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Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

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• (1540)

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 45 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

Today's study is on the experience of women veterans.

[*English*]

Today's meeting is a hybrid meeting. All of our witnesses are here in person with us today. We have one member online.

Just for the sake of our witnesses, you might see some questions from one of the members online. Otherwise, most folks are here in the room.

Before we get started, I want to let everyone know that obviously we will probably be dealing with a bit of difficult subject matter, particularly for our witnesses today. I would remind everybody to make sure you show some compassion for our witnesses. They are going to be sharing some very difficult experiences, in some cases, that they've gone through. Please, show some compassion for them.

I want to remind everybody—our witnesses, members, everyone in the room and those who are with us online—that if anything you hear today causes you some distress, including, for our witnesses, the things you're sharing, if there's help that you need from this committee, we want to make sure those resources are available to anyone who needs them. If you feel there's a need for those resources, please see our clerk. She will help to ensure that you get the resources you need.

One other thing I want to let everyone know before we get started is that our witnesses have asked that, given the subject matter we're dealing with, following the opening remarks and the first round of questioning, we might take just a short break to allow our witnesses that opportunity. If that's okay with members, that's what we intend to do. We'll make it fairly short, but I think we have some time.

Ms. Blaney, you have your hand up.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you so much, Mr. Richards. It's good to see you in the chair today.

I know you and I had a conversation earlier today about allowing a few extra minutes if our witnesses need it, if they're talking about

sensitive situations. I just want to see what your thoughts are on that.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): As you mentioned, it can be difficult to share the experiences that some of our witnesses may be sharing with us today. We have a two-hour meeting today, and we have the time for it. We generally have one-hour panels, therefore we have five minutes for each witness. In this case... Let's just put it this way: I will be flexible and understanding of the need, if you're sharing with us something that is a very personal experience, for a little extra time. I don't think you're going to find me to be very strict in that regard today. I think that's probably a good guide for us in this committee during this study, particularly since we have a two-hour session.

Thank you for raising that, Ms. Blaney.

Yes, I will be quite lenient with our witnesses, but probably slightly less so with you as committee members. However, I also want to let the witnesses know that if a committee member has asked you a question, I'm going to do my best to try to give you the time you need to answer it, understanding that we have to respect that every party needs to have an equal opportunity to share. If I signal that it is near the end of time, I just ask that you try to wrap it up as quickly as you can.

Thank you. Let me now introduce our witnesses today.

We have with us, as individuals, Donna Riguidel, Major (Retired) and Christine Wood, who is a veterans advocate.

With the LGBT Purge Fund, we have Michelle Douglas, executive director.

We also have with us the founder of Servicewomen's Salute Canada, Rosemary Park, Lieutenant-Commander (Retired).

We will go nearly in that order. I'm going to allow Ms. Wood the opportunity to wrap up.

We'll start with you, Ms. Riguidel, and you have five minutes or so to give us your opening remarks.

Ms. Donna Riguidel (Major (Retired), As an Individual): Thank you.

I wrestled with what to say here today, given this rare opportunity. I know that many of you, either through other testimony or through the media, have heard stories about assault, abuse and other mistreatment at the hands of a system that was not ready for women in 1988, but still is not ready today, in 2023. Do I talk about my first few years—I joined at 17—assaulted and harassed, culminating in one of my instructors, who eventually rose to the rank of colonel, trying to order me to give him a blow job; how the men broke the lights in the hotel room where we had our course party after basic training, so we wouldn't know who was touching us and were trapped in the dark; my first night at my unit, unsure and anxious, when I was pulled aside and handed a love letter from my course officer from basic training; or how I tried to gut it out because the military would pay for my future even after I was first diagnosed with PTSD, on meds to help me sleep, and raped by my then boyfriend, a higher-ranked unit member?

I will tell a story that until a few months ago was under a publication ban.

When I was 21, I went on the last course I would ever take as an NCM. It was in Kingston, and Kingston had just introduced co-ed barracks. From day one, I did not feel good about this course. The first morning, at PT, my sergeant, who was in the position of course warrant, ordered me to run up front with him.

Linemen were scaling the outside of the building to get into our room when we were sleeping at night. I had to buy new underwear about halfway through the first week, because somebody had stolen all of mine out of the dryer.

I was struggling. The previous year, I had been in a car accident. A friend of mine died in my arms. The first time my new boyfriend at that point and I had sex, I was so drunk I couldn't stand, let alone consent.

I went to the MIR and requested to be RTU'd. They gave me a day of bedrest and told me to come back the next day. My sergeant came to my room to talk to me about going home. I told him everything: all my struggles, my PTSD, the meds that I hated taking—all of it. He was kind and compassionate and encouraged me to finish the training. He said that it was important to my career. I was comforted to know he cared.

My roommates came in after dismissal that day, all excited, and said that the sergeant had ordered them to take me out that night to help me relax. I thought, what's the harm? The whole course came out. We all drank a lot. It was a good time. My sergeant even showed up at the end of the night and told everybody that he would see me back safely. I don't remember the reason he gave for having to go to his room first; I just remember wanting to sleep as he took off some of my clothes. I was so tired, and I kept closing my eyes. I said I wanted to leave and he just held me down.

Again, this was somebody who not only had my career in his hands, but many times, my life. I was so tired and I said I wanted to leave. I was half naked when I told him that I couldn't do this anyway; I was on my period. He said he didn't believe me but he would check, and if I was, he would let me go. I squeezed my eyes shut so that he could put his fingers inside of me—tampon and blood. He let me go.

The next day I realized that I couldn't claim to be too stressed to leave. I was trapped. I had to explain that I was staying, to that very sergeant. He smiled at me and said that I looked under the weather, reminded me to eat a well-balanced breakfast, and then he winked at me. I had another three weeks on course with that person.

When I got home, I asked for a leave of absence. I needed to process.... I knew that I couldn't come in to work anymore and see everybody in uniform; it was just too hard. I was told by my chief clerk to come in to sign the paperwork. My chief clerk was a female. She took me aside and told me that I was a slut, a whore and an administrative burden, and I needed to get out before they threw me out. I quit the CAF that January, in 1997.

I came back in April 2006. I had a few great years, and then more assaults, harassment and abuse. Not a day passes when I haven't seen the faces of men and women who used my kindness, my compassion and often my own pain to abuse and harm me.

What can we change about that? Since 2014, I've changed my focus to training and education around supporting survivors of sexual assault.

The single biggest indicator that somebody will suffer long-term effects is the support they receive at first disclosure of the incident. It's not who did it, and it's not the injuries they receive. It's the first time they have the courage to say that something terrible happened to them. How they are responded to will set the stage for how they recover.

In 2014, there was no mandatory training on how to support somebody disclosing military sexual trauma. There still isn't. Being raped should not cost you your career.

My daughter and I left her abusive dad, finally, in 2017. She carries scars on her soul that I would have been able to prevent if I wasn't so hobbled by my own pain. One of the last times I saw him, he said I should have told him I had been raped, because he never would have married me if he'd known I was broken.

In spring 2021, four female survivors got together and created a group. We call ourselves the Survivor Perspectives Consulting Group. In my final year in uniform, I trained almost 2,000 members of the CAF on how to support those who are victimized and how to recognize the earlier roots of that behaviour.

We've taught brand new recruits up to three-star generals. In our post-training survey, 83% of those trained say that they now know how to support someone. So far, 98% have said that this should be CAF-wide.

In my last year in uniform, I received a CDS commendation for creating this program, and I got a letter from Lieutenant-General Carignan, saying that the CAF leadership sees no value in institutionalizing this training. None of the leadership from CPCC or the CDS's office has taken this training.

● (1545)

I was medically released due to PTSD from MST on March 30, 2022.

Our group has grown and continues to bring this training package to everyone we can, using our education, our skills and, yes, our pain to hopefully bring change to the CAF. We have met obstacle after obstacle. We don't understand why the leadership would not be interested in a solution that is obviously resonating. To date we have trained over 3,000 members, and we continue to grow. Looking ahead, we have applied for the veterans wellness grant and are hopeful.

What is the ask? We need more women-centred programming. OSISS, Soldier On and Wounded Warriors are not yet made for us. They occasionally try to host bolt-on programs and pop-ups, but they don't have retreats or treatment dedicated to women veterans. Even small things like a benefit to join a facility that offers female-only areas for working out would be a huge stride. Leadership in all areas also must stop working with service providers with no qualifications or expertise to work in these areas, because people are being hurt.

As a service provider, I'd also say that the RFP process should prioritize veteran-owned enterprises. Right now, when you're medically released from the CAF, there are two avenues that you are encouraged to take. One is to be employed as soon as possible. I was told flat out when I was released that I was heavily employable. I have 16 years as a public affairs officer in the CAF, but I don't want to go back to the career in which I was assaulted and abused. My only other option, really, is to go for education and training for about two years and hopefully go into something else.

