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Chair: Mrs. Karen Vecchio



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• (1605)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC)): Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to meeting number 74 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the House order of June 23, 2022. Therefore, members are attending in person and remotely using the Zoom application.

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of our witnesses and members.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mike, and please mute it when you are not speaking. For those in the room, your mike will be controlled as normal by the proceedings and verification officer.

You may speak in the official language of your choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel. If interpretation is lost, please inform us immediately.

Although this room is equipped with a powerful audio system, feedback events can occur. These can be extremely harmful to interpreters. They have caused injuries and continue to cause them.

The most common cause of sound feedback is an earpiece worn too close to a microphone. We therefore ask all participants to exercise a high degree of caution when handling the earpieces, especially when your microphone or your neighbour's microphone is turned on. To prevent incidents and to safeguard the hearing health of the interpreters, I invite participants to ensure that they speak into the microphone into which their headset is plugged, and to avoid manipulating the earbuds by placing them on the table and away from the microphone when they are not in use.

I would remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

For members in the room, if you wish to speak, please raise your hand. For those participating by video conference, please use the "raise hand" function. The clerk and I will take notes.

In accordance with the committee's routine motion concerning connection tests, I would like to inform you that all of the connection tests have been completed.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted on Thursday, April 27, 2023, the committee will resume its study of menstrual equity in Canada.

I would like to welcome our panellists. I recognize that today is a little complicated with the votes. There are supposed to be some bells. At that time, we'll have to suspend for a second to decide what we're going to do, but we'll ensure that we get as much time as possible with all of you.

All of you will have five minutes. What I'm going to do is introduce you and give you your five minutes, and then I will introduce the next panel.

We would like to hear from our first witnesses. To begin, we have Lara Emond, the founder and president of Iris + Arlo.

Lara, you have five minutes.

• (1610)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Lara Emond (Founder and President, Iris + Arlo): Madam Chair and members of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women, Iris + Arlo is a social- and environmental-impact business that supplies healthy and environmentally friendly products, including single-use menstrual products that are natural, organic and plastic-free and reusable menstrual products such as underwear.

Menstrual equity is central to our mission, which is why, for every product sold, we donate menstrual products to people living in insecure circumstances through partnerships with organizations across the country. We also facilitate access to menstrual products by making them available through various businesses, as a result of which 130 Canadian organizations have committed to making menstrual products available in their restrooms. Lastly, since we firmly believe that education is the key to equity, we offer online educational material and workshop-conferences on periods.

A few observations before we begin. In the past year and a half, my team and I have discussed menstruation with hundreds of people across the country: CEOs, school administrators, agencies, student associations, governmental institutions and many more. A number of findings have clearly emerged from all those meetings.

First, every person who has or has had periods knows what it means to have to be resourceful in situations where they don't have the menstrual products they need. It can happen in public, at school or at work. It's an uncomfortable and embarrassing situation that occurs solely because sanitary facilities have not thought to accommodate persons who are having their period.

Second, periods are an uncomfortable topic for many people. It's time to break down those taboos and normalize discussions about menstruation. It's essential that everyone should feel comfortable discussing the subject and requesting assistance when necessary.

Third, most of the people we have met clearly aspire to have menstrual products that are healthier for both their own welfare and the environment.

Fourth, it's important to acknowledge that not everyone is comfortable using reusable menstrual products. This remains a very personal preference. It should also not be forgotten that sanitary facilities are often not set up for the use of reusable products, which impedes both their use and adoption.

Fifth and lastly, menstrual insecurity is a very real problem. Organizations receive many requests for sanitary products but are not always able to provide them.

There are several potential solutions to this problem.

Menstrual equity is a matter of fundamental equity, dignity and full socioeconomic participation. To achieve menstrual equity, we must treat menstrual products as what they are: essential products. Access to these products, as is true of toilet paper and hand soap, must be guaranteed. This requires lasting changes and the cooperation of many actors.

Consequently, as we have done for other essential products, we must ensure that they are available to the most vulnerable populations in places such as food banks, shelters and penitentiaries.

