussi disponible sur le site Web de la Chambre des communes à l'adresse suivante :
<https://www.noscommunes.ca>