I would like to see some of that money that's earmarked for training to also be allowed to be accessed by people who have started their own businesses as entrepreneurs. The money is already there. It's just a matter of changing the way we can access it. In the U.S. a certain percentage of contracts each year are required to go to veteran-owned businesses.

Our group is trying very hard to have an empowering and validating career after the uniform. We have built a powerful tool. Our training changes minds. We've seen it over 3,000 times. We're determined to make the CAF, the RCMP, the government and Canada stronger and more inclusive places. We don't understand why the CAF seems so intent on quashing our efforts, but we persist, because standing up to them is not new to us. We have looked into the eyes of men and women who have raped us, harassed us and beat us down. We're bent but not broken, and we're not going anywhere.

Thank you.

● (1550)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): Thank you, Ms. Riguidel, for sharing your personal experiences with us and for coming to us with some recommendations. That's appreciated.

We will now give Ms. Douglas from the LGBT Purge Fund the opportunity to take the floor.

The floor is yours.

Ms. Michelle Douglas (Executive Director, LGBT Purge Fund): Good afternoon, Chair and members of the committee. Thank you very much for inviting me to be here today.

I'd like to start by giving you a bit of background.

I'm a veteran. I'm also a survivor of Canada's LGBT purge.

The LGBT purge is described by the Canadian Museum for Human Rights as one of "the longest-running and largest-scale violation[s] of the human rights of any workforce in Canadian history". I would also add, "And hardly anyone knows about it."

We estimate that between the 1950s and the 1990s, about 9,000 people—2SLGBTQ people in the Canadian military, the RCMP and the federal public service—saw their careers stymied or terminated because their sexual orientation or gender identity was considered a threat to the country they had chosen to serve. During the Cold War and well beyond, this discriminatory process was often justified on the grounds of national security risk, given their—our, my—purported character weakness and susceptibility to blackmail by foreign agents, despite lack of any evidence that such coercion had ever occurred.

The shattered lives and careers caused by the purge resulted in psychological trauma, material hardships, financial ruin, self-harm and suicide. I understand a lot about this shameful period in Canadian history, because I was purged from the military in 1989.

I joined the Canadian Armed Forces in 1986. I was so honoured and proud to serve. I wanted to be a police officer within the military, and I did just that, graduating at the top of my class within the military police branch. I had my sworn badge and also my commission as a young second lieutenant, but one day I was posted to the special investigations unit, the very unit within the military police where I was posted on my first posting because I had graduated at the top of the class, and they wanted this as an honour. This unit was devoted to conducting the most serious criminal investigations, including sabotage, subversion, espionage and allegations of homosexuality.

Shortly after I joined this special investigation unit, my boss called me into his office. He told me we were going for an investigative trip up to Ottawa from CFB Toronto. I followed him in an undercover K-car. I was dressed in civilian clothes. Just as we got out to the Toronto airport, he pulled into a hotel along the airport strip, and I was interrogated there about my sexual orientation for the next two days. This was just the start of my interrogation about my sexual orientation.

Later, I was flown by the police to Ottawa to be polygraphed about my sexual orientation. While I was seated, strapped to the polygraph chair, I admitted that I had fallen in love with a woman. I later found out that the questions they intended to ask me had I proceeded with that included this very offensive opening question: "Had I ever licked the private parts of another woman?" I'm so grateful today that they didn't ask me that question. My experience left me humiliated and shamed. Others experienced similar questions, deeply sexualized in their nature.

I was also forced to come out to my family. I was given 24 hours to do so or the police would be sent to do it for me. Ultimately, despite graduating at the top of every military course I ever took, I was fired.

These experiences have had a lifelong effect on me and the thousands of others who went through them. On my release records are these words: "not advantageously employable due to homosexuality". I sued the military for this treatment, and in 1992 it was my legal challenge that formally ended the policy of discrimination against 2SLGBTQI people serving their country in the Canadian Armed Forces.

Well, I served for only about three years, but I am now a veteran, and it's been my life's work for 30 years to try, along with many others, to bring some justice to these forgotten survivors and veterans. A class action lawsuit in 2018 led to a settlement for more than 700 people who were found and located and could get some justice. Even justice delayed sometimes is still justice.

• (1555)

Today I work full time to pursue reconciliation and memorialization efforts arising from this period of history. I work closely with and see the impact, particularly on women who are purge survivors. They are veterans, and they are hurting. In fact, most of the people we see have very unique and special needs as veterans.

The trust was shattered by their employer and their country. Many experienced sexualized violence. We also know that many

who are part of the purge class action were also part of the military sexual trauma class action lawsuit.

Think about the shame and the deep traumatization at the hands of the government. We owe these special veterans a duty of care, and that goes beyond legal settlements. The establishment of the Office of Women and LGBTQ2 Veterans at Veterans Affairs has been a really good start.

We need some help in finding these veterans. Sometimes the shame drove them back into the closet. We know people took their own lives. We know the shame was so deep that many just have never surfaced again, but we want to try to find them because we think we can help them. Needs that cannot be met by other social service agencies—because they simply don't know what happened—can be met by organizations that are tailored, including this Office of Women and LGBTQ2 Veterans.

Education is a huge part of this. We can't have someone calling in for the first time to finally reach out and get some help from VAC and then be told it's impossible to imagine a story like that would ever happen in Canada. Then they get rejected again, and that's the last we ever see of these people.

Transwomen veterans are especially vulnerable. We have to be there for them. They can't be ignored, and we must—as we do with all veterans—honour, support and respect them. We're seeing an aging group of survivors. Some are angry. They are just so unsure of whom they can trust.

We're also seeing rising levels of addiction, senior squalor, homelessness, and precarious home lives. This, of course, is recognizable as the impact of trauma, pain and the betrayal of the government.

I'm here to talk, hopefully, about the elimination of hurdles and barriers to enable these veterans to access the services they need, because we owe them nothing less. I would be happy to speak further with you about these incredible Canadian women and all purge survivors, and about how the committee might address their needs.

My final words will be to these incredible survivors, women who have served their country so heroically, and to my colleague, Lieutenant-Colonel Cathy Potts, who has also joined me here today.

Mr. Chair, thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): Thank you for your testimony and for your courage in sharing your personal experiences with us as well.

Now we will turn to Ms. Rosemary Park, the founder of Servicewomen's Salute Canada.

The floor is yours.

• (1600)

Ms. Rosemary Park (Lieutenant-Commander (Retired), Founder, Servicewomen's Salute Canada): Good afternoon, Mr. Chair, members of the committee and colleagues.

Thank you for this opportunity to appear as a witness for this committee's study on the experience of women veterans. I understand this is the first study of women veterans by a House of Commons Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. If so, I say congratulations and thank you.

I applaud your undertaking this large assignment. I don't think you can cast the net any wider in the scope of issues and experiences this study seeks to understand about what it means for women to choose to serve Canada.

In my presentation today, in the section entitled "recruitment and life in the Forces", I'd like to respectfully ask and add a parallel question. What does it mean for Canada for women to choose to serve Canada?

What extraordinary talent base do servicewomen represent and offer as a unique cohort for Canada's democracy, defence and security, civil society and economic development, and now environmental adaptation strategic requirements?

Conversely, what happens as a result of the Canadian Armed Forces failing to assess and seize this opportunity for the past 55 years, and repeatedly choosing to not have a dedicated strategic plan valuing and optimizing the inclusion of servicewomen for the past 55 years?

This speaks volumes. In my opinion, it is being represented in witness testimony before you.

On December 13, 2021, the official apologies by the Minister of National Defence, the deputy minister and the chief of the defence staff following the \$850-million DND and CAF sexual misconduct class action lawsuit did not include the words "servicewomen", "servicewoman", "male" or "female" once. "LGBTQ" was there, yes, but "women" was not there once.

What are they spending \$850 million on? I'm sorry. It's minus \$50 million for men.

We are an invisible force. What a waste. What a loss to Canada.

The four PowerPoint slide views I provided to the clerk of the committee for you are my very brief representation of key challenges and outcomes I have reported over the past 51 years, understanding and acting on servicewomen's inclusion in the Canadian Armed Forces and the inclusion of women veterans in Canada's larger society.

The one-page bio I submitted to the committee clerk describes some of this involvement as a military researcher in my national, provincial and local community service as founder of Servicewomen's Salute-Hommage aux Femmes Militaires—which now operates as a proxy military association to know, honour, care for and strengthen the contribution of servicewomen to Canada, because there is nothing else—and as project manager for the past five years at the centre for international and defence policy at Queen's University on the servicewomen's salute portal project.