It is also important to promote access to menstrual products in public restrooms and to set an example by installing them wherever that is possible. I also want to mention the amendments that have been made to the Canada Labour Code in this regard.

Incentives, such as credits for modifying sanitary facilities and installing dispensers, can also be introduced to encourage this kind of change in most public restrooms

It would be a good idea to work with the provinces to guarantee the availability of menstrual products in schools and to promote education about periods.

Lastly, from an environmental standpoint, it is possible to promote the adoption of reusable menstrual products by providing grants, as many municipalities have done, and rethinking restrooms in order to facilitate their use. However, as the vast majority of persons who have periods use single-use products, it would be helpful to make healthier and more environmentally friendly products available to them.

- (1615)

In conclusion, menstrual equity is a matter of fundamental equity. We must acknowledge the importance of this issue and work to-

gether to guarantee equitable access to menstrual products, while respecting individual choices and promoting better education about periods.

Thank you for conducting such a serious study on this important issue. Together we can make a real difference, create an equitable country and change periods.

Thanks as well for this opportunity to share these thoughts with you today.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you so much.

I'm going to move it over to Monthly Dignity. In the room we have Clara Bolster-Foucault and Hayley Newman-Petryshen.

You both have five minutes in total for your opening comments. I will turn the floor over to you.

Ms. Hayley Newman-Petryshen (Co-Director, Monthly Dignity): Good afternoon, members of the committee, and thank you very much for inviting us to contribute to your study of menstrual equity in Canada.

Our names are Clara and Hayley, and we're the co-directors of Monthly Dignity, which is a non-profit organization tackling period poverty in Montreal. Our work centres around distributing free menstrual products to community-based organizations that serve clients in precarious situations, delivering inclusive menstrual education and advocating for free access to menstrual products, which should be considered a right rather than a privilege.

Our team is composed entirely of volunteers, and we are funded through in-kind contributions from manufacturers and donations from the community. We work with more than 20 community partners, including shelters for people experiencing homelessness, women's shelters, domestic violence shelters, centres for newcomers, asylum seekers and refugee claimants, youth outreach centres as well as publicly funded schools.

In tandem with this grassroots work, we both also conduct qualitative research on menstrual equity, during which we have interviewed people with lived experiences of period poverty as well as the community organizers, many of them here today, across the country who support them.

[Translation]

In the past year, Monthly Dignity has received an increasing number of requests for menstrual products from community organizations, schools, and even individuals. Unfortunately, given the small size and limited resources of our organisation, we are not able to keep up with this growing demand. However, this illustrates two critical turning points: a sharp increase in the degree of need within the community, and a growing awareness about issues surrounding period poverty and interest in implementing systemic changes to address them.

As many as 1 in 4 people who menstruate in Canada have had to choose between buying menstrual products and paying for other necessities, such as groceries, and as you can imagine, food comes first

Although this illustrates a profound problem, the reality is that we know very little about the scope and impact of period poverty in Canada. Period poverty is a doubly-hidden issue, owing to historic taboos surrounding menstruation and the broader issue of poverty. It is also highly intersectional, disproportionately affecting underserved communities.

[English]

Ms. Clara Bolster-Foucault (Co-Director, Monthly Dignity): Through our work, we've heard stories from folks on social security benefits not being able to find room in their monthly budget for period products. We've heard from shelter residents feeling too embarrassed to ask for period products from shelter staff, high school students who miss school every month, people getting infections and rashes because they kept a product on for longer than is considered safe, and folks experiencing homelessness not being able to find a private bathroom to change their pad or tampon, or making do with toilet paper or rags because they didn't have access to the products they needed.

The profound shame and stigma that results from these experiences cannot be overstated. The root causes of period poverty are complex and intricately linked with social determinants of health. However, there are downstream barriers to menstrual equity that present opportunities for action. To effectively tackle period poverty in Canada, we need a comprehensive approach that addresses both immediate and long-term needs while recognizing and adapting to local contexts.