A second document I provided to the clerk describes the 34 specific problem-solving projects undertaken by Servicewomen's Salute and Queen's University since 2017. Generally speaking, the projects describe the gaps we have identified and the corrective action we have implemented in research knowledge, CAF's lack of record-keeping, the inclusion and valuing of servicewomen, the lack of commemoration and celebration of servicewomen's military service, and the lack of responsive local community services.

I won't be surprised if the four thematic areas chosen by the committee, from women's physical and mental health to initiatives developed in allied countries, focus on and produce recommendations "to implement the best possible support measures for women Veterans". My expectation is that the recommendations will seek to support women veterans as individuals, as well as their individual well-being. They are laudable. I can only urge the committee, as elected representatives, to think how your recommendations can take on larger strategic value and impact as well.

This is a Canadian problem. This is for Canada. What a waste.

• (1605)

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): Thank you.

Our final witness to provide opening remarks is Ms. Wood.

The floor is yours for five minutes or so.

Ms. Christine Wood (Veteran Advocate, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and good day to everyone here.

I'll begin by expressing gratitude to the committee for acknowledging and exploring the sex- and gender-specific differences that can result in inequitable health outcomes for servicewomen and women veterans as a specific and unique group. It's been said already that this study has been a long time coming, and I am thrilled to be here with you today.

Mr. Chair, I join the CAF when I was 31 years old. I was in the best shape of my life, physically and mentally. As the shortest and smallest person in my platoon, I wore the same size rucksack carrying the same equipment a large man would wear. After 15 gruelling weeks, I left St. Jean with my commission as an officer, along with stress fractures and plantar fasciitis in both feet. It took five months of physiotherapy to get myself back up and running. I think most Canadians—and perhaps you—would be shocked to learn that, so far, my two feet alone have cost VAC almost \$50,000 for treatment and compensation. I think that's a ridiculous amount of money for a problem that is preventable.

More serious than feet, ill-fitting equipment also at best aggravated and at worst caused pelvic floor weakness. It's led to serious reproductive complications for me. I've had high-risk pregnancies, one miscarriage, one pre-term birth, a prolapsed bladder, and ongoing stress and bowel incontinence. I am 44 years old, and I often have to wear a disposable piece of adult underwear, because a panic attack or nightmare can lead to an accident.

I can be extremely humiliated about sharing that. It's difficult, but I believe it's important for everybody to understand what the real costs are to people like me when our system keeps making women-specific issues invisible. "Invisible" is a word that I think rings true for a lot of us. I feel my experience with VAC has been invisible. My injuries are invisible.

We know servicewomen are disproportionately targeted with sexual misconduct, sexual harassment, sexual violence, gender-based discrimination and abuse of power. I experienced the full gamut of sexual misconduct in the first 18 months of my service. By far, the most damaging was a sexual assault 18 months in, which resulted in my developing post-traumatic stress disorder.

Post-traumatic stress disorder presents physically for me. It comes out somatically. I think this is something especially true for women, as opposed to men. This is something the VAC table of disabilities—that all-important document—does not recognize. Mental pain leads to physical pain. For instance, take someone who has arthritis in their back. They're inactive. They may become isolated; then they may become depressed or anxious. That makes sense to all of us. The reverse is also true. If someone who is depressed or anxious becomes inactive and isolated, their body falls apart. That's exactly what's happened to me.

• (1610)

The bottom line is that I have been diagnosed with 10, more than 10, distinct physical health illnesses since being assaulted, which will require lifelong monitoring and treatment. That includes restless leg syndrome; type 1 diabetes, which came out of nowhere at age 36; chronic migraines; fibromyalgia; sexually transmitted infection; pelvic floor and reproductive issues; sexual dysfunction; lower back pain; arthritis in my neck; extreme sensitivity to sound and light; sleep apnea; and tinnitus. That's just the physical, and it's all directly related and interconnected with the fact that I have been in a state of hypervigilance for 12 years.

I haven't submitted claims with VAC for all of these conditions, because, as I said, I feel like VAC cannot see me and my disabilities. It does not recognize them as being related to my service. It's a waste of my time and energy, but my health keeps worsening as my conditions go untreated. Every application for benefits that I've put in for a physical condition—aside from the feet, which was clear—has been denied outright, and I have had to appeal.

I'm aware of the time, Mr. Chair. I'd like to speak to this committee about ways forward. I'd like to speak about the creation of external advisory committees. I want to add my voice to the growing chorus of calls for VAC to release its gender-based analysis report, which we have yet to see. I'd like to see VAC make its Canadian-funded research available publicly. I would like to see this committee recommend the creation of a comprehensive system of medical care that will meet women's needs. I'm talking about in-patient care

and outpatient care. I have been talking about this for seven years, but I am happy to keep talking, because one day we will make this happen.

There's so much more I could say, but I will end here. I am open to answering your questions, even if they feel uncomfortable for you to ask. We cannot change what we can't name. We can't be shy about this, so I urge you to make strong recommendations to VAC based on our testimony, and those which will follow, so that VAC becomes transparent, open and able to meet the sex- and gender-specific needs of servicewomen and women veterans like me, because I don't want anyone else to struggle the way I have.

Thank you for having me.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): Thank you. I can only imagine how difficult it must have been for you to share some of your personal experiences.

Because we've wrapped up the opening statements, I want to thank all of you, once again, for your courage in bringing your personal experiences to us. I know that it will be incredibly valuable to this committee in the work we're doing.

Thank you for being willing to share your experiences and having the courage to do so.

We're now going to move to the first round of questions. For the benefit of our witnesses, these are pre-arranged and predetermined rounds of questioning.

We'll begin with Ms. Blaney.

• (1615)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I think you said we were going to have a quick break after this, so I'm seeking clarification on that.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): What I was going to do is have the first round of questioning, and then allow an opportunity for a bit of a brief break, unless our witnesses.... Are you comfortable with proceeding to the first round of questioning? Is that okay?

We can take the break now. That's fine. I can appreciate that.

Please don't apologize. We appreciate and understand the need for that, so we will take a three- to five-minute break, and then we'll come back for questions from members.

The meeting is suspended.

• (1615)

(Pause)

• (1620)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): I call the meeting back to order.

We'll start with our first round of questioning from members.

For the benefit of our witnesses, this is how this works: Each member will get opportunities for questions based on a predetermined order by party. To keep things fair, the members are very strictly limited to a certain length of time. In the first round, that's six minutes per member.

I will encourage them, of course, to try to use their time wisely to allow you the opportunity to answer the questions they're asking. I will try to be a little bit flexible if you need a few seconds to try to answer something where you need to get the rest of the information out, but we'll try to hold them to it as best as we can.

We'll start the first round of questioning with Karen Vecchio, for six minutes.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Thanks very much.

I would really like to thank Donna, Rosemary, Michelle and Christine for coming here and sharing these stories.

I'm very fortunate, because I get to sit on the status of women committee, where we have done some reports on this, looking at the Canadian Armed Forces.

Michelle, that's how I met you. It was talking about the LGBT Purge Fund, the importance of that, what it was like and the sexuality issues we had there.

Christine, I'm going to start with you, if you don't mind.

I can only imagine how difficult it is. When we're talking about simple things such as an OB/GYN who might be there as a doctor who could serve you, what types of doctors service the people in the Canadian Armed Forces—specifically women? Are there OB/GYNs? Are there people who know the female body, as well as other doctors?

• (1625)

Ms. Christine Wood: My guess would be no. I never saw an OB/GYN following the assault, and I've had only a family doctor since my release. I actually just lost my family doctor. She closed her practice. This is a huge concern now for me. I don't know how to get referrals. My health is so complex. I have a lot of specialists. I need a family doctor to keep everything organized in one place.

Maybe one of the other.... Donna, do you have a better idea about CAF positions?

Ms. Donna Riguidel: I do, just because my release was about a year ago.

I can tell you that on my last well-woman test, I was referred to a GYN outside of the military. No, they don't have specialists within the military—at least within where I went. I was in Winnipeg, Edmonton and then Ottawa. We were referred to outside practitioners.

I'm in the same boat as Christine, though, since my release. I don't have a family doctor, so I've had to go to pop-up Pap clinics and that kind of thing just to try to bridge the gap.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: When we're looking at the whole well-being of a female working in the Canadian Armed Forces, that's really important.

You spoke of endometriosis and all of these other things that happen, so it's important that we're taking care of women with OB/GYNs.

Ms. Donna Riguidel: I want to just touch on this: As of the last time I looked into it, they do not have sexual assault exams on most of the bases, including the more isolated ones. It's on the survivor to make their way to a major centre to get that done.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: There would be no rape kits. There would nothing like that.

Ms. Donna Riguidel: There would be nobody trained to do it, either. That was, again, the last time I checked, including on board ships and in isolated deployments.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: One recommendation we did make in our last study was ensuring that there are no negative consequences for people coming forward with their stories.

Have you heard of any changes in the Canadian Armed Forces to protect and safeguard our victims?

Ms. Donna Riguidel: There is no standard across the board. There are still so many gaps and so many people who are having negative repercussions from coming forward, either officially or, mostly, non-officially. Some are at a loss, not knowing where the file is going or not knowing anything like that. Yes, it's definitely a mixed bag.

Does anybody else have...?

Ms. Christine Wood: Yes. I do remember—this is reading an article from 2018—that a team went to Latvia to do a GBA+ analysis on the area. They found that there was one person who was able to administer a rape kit. It was a man.

My question is, what if that man is the rapist? What do you do?

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Thanks so much. I think that goes to so much of what Donna had even talked about—when the person above you is in charge and that's the person who has sexually assaulted you, harassed you or any of these types of things.

When you're making a complaint in the Canadian Armed Forces on sexual misconduct and it comes to people who are generals or those wearing the flag, have they done anything where there are any suspensions during this investigation? Are there any suspensions of those potential or alleged perpetrators?

Ms. Donna Riguidel: I know that we can say, looking at what happened to General Fortin, that they definitely pull them back out of places, but then, of course, the end result is that now they're being sued for doing that.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: There are just so many things that we have to unpackage here, aren't there? From the time that you're in the Canadian Armed Forces, where you're treated maybe like a human sometimes, we know that you're told what to do all the time. Then, if we do not divide it between male versus female, if you're not having the proper care, if you're not having all of those things, no one's there to have your back, so when you are....

I'm sorry. I'm sitting here flabbergasted, because when I look at you, Christine, I'm so sorry that you've been treated this way. It's even difficult for me to ask questions.

How did we go wrong here? How did we allow you to end up where you are? You're only a few years younger than me. How did this happen? Really, I don't have a question. I have more of a comment.

We can do better. I think the recommendations you're bringing forward are very, very important. For anything to do with sexual assault, we know the trauma. We know that it's decades. If we do not deal with it immediately, we're going to have just what you're defining today.

I thank you very, very much.

I will cede my time. Thank you.

• (1630)

Ms. Donna Riguidel: Can I touch on one small thing? I can tell you, as I said earlier, that the first response and support at disclosure is so important. My chain of command, as a result of one of my sexual assaults, sent my chaplain over to talk to me. They are considered service providers and able to provide counselling.

In terms of his response to me when I told him, he asked me how things were going. I was on exercise when it happened, and I was still on exercise then. I said I was having really bad dreams. He asked me if I was sure if on some level I wasn't sexually aroused by the whole experience.

That was the expert.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): Did you want to add something, Ms. Park? If you'd like to, you can do so briefly, please.

Ms. Rosemary Park: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

With these examples that we're sharing, I know there are two features. One is that, as veterans, we don't know what is happening. When it comes to the sharing of information, there is a great deal of work being done, but we aren't being informed about changes that are being tried.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): Thank you for that. We'll now move to our next round.

Ms. Rechie Valdez, you have six minutes.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez (Mississauga—Streetsville, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

To the witnesses, thank you for your bravery and your honesty. Ultimately, your testimony will, I believe, make a difference in this important study. I'm truly thankful and grateful for your service.

Through you, Mr. Chair, I'll direct my questions to Christine Wood.

Karen, I'm going to try to unpack. Here we go.

Ms. Wood, in your testimony you discussed several examples of where your physical health was negatively impacted. When you were seeking medical assistance, could you walk us through what that experience was like when you were seeking it from VAC?

Ms. Christine Wood: Do you mean the assistance I received from VAC?

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Yes.

Ms. Christine Wood: It's a fight, a battle, to get anything approved. My primary condition that VAC recognizes is post-traumatic stress disorder, and because they don't recognize the physical illnesses that are consequential to PTSD, especially in women, I've been denied physiotherapy or a chiropractor or.... Like, they're allowed to work on my feet, but they're not allowed to touch any other part of my body. I have a claim that's been accepted for my feet.

I've gone months without hearing from my case manager when they say they'll get back to me. I haven't received a lot of help. I would say that most of my resources came with the assistance of either my family doctor or friends who were able to help recommend places. If you look at my VAC file online, it's denied, denied, denied, denied and denied for vocational rehab assistance for musculoskeletal injuries or pain or whatever. It's just denied.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: I'm not sure what the portal looks like, but when you submit the claim and a request, I'm sure you're attaching evidence of X-rays or whatnot, and even after that you will get denied. I just want to confirm that.

Ms. Christine Wood: Yes. That's 100% true.

Take my migraine application, for example. One migraine resulted in a small blind spot in my left eye. I have the paperwork from the eye specialists I had to see afterwards to make sure it wasn't growing or hadn't gone away. It's still there. It's permanent. They would even deny it with that information and records of hospital visits to get ER treatment for a migraine that was three days long.

I almost think it's a matter of practice. I don't want to be too skeptical, but at this point, after so many years, I can't help it. Do they just deny most claims outright and hope you will not appeal? Most women veterans and most veterans I know view VAC as Canada's meanest insurance company.

• (1635)

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: You mention external advisory committees as one of your recommendations. I was hoping you could elaborate on that idea and how that would help.

Ms. Christine Wood: I'm happy to, because I sit on the external advisory council of the sexual misconduct support and resource centre with subject matter experts like judges and professors. They're experts in the field of sexual trauma. I've seen first-hand the benefit of that kind of an advisory council and the advice it can provide to an organization. I would like to see an external advisory council, much like the SMSRCs, developed for VAC, so that we can bring in external subject matter experts and some people with lived experience to help guide VAC on its policy.

I would like to see the creation of a women's veterans external advisory council that is mostly composed of women veterans and has the opportunity to engage with VAC at that level to provide feedback and to make sure the programs, the resources and the things they are designing are actually going to meet our needs. When programs and such are designed without that, then it's a waste of money, and it's just a band-aid solution.

Bringing in that external participation works. I've seen it work.

VAC is very insular. It doesn't really talk with the CAF. That's another group. I'd like to see servicewomen and women veterans together, and then some people from both sides being brought in. We're acting like CAF and VAC are two separate things, but they're not. It's one system, flowing back and forth.

Yes, that external advice is invaluable. There are really smart people out there. They have a lot to contribute, and they want to, because they care.

Mrs. Rechie Valdez: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Desilets, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Luc Desilets (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ladies, your testimony is very moving and you show extraordinary courage. I did not expect that today. I am one of the two people who suggested this as a topic for study, but I did not expect it to be so moving. Listening to you earlier, I had a sense of shame, as a man. It's silly, isn't it? It will surely pass, but that's the feeling I have.

Some of you are familiar with the workings of such a committee, but you have great power, which lies mostly in the recommendations that will be made. I will soon ask you to take turns telling us what two recommendations you would want to include in our report, if you were in our shoes. The four of you are agents of change, so to speak, while we are just poor members of this committee. We come here with great joy and hope to make a difference, regardless of our political allegiance.

Ms. Park, you have written many articles and your resume...

• (1640)

Ms. Rosemary Park: Excuse me.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Can you hear the interpretation?

[*English*]

Ms. Rosemary Park: I'm hearing only the English.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: There. You found the right button.

Ms. Rosemary Park: I took a crash course, but that was 36 years ago.

Mr. Luc Desilets: We have the interpretation now. We are in a supposedly bilingual country.

Ms. Park, you've written a lot of articles and your resume is really impressive. Based on the studies and reading you've done, are there any exemplary countries that have practices that we could learn from when it comes to sexual misconduct?

Without minimizing it, far from it, I imagine that the problem exists in the militaries of all countries. There is machismo in these types of organizations. Are there any countries that have looked at this problem and thought that sexual misconduct is unacceptable?

In the last year or two, it seems like there's been some movement here in Canada since the new minister came in. She would like to take a little more space.

Where in the world do you think anything smart is being done?

Ms. Rosemary Park: That is a good question.

Mr. Luc Desilets: You may respond in English, if that is your language, Ms. Park.

[*English*]

Ms. Rosemary Park: If I may say so, what we see in other countries is women veterans acting and organizing to assert themselves not as individuals, as the moral voices that we have here, but as coordinated push-back, so we see in other countries the involvement of women themselves. We had done this with the class action, but they are much more involved, and I would say in the States in particular.

Have the militaries....

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Are any defence departments elsewhere that are proactive in this regard?

Ms. Donna Riguidel: May I speak for a minute?

Mr. Luc Desilets: I'll let you have the floor, Ms. Riguidel.