Programs and policies aimed at reducing period poverty must respond to the pressing need for menstrual products among underserved communities by reducing financial and structural barriers to accessing these products among those who are most at risk of period poverty. This can be addressed by increasing social assistance funding, subsidizing the cost of menstrual products, distributing free menstrual products in publicly funded institutions and allocating additional funding for community-based organizations to purchase the products that they need to distribute.

[Translation]

Secondly, comprehensive and inclusive menstrual education is necessary to reduce the stigma surrounding menstruation. This could be addressed by integrating menstrual health into elementary and high school curricula, engaging in public awareness campaigns,

and advocating for the provision of menstrual products to be considered the norm. In every aspect of these efforts, it is critical to meet people and communities where they are, and to actively consider the needs, experiences, and preferences of diverse populations.

Menstrual equity is about more than just periods. It's an issue that sits at the intersection of social justice, human rights, gender equality, food security, poverty reduction, education, and so much more.

We are encouraged by this committee's interest and efforts in this important issue in Canada. We hope that these discussions will mark the start of a systemic change.

Thank you very much.

• (1620)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Moving online, we're going to turn to Moon Time Sisters. We have Veronica Brown, who is the lead for the Ontario chapter, as well as Nicole White, founder and lead for the Saskatchewan chapter.

I will pass it to you to share your five minutes.

Ms. Nicole White (Founder and Lead, Saskatchewan Chapter, Moon Time Sisters): *Tansi*, and good afternoon everyone.

My name is Nicole White, and I'm honoured to be speaking to you from Treaty 6 territory. I am the founder of Moon Time Sisters, which is a flagship project of True North Aid. I'm joined today by Veronica Brown.

Ms. Veronica Brown (Lead, Ontario Chapter, Moon Time Sisters): *Meegwetch*, Nicole.

While usually in Treaty 13 territory, I am calling today from Portugal.

We are very grateful for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the state of menstrual equity across Turtle Island and how this issue is disproportionately affecting indigenous nations.

Ms. Nicole White: In 2017, I learned that it was common for indigenous students to miss school due to a lack of access to menstrual products. From a simple donation of pads, Moon Time Sisters, or MTS, was born. It has since evolved into an indigenous-led national organization working towards period equity in northern communities.

Barriers to access and affordability are amplified for indigenous nations. Some communities have no access to products at all and need to travel long distances to purchase these essential items—with very little variety. A mother from La Ronge, Saskatchewan, once told us that she got some product from their local shelter. She and her girls had never actually had pads before; they just used socks.

Since its beginning in 2017, Moon Time Sisters has grown to include four chapters and has partnered with over 100 northern indigenous communities throughout the country. We have shipped over two million period products to high schools, elementary schools, midwifery organizations, health care centres, friendship centres, shelters, food banks and community programs. We are ensuring that we are supporting community as a whole, as the medicine wheel teaches us.

Most importantly, we work with community. We collaborate with each one to ensure they are being heard and their needs met. We provide them with a full spectrum of moon time products that have been specifically requested. We're often asked why we don't send only reusable options, like cloth pads or menstrual cups. While we recognize this question is rooted in good intentions, it's also indicative of a colonial mindset that we know what's best for others.

Indigenous menstruators deserve not only equal access to menstrual products, but also the dignity of choice to address their unique and individual needs.

Ms. Veronica Brown: The 2023 survey completed by Plan International Canada found that 25% of Canadian women “who menstruate have been forced to make the decision between purchasing menstrual products and purchasing other essentials such as food or rent within the last year.”

Through our work, we've seen first-hand the disproportionate effect of period inequity in northern communities. We know that far more than 25% of indigenous menstruators have been forced to make this difficult decision.

We recently partnered with the University of Saskatchewan and developed a crowdsourcing survey to collect information about preferences, as well as the barriers experienced by people who menstruate in remote northern communities. We're pleased to share some of the preliminary results with you today. For your reference, we have provided a copy with some figures in appendix 2.

Our data is not a one-to-one comparison to the Plan study, but our preliminary findings are very telling.

One key takeaway is that 73% of indigenous respondents in remote communities and 55% of indigenous respondents in non-remote communities sometimes or often have issues accessing menstrual products.