Ms. Donna Riguidel: This is not a problem unique to the military, it is a problem unique to humans. Every solution that governments and the military try to provide—

[*English*]

Every time we try to address this with a military solution, we fail, because it's not a military problem. We can't discipline this problem away. We can't punish it away. Every military that's integrated in the world struggles with this. We are all failing at it, and the reason is that we haven't switched to a survivor-centred, trauma-informed approach. We haven't gotten to the point where instead of right away rushing to how we should arrest the perpetrator and charge them in a criminal justice system—which, let's face it, fails and is not set up to do anything really effective—we switch right away to how we should support the survivor to start them on the path to healing, to start them on the path to either returning to service—if that's what they want—mentally healthy or cycling out, again, mentally supported and feeling as though we have their backs. How do we do that?

When we crack on with that, it is going to start to accomplish things. The reason we're failing is that we don't do that, and we also introduce training systems that don't make sense.

The one—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Desilets: I'm sorry to interrupt.

Personally, what concerns me greatly is the issue of culture and culture change. That culture exists all over the planet. I understand that. However, it seems to me that in Quebec and in Canada, we show a certain sensitivity. Canada is a great country. It knows how to show a lot of humanity, and it has the opportunity to do so.

What are your observations on that, Ms. Riguidel?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): Mr. Desilets' time is up, but you may respond anyway, Ms. Riguidel.

[*English*]

Ms. Donna Riguidel: Okay. I believe that as a military, as a country, we have an opportunity to become the leader in this to get to the point where other militaries in other countries are coming and asking, “Shoot, how did the Canadians do this?” We have to do that though by having training that makes sense—so it can't be a point and click. You have to get in and engage and discuss and shift people's moral compass, because we have to get to the point where as a military we can continue to do our—let's face it—inappropriate job of being better at war than the enemy is, but do so with professionalism and respect. That's where we've lost it.

The only way to get back to it again is to address the human wearing the uniform, not just the uniform.

Thank you.

• (1645)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): All right. Thank you.

Our next intervention will be from Ms. Blaney for the next six minutes.

The floor is yours.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank you all so much for being here today. Thank you for your service.

I feel really sad and disappointed that we still live in a country and in a world where we have to ask people to come and bleed in front of us. I want to say that part of our job is to listen, but a bigger part of our job is to believe. I want to say I believe very much what all of you testified today, and I'm very honoured that you took up that space and were here with us today to do that.

What I felt was really impactful was how many times I heard the word “invisible” in the testimony today, and that we have a system that seems to continually make women's realities invisible. That impact is having a particular one in the service of our military.

The first question I'm going to ask is for all of you, and I'll start first with Donna. One of the things I've heard again and again is that when you come to VAC, it's like you have to prove everything that happened to you, so that they will treat you for it on the other side, at VAC. If they don't believe you, which goes back to my original statements, then it's really hard. You're denied, and then you have to appeal and appeal. I'm wondering if you could talk about that experience, what the impact is and any recommendations you have on changing that.

Ms. Donna Riguidel: I think one of the major changes that happened—and it happened after the class action—was having more dedicated staff specifically managing these files. I don't know about everybody else's experience, but my claim for PTSD sat for about two and a half to three years until they introduced the dedicated system. Then it was more fast-tracked, both because with the class action it was required, but also because they had staff who were trained in what to look for.

Because sexual assault remains something that is really hard for people to come forward and talk about, it remains under-reported. That's for men and women. We know that men are assaulted in great numbers and don't come forward for a lot of very specific reasons. Knowing that they don't come in with proof and knowing that they don't come in, necessarily, having talked to a doctor or even having made a police report.... There needs to be, again, more education, more trauma-informed.... There needs to be an understanding that we're not going to have all the paperwork that we might have if we break a leg or suffer some kind of physical foot injury or something like that. However, it doesn't make our injury any less valid.

A voice: Rosemary.

Ms. Rosemary Park: I'm going to turn it to the unknown. VAC has only approximately 14% of women who are receiving benefits. The invisibility is of women who have served and are not known to VAC or who think, because of the issues, that they don't deserve to be considered as veterans. Dr. Maya Eichler has commented on that, that it's a self-defeating problem where there is an "I don't deserve it" feeling. VAC is trying to reach out, but its methods are.... It's a very difficult task for a government to create a sense of trust that it does care and to please apply, that it's there to listen.

I don't envy that, but I think that.... We have the 14% with the difficulty, as you say, of showing that this is warranted, because there are no examples of precedent. These are new decisions being made. It's an ever-changing landscape, but in particular, one of the problems—for men and women—is that when they have served, they have served under certain policies. The decisions about their release were decided at that point in time. When the policies change, that doesn't affect them. They're stuck with the old one.

• (1650)

Ms. Michelle Douglas: Thanks for raising that question. I think it's a great one. I'm going to pick up on what others have said.

Veterans Affairs Canada needs to do a lot more outreach, to put out television ads and some social media. We find that we can put things on Twitter all day, but it's just not reaching the purge survivors who were fired in the 1970s and 1980s and who are aging now and aren't as familiar with social media. They don't know even what services might be provided to them.

It's not only that they think they don't deserve the support, but that they probably think in many cases that they don't qualify for support. Many of us who were purged were fired, often very quickly, with a lot of shame and no sense of any community. In fact, the military pushed people very, very far away. Also, people were so ashamed that they didn't seek comfort in family. They may have been rejected there, too, had the reason for their dismissal and their firing been known to some family members. These people are really alone, and trust is hard to build.

For lesbians—also transwomen—who went through this purging, we didn't even know that we were deemed veterans or that the definition had changed, so people haven't come forward, but we have to find these people. I think that's a duty we owe to these kinds of veterans, and then, if they do make that call, to be super trauma-informed, to be survivor-centred, as was said, to tell them how much they're going to be respected, and to make sure that whoever is receiving them is aware of the history. It's not hard to learn this history. We're doing literally thousands of micro-outreach opportunities.

The other thing I would say is that Veterans Affairs Canada could help us by respectfully connecting survivors of the purge to outside organizations that are bringing peers together and directing them to other resources that might be there. It just gives them a sense that they're not alone, that their privacy can still be respected but that other people with common experiences are around.

Most don't even know that exists. We'd love to find them and just tell them how loved they are, how valued they are and how much we respect their service. This is another kind of woman veteran who is so invisible that they're even sometimes ashamed to come

out to other veterans in case they have a really bad experience and are pushed away, for probably the last time.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): Okay. We're well past the time for this round, but I saw that Ms. Wood had her hand up and was wanting to get a chance to respond.

If you can do so briefly, you may.

Ms. Christine Wood: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

To be brief, I just connect so much with what you've all said. I think there's a challenge in finding and reaching our legacy veterans, and a more low-tech approach may be needed to find them, with more visits to smaller places and more advertising on television.

Another group that I believe struggles to self-identify as veterans are people like me who were injured early on in their career. There are some people who are injured in basic training. There are people like me who were severely injured 18 months in. I did not start calling myself a veteran for about five years.... I was absolutely embarrassed to say that I had served, because I left after being assaulted. I felt ashamed that I left, that I gave up. I didn't stay in for 20 years and fight it. I gave up.

I've heard Michelle say this before: I've done more outside of the military to better the military than I ever could have in it.

I'll end there, Mr. Chair. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): Thank you.

This concludes the first round of questions. We will now move on to the second.

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

• (1655)

[*English*]

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Are you guys okay? Okay. That's great.

I'm in my eighth year on this committee. I have to draw some attention to something here: Your testimony should be the key thing in determining what we recommend and what the government does. What I find is that people come here and share. You need to have the experts, the advisory councils and all of those things, but all of those things should wrap around what is heard here. That is not happening. It needs to happen.

Thank you so much. You guys are amazing.

I want to speak to Donna about the Survivor Perspectives Consulting Group.

I sat up reading it, and going through it and highlighting.... It is remarkable. It is a remarkable approach to dealing specifically with this military sexual trauma issue. I'm going to very quickly read your mission statement. It says, "Social change needs a movement that cannot be mandated with rules and orders. Instead, it needs to be through honest and direct engagement and putting the humanity of our members first." From what you're saying, you understand the role of the military. It's rules and orders. It's "jump" and "don't jump". All of a sudden, we are talking about humanity here. You're all assets, in a way.

I loved this comment, which I would like you to respond to: Warrant Officer Carolyn Edwards, who works with you, said, "I liked how the workshop highlights that you can still be a bad-ass warrior and have empathy. Listening with empathy and showing compassion...does not weaken us as soldiers. It strengthens us all to be...better, stronger and a more well-rounded force."

"Go women", right? That thinking is totally contrary to that of those who.... As you mention here, you received a CDS commendation for creating this program, then a letter telling you the Canadian Armed Forces leadership "sees no value in institutionalizing [your] training".

Would you please talk about that?

Ms. Donna Riguidel: Yes, that was a weird week.

We've continued, obviously. Since I left the military—my last day in uniform was March 30, 2022—we've continued to do training with people who will bring us on board. We've done it for pay and no pay. We're just happy to bring it forward.

It was unfortunate. We were told that because they already have existing CAF training that hits on many of the points, our training wasn't valuable. My response was, "That's the way it was designed." If it's survivor-centred and trauma-informed, you're going to hit the same messaging. The power of our training is that it's from the perspective of a survivor versus the organization.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I want to interrupt you for one second; then you can carry on.

You said that none of the leadership from the CPCC's or CDS's offices have taken the training. How do they know what they're talking about?

Ms. Donna Riguidel: They course-loaded people who have gone back with reports—mostly training development officers. I am not a training development officer. I was a public affairs officer by trade. We created this training with the idea of.... Again, what if being raped didn't have to cost you your career?

When I did my training in this, one of the cases that was obviously being dealt with at the time was the Weinstein scandal in the States. One thing that really hit home for me was this: When they interviewed two reporters from The New York Times, they said the real tragedy regarding people who prey on our young people isn't even the sexual assaults—as bad as they are. It's the fact that those people now feel they've lost their potential. It kills their dreams.

That's what it did for me. It took away my dream of university and everything else. What if it didn't have to cost that? What if we could work on the problem and, hopefully, get it down to be as minimal as we can? The ones we know are out there are better at hiding than we are at finding them. What if that didn't have to mean I'm going to have to hang up my uniform? What if I could be supported, as if I were injured in any other way? I could then return.

We don't have to lose these people. That's what we took it as. That's what we've been doing.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: I appreciate that so much, because I also read in here how, if you deal with things at the beginning and prevent, or at least limit.... However, there are those who need to be weeded out. It's such a rational and reasonable approach.

Ms. Donna Riguidel: There are, but the beauty of switching it to this is, again...support first. That's what gets more people coming forward, because they don't feel as if everything's going to run without them. They don't feel they're going to lose their position, their course or whatever else. If they feel they have a voice in what's going to happen next, they're more likely to come forward earlier. You don't get 30-year-old legacy cases down the line. You get somebody coming forward early on. We can support them right away and, again, help them come back to full strength.

• (1700)

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: You talked about a command-level course. You realized that, depending on where things are in the hierarchy, they need to be programmed differently.

Can I ask what that looks like?

Ms. Donna Riguidel: The biggest difference between the command level and what we call the baseline training is the scenarios. Other than that, the training is the same.

That was something I ran into, because when I first created a program, I was still in uniform. It was a military-specific program. It was a day long. I was told I needed to create a different one now, for command. I asked why, and they said, "Well, colonels and above, they're not the problem. It's the junior ranks who are the problem. Colonels and above, they can take a half an hour or an hour." I asked, "Do you want me to tell corporals they've spent eight hours, but a colonel has to spend only an hour?"

I would like to say that response disappeared right around the same time as the CDS, and we had nine other general flag officers fall under allegations. Yes, those complications went away.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Understandably.

Thank you, Chair.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): That's the end of that round.

We'll move now for the next five minutes to Sean Casey.

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Let me add to the comments that you've heard from all of the colleagues around the table. This has been a remarkably courageous, touching and moving session. For all of you to come forward in a public forum and go into such depth and detail on obvious trauma is something that I hope and I expect will bear fruit in our reports.

Thank you for that.

I want to bring Ms. Douglas into the conversation a little more. There are a couple of things I want to ask you about.

Maybe I can start with.... I know you were a long-time employee of the federal Department of Justice, and you fairly recently succeeded in getting them to agree to produce about 15,000 pages of information in connection with the purge.

Can you tell us a bit more about that?

Ms. Michelle Douglas: It took the LGBT Purge Fund a really substantial, challenging effort to work with the government to uncover an additional 15,000 pages of purge-related documents. A court settlement gave us access to 10,000 pages, but we knew there were a lot more. It was a difficult journey, but eventually there was a settlement. The court has now approved it, and we're in the process of finding those documents.

These are historical documents that will tell the story of why this happened, and why the government targeted 2SLGBTQ folks in particular and looked at us as being somehow more fundamentally weak and unable or unworthy to serve our country. We're getting those documents.

We believe that if we don't have access to those documents and make them public, people will hardly believe this could happen in Canada. If we think that they might not realize it could happen in Canada, then they'd probably say it didn't happen in Canada at all. After that, we know it gets forgotten altogether.

We really think that veterans, people who have served their country, deserve to be remembered and to have their full history be known. We're publicizing these documents.

Just recently, through research, we uncovered the story of a young man whose name is on the Vimy Ridge memorial. He was a gay man. He's there. He made the ultimate sacrifice for our country.

We have to tell these stories, and that's what we're doing.

Mr. Sean Casey: Thank you.

Ms. Park, you talked about the 2021 apology, the \$850-million suit and the deficiencies in the apology. I'd like you to speak a bit more about that.

What should have been there? How should it have been there? Is there any way now to make it right?

• (1705)

Ms. Rosemary Park: Mr. Chair, what I find interesting is that the absence of women in that apology has not been identified. I was listening several months ago, and I realized that, whoa, we are not there.

I contrast that to the government's apology to the LGBTQ purge. We have not been invited to the Prime Minister's Office, and we have not sat in the House of Commons upper balcony to have that statement said: "We're sorry." This lack of acknowledgement that we have served.... We did not volunteer to be harmed. It's long overdue. Women, because of that, feel that somehow it isn't deserved.

How does one correct that? With the Queen's University portal project, we've been quietly operating for five years. We have not been identifying or advocating for demanding that this must change.

It's a very good question. Does it make a difference? There are some who are in the class action who have said that it does. There are others who say just drive on. I don't have a good answer for that, but it's a good question for discussion.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): We're well over the time, so thank you, Mr. Casey.

[Translation]

Mr. Desilets, you now have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Wood, after you left the military, how many claims did you file in the first month, in the year after you left?

[English]

Ms. Christine Wood: None.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: There were none?

[English]

Ms. Christine Wood: None. I left. I knew I was damaged, but I ran. I was permitted to move before my release. It is a real thing that it took time for some of the symptoms to really appear.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: When you submitted a first and second claim, were they denied or accepted?

[English]

Ms. Christine Wood: The first three applications I put in at the same time for PTSD and two other conditions, and all three were rejected that first time.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: So you submitted three claims, which were denied.

How long after that did it take for you to request a review and go to court for at least one to be granted?

[English]

Ms. Christine Wood: It took two years, sir.

Mr. Chair, it took two years for the appeal for PTSD to go through. I used the Bureau of Pensions Advocates for assistance. All they did was include one piece of paper saying that I was mandated to sleep at that base because I was there for training. That's how they finally connected it to my military service; otherwise, I had just been raped.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Beyond these three claims, have you submitted any others?

[English]

Ms. Christine Wood: Yes, sir. There were several.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Were there seven claims in total, or seven additional claims?

• (1710)

[English]

Ms. Christine Wood: I would say almost 10.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Have all the claims been resolved?

[English]

Ms. Christine Wood: No. My fibromyalgia claim, which is.... It came in 2019. It took two years to diagnose. I put in a claim on June 15, 2021, and I am still awaiting a decision.

It's not about getting the compensation; it's getting the treatment. That's what I need. That's why it's so frustrating. Wait times are not everything, but they result in a lack of treatment and in conditions going untreated and undertreated for years.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Ms. Wood, the chair is signalling that my time has expired.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): Mr. Desilets, you will have the opportunity to speak with Ms. Wood after the meeting. I thank you for your understanding.

[English]

We have two and a half minutes for Ms. Blaney, for some questions.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: If I could come back to you, Donna, if we had a world that was more survivor-focused, it would provide a lot more support, a lot more coming forward, and a lot more of a deterrent, so it's something for all of us to think about in our lives.

You talked a lot, and a few people have mentioned this, about the need to have more trauma-informed training for the VAC people who are working so closely with veterans. I'm curious, because it makes me think about.... If you discuss your experiences with any kind of sexual assault, or harassment.... When you were in the CAF, it was never addressed. It was swept under the table, or you didn't feel safe enough to come forward. How does VAC deal with that information? Is the veteran provided any sort of supports to figure out how to come forward with that story? Is there any information?

I'm curious about how that communication happens between the CAF and VAC.

Ms. Donna Riguidel: That's a really good question. Whenever people disclose to me, I treat it as if it's the first time they've disclosed, because it could be. I know people are disclosing to VAC case managers, and I know that, again, similar to anything else, if you're trained, great, you're confident in how you're going to support that person, but if you're not, you can fumble it, and you cause more damage.