Relating to the previous question, of responses from those who sometimes or often have access issues; 39% say that this is because they are unavailable at the store; 26% of responses say that they have other priority items to buy, and 26% say that they are unaffordable.

The survey also indicated that indigenous respondents in remote communities were most likely to miss work, school and exercise due to a lack of access to period products.

Our survey explored product preference, access to pain relief, recycling programs, various experiences while menstruating, and who menstruators are comfortable talking with about their moon time. Additional data will be released in a forthcoming report.

Ms. Nicole White: Thousands of indigenous menstruators from coast to coast to coast are struggling.

While we're tremendously proud of our growth and the amount of support we've been able to provide in our few short years as an organization, we're also deeply concerned by what it means: that the need for our support is vital and it's growing, not declining.

In an ideal Canada, all menstruators can bleed with dignity, no matter their gender, location or ethnicity.

We appreciate the committee's time and the opportunity to speak about how period inequity is affecting northern regions. Thank you for hearing us today and for the government's steps towards our collective goal of achieving period equity.

Hay hay.

● (1625)

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Staying online, we have Meghan White, co-founder of Period Packs.

Meghan, you have the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Meghan White (Co-Founder, Period Packs): Good afternoon, everybody.

Of course, I'd like to express my gratitude to the committee for welcoming me here today, and for your zeal in exploring the issue of period poverty here in Canada.

It's been a great pleasure of mine to witness the growth of the menstrual movement here, including the recent amendments to the regulations made under the Canada Labour Code requiring, of course, free pads and tampons to be made available in all federally regulated workplaces, and the foundations put into the federal menstrual equity fund pilot framework.

Over the past five and a half years, I have devoted my entire life to the cause of period poverty, collaborating with passionate advocates from diverse sectors around the world, many of whom are in this room. I have seen both the devastating impact of period poverty on women and girls, and the inspiring progress we have made. However, the reality is that period poverty continues to have devastating effects on the lives of countless individuals.

In 2018, I co-founded Period Packs, an Ottawa-based agency that addresses period poverty through a three-pronged approach of access, advocacy and education, a winning formula, that I am sure you will hear echoed by many, if not most, of the witnesses at this committee hearing today.

In 2018, Period Packs made significant strides in addressing period poverty in our community. Our grassroots programming distributed over one million menstrual products to Ottawa community members through our 36 frontline community agencies. Through advocacy and partnerships, we have implemented two major, ongoing pilot programs, and we have supported over a dozen institution-level initiatives, as well. Our peer-to-peer education approach directly engages community youth, while our 50-plus virtual workshops reach diverse organizations, including city councils, university boards, high school boards, major Canadian banking institutions and many social service agencies.

Over the years, the need for our services has grown exponentially. We provide products to a variety of frontline services—food banks, shelters, safe houses, public libraries, sexual health clinics and street outreach programs—and make a tremendous number of personal deliveries to individual community members. Perhaps for me, most striking is the work we do with high school students, where we provide pads, tampons, menstrual cups and menstrual discs.

Providing choice and quality products is foundational to our service. By offering a range of options, we ensure individuals have access to products that suit their unique bodies, preferences and comfort levels. This inclusivity empowers people to choose what works best for them, enabling them to manage their own cycle with confidence and dignity. It helps us create compassionate, ongoing programming informed by the individual.

To date, 50% of the products we have distributed have been in partnership with women-founded and -operated Canadian SMEs. These SMEs have played an integral part in addressing period poverty in Canada, not just through partnerships with community agencies like Period Packs but also by conducting their own high-quality, independent research, funding and design of educational programs. They are on the ground with grassroots organizations, working meticulously to truly understand community needs and design best practices to address them. Partnering with women-owned SMEs creates a supportive circular economy where grant money and donations benefit social enterprises dedicated to making Canada a better place for everyone. These partnerships have demonstrated an intimate understanding of the issue and the ability to efficiently deliver a variety of products at a competitive price.

A need for product variation and choice also drove these partnerships. Period Packs' extensive programming has proven that it is simply inadequate to provide only pads and tampons. Menstrual

cups, menstrual discs and period underwear are highly in demand in our programming.