It's tough, and I know it's tough. The system tries to protect your identity, because it doesn't want to cause you trauma, but at the same time, there needs to be a much more open conduit and a way for people to come forward and self-identify in a way that doesn't have any repercussions. I'm not sure what the answer is.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that. I think that is a big gap.

Do you want to add something, Christine? Okay, I wanted to make sure.

One of the things we've noted very clearly is that the data collection by both the CAF and VAC is very poor. That lack of collecting data doesn't allow us to follow the paths of women through the system, so I'm wondering if you could speak to that. When I get more time, I'll come back to the rest of you on that question.

Ms. Donna Riguidel: I know that in our training we use stats, and they're mostly American, because that's where we can pull them from. In the U.S., two out of every three survivors of MST will leave the military within a year if they're not given the right support. We can extrapolate that and say it's probably similar in Canada, because we're so closely linked, to which my response is always this: Knowing how starved our Canadian Armed Forces are for members, I don't think we can afford to lose two out of three of anybody, especially considering that supporting members when they come forward should be a no-brainer. That should be a really easy fix, but as I've said, there is still no mandatory training for that really important trauma first aid, that mental health first aid, when somebody comes forward.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): Thank you for that.

We'll move to the next five minutes, with Fraser Tolmie.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie (Moose Jaw—Lake Centre—Lanigan, CPC): Thank you very much for joining us today.

You know we always say thank you for your service, and we do mean it.

Ms. Wood, you pointed out that after a horrendous experience, you ran away. We'll, you've run back, and you're here for a fight, so we appreciate that. We recognize your hearts and what you're here to do, to make a positive change. We live in a civilized society, but we don't always feel like we're civilized, so thank you for your time.

Major, I'd like to ask you a couple of questions. I will do my best to get through the list I have. Can you speak more to the training your group has done? What does the training look like? What are the results you're seeing that you can share with this group?

• (1715)

Ms. Donna Riguidel: Sure.

The training we created is as a result of my taking training on my own with the Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services. It's one of the only groups in Canada that offers first responder training which is just that—that support for first disclosure—as well as training through mentors and violence prevention strategies. That's Dr. Jackson Katz's group in the States on bystander engagement intervention.

I've taken the stuff that I've learned and implemented it into a military construct. We use our stories as a way to leverage that humanity, get in there and, again, shift somebody's moral compass to make them see us more as human beings and stop objectifying us.

The results that we've seen are nothing less than astounding. I've had 30 people in a room all at one point have that lightbulb moment. I try to bring other survivors with me as much as possible, so they can experience that same sort of feeling of incredible validation when all of a sudden we realize that people in the room get it. I get commanders reaching back to me afterwards, asking if it is okay if they reach out to a survivor they screwed up support for three years ago, and if that would make a difference in their healing now. In this case, I always say, absolutely, please do that now.

We get so much positive feedback. We do a pre- and post-course survey. Pre-survey, about 80% of people come into the training with other training. I want to be clear: They come in with the training that's been established by the CAF already, but they are not confident in how to support somebody. That shifts to over 90% afterwards. Now they know some things to say; more importantly they know what not to say. Now, when they're having those tough conversations, they feel confident that they're going to be able to help somebody and not hurt them.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: I see that you're bridging your past experience and creating something new, which is very entrepreneurial. That leads me to my next question.

How could Veterans Affairs Canada do a better job of supporting female entrepreneurs like you?

Ms. Donna Riguidel: I think we need more programming, specifically for female entrepreneurs. I know we have the ability, for example, within our RFP process, to identify and say that we would like priority to be given to veteran-owned companies or female veteran-owned companies. I want to be clear, that doesn't mean I want anybody to be left out. All things being equal, maybe it might give you another point in the rubric when it's examined.

Right now, nothing like this exists. I'm competing toe to toe with large academic institutions with lots of experience and everything else. We're coming in saying that we have some subject matter expertise as well as the psychology. We're trying to fight that fight.

Yes, I think there could be programs created specifically for female veteran entrepreneurs, because this is a road that a lot of us would probably go down. We can't necessarily go back to the career that, again, we were abused and assaulted in. That's really traumatizing. It really harms us, but we might not have the confidence to step out and say, yes, we want to start something on our own.

I don't even want to overstate it and say a safety net, but if there was more support in that area, I think you would see a lot more going that way.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Well, that's a great segue into my next question.

We've touched on this in previous meetings and a bit tonight. I understand that in the U.S. a certain percentage of government contracts must go to veteran-owned businesses.

What do you think of that policy they have?

Ms. Donna Riguidel: I think that policy is excellent. We've actually recently just registered for business in the U.S. We've been invited to present at Fort Leavenworth in the fall. We're starting to bridge into the U.S.

I know we brought up earlier what other countries are doing. We're unique in the sense that we are staffed by veteran survivors who want to make a positive change. When we've presented in the U.S., which we've done now twice at conferences, it's been really eye-opening for lots of the other countries to see us. We have standing invitations to attend some of these now.

Mr. Fraser Tolmie: Do I have time for one more question?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): You have about 10 seconds, so I think we'll stop you there.

We'll move now to the last questioner for the second round of questioning. That's Wilson Miao, for five minutes.

Mr. Wilson Miao (Richmond Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, all, for joining us today for this important study.

While I listened to your remarks, it really filled me with heartfelt sympathy, because I was raised by my mother. I love her so much. I can't imagine something like this happening. For all of you to be here today, sharing this is like stabbing your wound again. I don't know how many times you guys have shared this story with people in seeking help, but it's unacceptable.

At the same time, I understand. Donna, you mentioned right now that our military is always looking for new recruits, but hearing these stories sets them back, in a sense, to wonder why they would want to serve our country in that way.

I want to ask this of each of you. When you first started, what made you want to serve Canada? Were you expecting to experience such trauma?

Please go ahead.

• (1720)

Ms. Christine Wood: When I joined, I wanted to keep girls and women safe. That was my idea. The Afghan war was still raging. I had seen videos of women in combat gear providing assistance to women and children, and that aligned with my beliefs and my desire.

I never expected to experience what I did, but I want to make sure that when I say “experience what I did”, it's not just military sexual trauma. There have been a lot of resources and attention focused on that specific issue, and I have spent years being part of that voice, but it is more than just military sexual trauma that's affecting women. Number one is the VAC table of disabilities.

If I may, Mr. Chair—I'm sorry, sir—just respond to something Mr. Desilets said earlier, which was that he felt shame as a man. Everyone has been asking where the oversight is and what's....

I have to say that I believe that you who are sitting on this committee are the oversight. We are here baring our souls. We are willing to do this because you are the ones with the power. It's not us. We can come and we can talk, but we can't change it. It is on our elected representatives.

I would hope that over the last two weeks, as you were all back at your constituencies, you took time to meet with women veterans to talk about their needs, if you're sitting on this committee. I would hope that all of you did that, because it is larger than just military sexual trauma.

I will stop there, because I know everybody wants to speak, but I needed to make that point.

Mr. Wilson Miao: Michelle.

Ms. Michelle Douglas: It's a great question.

I joined the Canadian Armed Forces because I love Canada. I believe in the fundamental values of Canada and the proposition that we are a just society or always pursuing the idea of equality and justice. These were things that chimed for me.

I realize how much service is of value to me. Serving others was something that I was honoured and proud to do.

I did not expect the level of misogyny that I experienced in the Canadian Armed Forces. It was part and remains part of the culture of the military. This shocked me.

I also did not expect to be so marginalized among the marginalized. As a lesbian in the military, sometimes I still feel excluded from other equality-seeking organizations. We have to be much bigger in our consideration of how we're thinking about the intersectional aspects—racialized, indigenous, aging, trans and other veterans. We owe them respect and fundamental dignity.

That's also the driver of my work today. It's actually about service.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): We will stop there. We're over the time for this round.

This concludes the second round of questioning. We are coming near the end of our meeting, but because of the start time of our meeting we do have this room and the resources that go with it available to us until about 5:40.

If the witnesses are comfortable with it, I'm going to give us about another 10 minutes or so. I can give each party one more round of two and a half minutes.

If our witnesses are comfortable, that's what I will do. It looks like that's the case.

The first questioner in the third round will be Cathay Wagantall for two and a half minutes.

• (1725)

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you very much, Chair.

Again, thank you so much for being here. You are contributing to the potential for us to do a good job. Thank you.

I would like to bring up this note in the information you provided to us, Donna. It talks about—and you said—even the “small things like a benefit to join a facility that offers female-only areas”. This is something that our society and our cultures are losing and...don't understand how they are destroying our culture and potential.

Can you talk a bit more about that? You're talking about after service, right?

Ms. Donna Riguidel: Yes.