I take pride in doing this work alongside dedicated advocates from all sectors, including other witnesses here at the committee and everyone present today. I firmly believe that Canada will be well on its way to becoming a leader in addressing menstrual equity by establishing a commendable foundation for the advancement of gender equity.

Thank you for providing me with this opportunity and for making it easy for me to proudly share that Canada is building the foundation to be an international leader in this space.

• (1630)

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll now hear from the Resource Assistance for Youth and Ayla Banks, drop-in manager.

You have the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Ayla Banks (Drop-In Manager, Resource Assistance for Youth Inc.): Hello. Thank you for having me here and thank you to the committee for the work you've done for menstrual equity.

My name is Ayla Banks, and I'm joining from Winnipeg on Treaty 1 territory, home and traditional land of the Anishinabe, Ojibwa and Innu Cree and Dakota peoples and the national homeland of the Red River Métis.

I'm speaking today on behalf of Resource Assistance for Youth and the folks who access our services. We also go by RaY.

RaY is a multi-dimensional, street level frontline service organization that seeks to provide services that meet the emergent and long-term needs of youth experiencing homelessness between the ages of zero and 29. RaY is a non-partisan, non-judgmental organization underpinned by the social determinants of health that utilizes evidence-based harm reduction practices to support youth in a participant-driven way.

Overall RaY's vision is to end youth homelessness through systems navigation and collaboration with the youth themselves. Specifically, we provide frontline services in conjunction with providing system-based advocacy, education, employment and training readiness.

Our service delivery model is called a hub model, which includes basic needs and a hot meal program, four distinct housing programs to meet youth where they are at, an employment and training program called Level Up! that bridges marginalized youth to the labour market, as well as access to mental health, primary health and substance use supports. These programs work together to ensure youth we work with can reach independence and stability in terms of their mental health, physical health and economic conditions.

The goal of addressing each of these elements is to set youth up for success in the long term rather than providing temporary solutions for isolated issues.

With over 25 years of experience, we now serve more than 2,700 marginalized and street-entrenched youth every year as they transition towards adulthood.

My current role here is managing our drop-in space, which sees anywhere from 50 to 100 participants a day. Our folks see more barriers than most and menstrual health education and access plays an often-overlooked but serious part in impeding an individual's ability to achieve health, growth and success.

When I first learned of this initiative, I immediately thought of my long-standing unofficial appointment with a woman I will call Mary. While she is well over our zero to 29 age mandate, she has been unhoused for a number of years and turns up consistently once a month in our opening hours before the youth arrive to request pants, underwear and period products. She will have some sort of garbage bag or old cloth wrapped around her waist in an attempt to hide her ruined pants. She changes in our bathroom. I load her up with supplies, and she quietly leaves.

While Mary and I have had this almost wordless system now for a couple of years, I see many variations of Mary throughout the month. Some folks are incredibly embarrassed. Some have been denied entrance to other facilities because of their appearance or odours. Some have been using unhygienic makeshift replacements leading to further health issues. Some have just resigned to this as one of life's normalities. This should not be a normality.

In terms of our participants who may be housed but are living on a monthly basic needs budget of around \$150 to \$200 a month, or those who are entering the workforce at a minimum wage that does not match the current cost of rent and living, we see the incredibly difficult decision being made regularly on whether to eat, afford the bus to work, or not ruin another pair of pants, which may be their only work pants. This should not be a decision anyone has to make.

Through our work on the front line we have come to learn that access to free menstruation supplies needs to be more widespread than the front desk of a daytime drop-in centre. Every bathroom, regardless of gender designation, should be stocked with free supplies. As we know, not all women menstruate and not all men don't. Due to stigma and taboo, requesting menstrual supplies as a woman can still be felt as shameful. For trans men and non-binary folks, it can be not only felt as undignified but a way of outing oneself and a terrifying safety risk.

Furthermore, on top of bathroom stock, supplies need to be available for outreach workers and other forms of frontline service pro-

vision due to the often inaccessible nature of bathrooms for some of our more street-entrenched and marginalized community members.

Ideally these supplies would be more than just a single option as well as preferences for menstrual products are often affected by important aspects such as one's cultural background, education and knowledge and even trauma history. Providing access and choice provides dignity and safety. Dignity and safety are crucial to our mental and physical health and overall community wellness.

Thanks again for having me.

• (1635)

The Chair: Thank you so much.

I believe there is going to be a vote at some time. There is a closure motion, so it would be 30 minutes when the bells do start, but what we're going to do now is start with our first round.

We're going to start off with six minutes, and we'll start off with Dominique Vien.

Dominique, you have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Dominique Vien (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Good afternoon, ladies. Thank you for being with us this afternoon.

We knew there were problems with access to menstrual products. Some women also find it hard to pay for them. However, after every testimony that we hear here, we realize that the reality may be even more appalling than we could imagine.

Ms. Emond, I'll go to you first and ask you a brief question. Other people who design reusable menstrual products have come and met with us, and I told them we hadn't seen their advertising. I jokingly said that other members and I, who are from another generation, might be reading the wrong magazines.

How much market share have you acquired? Who buys your products? Are young people more inclined to buy them than we were when we were the same age? Can you give us a quick snapshot of the popularity of these products?

Mrs. Lara Emond: Iris + Arlo offers single-use products such as tampons with and without applicators, day and night pads and 100% organic cotton panty liners made of biodegradable materials. We believe women must be able to choose. So we also offer them a line of reusable products, such as menstrual underwear. According to some studies, the market for menstrual panties has expanded 15%. It's a very fast-growing market.

Young people are more informed about health and environmental issues. People are interested in and attracted to these kinds of products. When all the options are presented to them when they have their first period, young women realize how much more comfortable and environmentally friendly menstrual panties can be. Since eco-anxiety is really an issue for the younger generations, these products will be more readily adopted.

One of the solutions would be to discuss the subject more, but this kind of product also needs to have more visibility.

Mrs. Dominique Vien: School is a good place to provide that education.

Mrs. Lara Emond: That's right. However, one in four Canadians doesn't know what menstruation is, and I think one in three young women don't know how to manage it. There's clearly a lack of education.

I'm going to tell you a story. In the last 18 months, we have worked with businesses, encouraging them to provide menstrual products in their workplaces. Some extremely informed CEOs who head up very high tech businesses have literally asked me how a tampon works. There has to be education at every level.

Mrs. Dominique Vien: Oh boy!

I don't know who will answer the somewhat complicated question that I'm about to ask. Many of you could no doubt answer, but I think it was Ms. White who mentioned the Canada Labour Code and employees of federally regulated businesses.

Unless I'm mistaken, women on the government side have free access to hygienic menstrual products. I'm a former minister of labour in Quebec, and we didn't address this issue when we completely revised Quebec's Labour Code. It was a major revision. I'm saying all this to remind you that this issue falls under provincial jurisdiction. My colleague Ms. Larouche will definitely emphasize that as well.

We can talk and decide that these products will have to be in all the restrooms of all Quebec businesses, but who will assume leadership? How will we go about convincing those businesses?

Ms. Bolster-Foucault, you look as though you have an answer.

Ms. Clara Bolster-Foucault: That's definitely the question. For starters, I'd say this doesn't have to be the responsibility of a single person. Leadership should be exercised at all levels. There's room in every government for female politicians like you who, in performing their duties, can ensure that this becomes the norm.

We need to pass an act that applies everywhere, but there also has to be a change of perception among the general public. We have to conduct awareness campaigns and introduce measures so these products are available in workplaces, but we have to do much

more. Businesses will eventually take the initiative of providing those products. I hope that has a snowball effect.

• (1640)

Mrs. Dominique Vien: The business world has no choice but to be attractive these days. There's a labour shortage after all. Women are very much a presence in the labour market.

Is the business world prepared for this? Is it sensitive enough to this issue? Someone will have to pay for it, and we'll have to look into that aspect.