For me, going to the gym is very triggering. I was sexually assaulted in a military gym in 2012. A lot of my assault and harassment was around physical fitness.

I'm not alone in that. A lot of survivors of sexual assault have a hard time pursuing fitness, for a number of reasons. One is that mentally we don't allow ourselves the gift of physical fitness, because making ourselves more attractive is potentially attracting that attention. It's wrong, but that's what we think.

Of course, we also understand the mental and physical benefits of physical fitness, but right now there is no funding available for women-only gyms.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: If I can add to that, so much of what's happening at the veterans level is because of what happened while serving.

I had the opportunity to go on the HMCS *Fredericton*. It was a phenomenal experience, except there were many things I noticed that would make me very uncomfortable as a woman on that ship. I don't think there was a lot of thought given to that back in 1980-whatever.

What is this going to mean in terms of how we do things, or do we even want to go there?

Ms. Donna Riguidel: Joining the CAF is learning that you are heavily recruited. We read all the headlines about how they want to reach 25%. However, you're joining an organization that's not built for you in any way, shape or form. The equipment is not built for you; the uniform is not built for you; you might not have a wash-room in the building if it's a legacy—

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: There are no locks on the doors.

Ms. Donna Riguidel: Nothing. You're not allowed...

For me—and I've spoken to other women—serving my country meant learning that the leaders and peers I worked shoulder to shoulder with I had to trust with my life, but I couldn't trust them with my body.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): Thank you. That's all we have time for.

Ms. Wagantall, thank you for that.

We will move to Churence Rogers for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Churence Rogers (Bonavista—Burin—Trinity, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and welcome to our guests.

Unfortunately, we have very little time. I had a couple of questions, which I'll skip in the interests of getting in that two and a half minutes.

The main thing I want to know from all of you, and I'll give each of you an opportunity to comment, is that we're doing this study and at the end of the day we're going to be making recommendations. From your perspective, what do you prioritize as your number one or number two recommendation that you want us to include in this study?

Christine, can we start with you?

Ms. Christine Wood: My number one suggestion is a top-to-bottom review of the table of disabilities and making sure there are no sex or gender biases left in them.

Mr. Churence Rogers: That answers the question I was going to ask as well about that table and what you would like to see done with that.

Thanks, Christine.

Ms. Douglas is next.

Ms. Michelle Douglas: Historical education is helpful grounding for culture change. I think bringing in outside stakeholders for the journey of change that is under way in both the CAF and Veterans Affairs is essential. Also, a shifting culture that grounds respect and diversity in everything that's done at Veterans Affairs, and not mocking or judging people's experience but accepting and believing it, is essential. Training is so important in that journey.

• (1730)

Mr. Churence Rogers: Thank you so much.

Ms. Park.

Ms. Rosemary Park: I'm going to go to a higher level.

With regard to veterans in Canada, when they leave the military, they disappear. They are an amazing resource at the local level, but we are not tapping into that. I would give the example of work that I'm involved in right now around emergency management disaster response.

The question I ask is, where are your veterans in your local community pitching in? The reserves aren't going to be called in, and the reg force isn't going to be called in. It's a request for final assistance; they're the force of last resort. Where are the reserves? They are living in a community but not wearing a uniform. Where are the veterans? Women veterans organize. That's who we should be using.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): We have concluded the time for this round.

Ms. Riguidel, if you have just a brief response, then go ahead.

Ms. Donna Riguidel: It's super fast. Honestly, just have far more women-centred, dedicated programming for our women.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): That was incredibly brief. Thank you for that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Desilets, I now yield the floor to you.

You may continue your remarks, but only for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Wood, I think you alluded to a gender-related report that would have sort of been pushed aside. In fact, it may not have been published. I may have misunderstood.

What is that about?

[English]

Ms. Christine Wood: I was referring to the GBA+ analysis that is done by VAC. I believe every department of the Canadian government is required to do a gender-based analysis.

Do you understand what that is?

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Very good, but I'm not familiar with this report.

Has it been made public?

[English]

Ms. Christine Wood: It has not been made public, despite numerous calls for it to be made public—I'm talking about a long time. We need to see it.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: All right, we'll look into it.

[English]

Ms. Christine Wood: I don't know how intersectional they were. I don't know how deeply they got into it or if they got it right. We need to know.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: In principle, it is quite difficult to hide things when they are not state secrets. We'll see what can be done about that.

Have you had to appear before the Veterans Review and Appeal Board with respect to your various claims?

[English]

Ms. Christine Wood: No, I always appealed myself or with the assistance of the Bureau of Pensions Advocates, the BPA. I was either successful or not. I've never gone as far as going to the VRAB, the Veterans Review and Appeal Board. I've never gone that far. I might. It takes so much effort, though.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Can you tell us more about that?

[English]

Ms. Christine Wood: It takes so much time. The medical conditions I have make it difficult for me to focus. They make it difficult for me to keep my things organized with different doctors' notes, appointments, records, receipts and everything like that.

It's also incredibly difficult to have to say again and again that I have been injured in this way. I mean, with every single application that I fill out I have to say that I was sexually assaulted in 2011. This is how it happened. This is what happened after. This is why I have PTSD, and now I have this.

I link it to the medications I took for PTSD or just the mental stress that came out and presented in my body. I have to do it again and again and again. That is what I mean about it being exhausting and dehumanizing. It is embarrassing.

Like I said, I'm ashamed I left. I advocate alongside women who went through what I went through, and they stayed in, but I didn't. I knew that, without knowing who raped me, I could never be safe in a room.

I shouldn't have to write on every form what my primary diagnosis was and all of the details to make it obvious. It's like I'm trying to dumb things down enough so that they can understand and make the connection. I'm exhausted from it. Like I said, there are claims I haven't put in that I need to. I need to, because I need care. I need coverage and treatment.

I will stop there. I'm sorry; I'm taking too much time.

● (1735)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): No, thank you. Nobody feels at all like that. I think what you just told us is incredibly valuable information for this committee to know and understand. I think it's something that many of us have heard far too often—the need to continually tell the story that is so hard for you to tell. Don't feel like you've taken too much time. We appreciate what you've just shared with us, without question.

We will now finish our questioning for today with Rachel Blaney for the last two and a half minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

Again, as I said earlier, I'm sorry that you have to bleed so that we can actually do something with it.

I'm going to come back to my very unsexy but, I think, very important issue and question around data collection. I believe that what we don't track, we don't see. Talk about making things invisible.

I'm going to start with Ms. Park. I have only about two and a half minutes, and I want to get all three of you in there, so I apologize for that.

Could you speak to that?

Ms. Rosemary Park: The lack of collection by the CAF makes it very difficult for VAC to have a history. I'll give you the one example that surprised me. We have a saying at Servicewomen's Salute: #iamnotsurprised. With respect to deployment, when women were sent on deployment, they did not record where they were or what they did, so there is no record. We have to crowdsource now. Those deployment experiences, and logically those in harsher conditions, will have implications for later health care and other issues. If I had a request.... They have tried to do a study. They've been able to find women going back to 2000, but they say it isn't possible to find them from earlier than that. There have been 399 missions since 1945. Women have been sent on international deployments since 1975. The only thing we can do, which we are undertaking, is to crowdsource.

Ms. Michelle Douglas: We're looking for these purge victims, purge survivors. We'd like to talk to their families, and we don't know how to find them. We don't have the data to know who they are or how to reach them. We think the government might be able to help by doing much more information broadcasting and awareness raising. We need this data, because we know this is an aging group and that they're in their final years in many cases. We want them to know in this period of their life that they are respected as veterans and that they can get help as they age from Veterans Affairs, from the government that, in many cases, betrayed them. Without this data, we don't even know what we're dealing with to help to resource the help for them.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): Is there anyone else who wants to respond briefly? We are at the end of our time, but if there's a brief response, I can allow that.

Ms. Christine Wood: I was going to say that if Veterans Affairs and CAF tracked injuries and claims, if we tracked all of these different metrics and data points, then we would know what programs are needed. We could collect data about how effective they are. That's the whole point of it. We need to be transparent and accountable to the public. These are taxpayer dollars. The programs, if they are not designed for you, are not going to work for you. Collecting that data has to be part of the backbone or the foundation of all the work that goes forward, because, as I said, you can't treat it if you can't name it. You can't name it if you don't track it and have the data.

Thank you.

● (1740)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): Thank you.

We'll have to close there, but I want to sincerely thank all of the witnesses today for the moving and impactful testimony that you have provided this committee. I think I can speak on behalf of everyone here when I say that it was very powerful, and I think it is going to be very important to us in our deliberations and in the recommendations we make going forward. Know that you have made a difference today. Thank you for your courage and for your time with us today.

With that, we'll close the meeting.

The meeting is adjourned.

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