Ms. Clara Bolster-Foucault: I think so. If that becomes the norm, businesses, schools, municipal agencies and every other entity will have to follow suit. People will have to be ready.

[English]

The Chair: That's awesome, thank you.

I'm going to pass it over to Anita Vandenberg.

You have six minutes.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you so much.

Thank you to this incredible witness panel for the work you're doing on menstrual equity.

I'd like to go to the economic arguments for this. We've talked about the dignity, the rights and the choice, but there's a real economic argument to be made here.

One of the things mentioned was that people are missing work and school. Then, of course, there are issues of not just physical health. The shame and the lack of confidence can also lead to other issues in terms of the rest of their lives being impacted. Also, Ms. White, you mentioned the flip side of that, which is that most of the businesses that are in this sector are led by women. On the one hand, the product can actually help in terms of economic empowerment of women, but we also have the businesses that are women led and the entrepreneurship.

I'll start with Ms. White on that angle, and then I'll ask everybody, in the order you spoke, to comment on that if you would like to.

Ms. Meghan White: Thank you so much.

The concept here—it draws back, I'm sure, to a lot of other questions—is creating a circular economy of support: that we are getting as many things done as simultaneously and as collaboratively as possible. Whether we are council members, MPs, working in the non-profit sector, business folks or designers of menstrual products ourselves, when you identify the need and you see the whole, you must act in every sector across the board.

That's where we're going to find our really Canadian way here and where we're going to work together collaboratively to solve this problem while supporting industry and while meeting our environmental goals. The collaboration here is so important. I can see it in this room. Everybody's really keen and ready to do that.

I'll pass it to someone else.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: It's a real win-win.

I'll pass it to the Moon Time Sisters for Ms. Brown or Ms. White.

Ms. Veronica Brown: When it comes to the economic impact, when we look at the rate of high school graduates in northern communities.... We're talking about on-reserve high schools for first nations and also about Inuit communities, which are really not brought to this table often, that conversation of northern communities.... The high school rate of graduation is quite low. When Nicole was speaking with the MP who really started this fire of Moon Time Sisters, it was because students were missing school.

If we look to supplying communities in different regions, to high schools, but not only high schools—we are talking also about other programs related in the community—you're going to have a higher rate of graduation from female and non-binary two-spirit students. You're going to have more women and two-spirits going to work. Our stats are saying there is quite a high number of women and two-spirit people who are missing work because they do not have access to menstrual products. When we talk about the economic impact, if you're going to allow the entire community to work as a whole, we really do need to be supplying this one barrier that is a very significant barrier but a very simple fix in terms of just supplying product.

When we're talking about jurisdiction, municipalities know what the concerns are in their jurisdictions. They're working with shelters. They're funding their shelters. If we're looking at who is going to be responsible for funding, it really does need to be multidisciplinary here. At the end of the day, every region knows their region very well. They have frontline workers in there. Their social services know exactly what shelters, the numbers who are attending, who is going to need that product. That's a pretty big piece to keep in mind, but when we're looking at first nation and Inuit communities, we do need to be working with the territorial governments as well and with their programs.

● (1645)

The Chair: Thanks.

I'm going to interrupt right now. I have put the clock on pause. We are voting in 28 minutes and 29 seconds. I'm looking for this committee to allow us to continue, and I'm looking to see whether we want to vote by app or whether we need to go upstairs to vote. If we can get everybody wishing to vote via the app.... The reason I'm asking is, looking at the timing, we would be voting....

I'm looking at the clock. We have 28 minutes. That means that, within 24 minutes, we'll have to stop. Then we're looking at coming back to this room, but the meeting today is done at 5:30. We're voting at quarter after five, meaning there would not be time to come back. I want to put that to everybody.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri (Peterborough—Kawartha, CPC): Then you have another five minutes to vote.

The Chair: Yes, but I'm saying that it's up to us.

Let's continue this conversation, but the idea is, when we go up to vote....

Let's finish this meeting in 23 minutes. That will give everybody four minutes if they wish to go upstairs or four minutes if they do that and then go from that. There are 24 minutes left.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: How much time do I have left, Madam Chair?

The Chair: You have 55 seconds. We won't be coming back as there will not be time.

Let's see if people are staying in the room or not.

Go ahead.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: In one minute or less, I saw a lot of nodding in the room, so would you guys like to comment on that?

Ms. Hayley Newman-Petryshen: I think it comes back a lot to the opportunity costs, losing education and not being able to go to school.

I think we also have to think about health policies. We severely underfund women's health research, so you have people with endometriosis or other menstruation-related illnesses who have a period for three or four weeks. We're not talking about two or three days every now and again; we're talking about a chronic illness. The amount of work people are missing, the amount of school people are missing, the activities people are missing when they're out not feeling like they can fully participate because of that....

One in 10 women has endometriosis. There is a bunch of other related things that give people a hard time when they are menstruating. When we talk about periods, why people are missing these opportunities and why the economy gets tied up in that, we really need to be thinking about this as well.

Social corporations and enterprises in Canada have been huge supporters of Monthly Dignity. We fully exist off the donations from companies that are based in Canada, many of them run by women.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We're going to Andréanne Larouche for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche (Shefford, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank all the witnesses for being here today to destigmatize this issue, which still appears to be taboo in 2023.

I'm going to go back to what my colleague Ms. Vien said earlier. For 10 years, I managed an environmental fair, the Foire Écosphère, which generated environmental solutions for sustainable transportation and electric vehicles. We also provided solutions for green renovations and construction, eco-fashion and aesthetic products, since eco-cosmetic products are increasingly popular. People were already talking about reusable menstrual products at the time. Now they're also talking about plastic-free and single-use products but that are much more environmentally friendly and have less environmental impact. The environment is an important issue.

Research can be a federal jurisdiction. Would it be a good idea to invest more in medical research, particularly to find solutions for sustainable and reusable products? That would make it possible to address the environmental consequences of those products.

Since all the witnesses discussed reusable products, those of you here in the room and online can answer my question.

• (1650)

Mrs. Lara Emond: I'll answer it, if I may.

It's clearly worthwhile to invest in research, and we don't do enough of that in Canada, whether in materials or ultimately the development of new materials, which would be part of the circular economy. There has to be more investment in research if we want to be more competitive one day and lower the purchase price of menstrual products. I think we have to do that. We know that Canada isn't competitive enough in many areas of trade and intellectual property

As my colleagues mentioned, we have to consider the fact that very little research is being done on the health of women and persons who have a uterus. I'd like to point out that there are still vague and permissive areas in the legislative field. Several studies have shown that many pesticides, endocrine disruptors, dioxins and other substances can still be found in menstrual products today. That influences the health of persons who have periods and use those kinds of products. We can't yet quantify the impact that has on health or, in turn, on our overall health system and environment in Canada.

We could draw a parallel with cigarettes, for example. Many years ago, little research was conducted on cigarettes. The general opinion was that it was a healthy product. Then research and studies were done that revealed a need to regulate cigarettes. Those kinds of studies on menstrual products should be conducted for the welfare of all Canadians.

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Would Ms. Bolster-Foucault and Ms. Newman-Petryshen like to add anything?

Ms. Clara Bolster-Foucault: I'd like to add something. I really agree with what was just said.

However, the lack of menstrual health data really really leaves us in the dark as to the impact of menstrual insecurity. The truth is that we don't know who is facing this issue or its consequences for the persons concerned. I think investing in this kind of research would be more beneficial. Greater emphasis should be put on the health data collection and less on the products. However, research also has to be conducted on the products.

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: That's where you see how important it is to rely on sound data in science in order to develop new technologies. My colleague Luc Thériault could discuss the lack of research being done on women's health with you at great length. He has proposed a study on breast implants.

Many organizations have made us aware that less money is invested in research on cancers and diseases that typically afflict women.

I want to single out the work done by stores that offer reusable products and bulk products. A young and absolutely dynamic female entrepreneur who recently received an award from the chamber of commerce runs a business called Orange coco. Her store is extraordinary and sells reusable products. Hats off to Orange coco.

With regard to menstrual equity, we realize that many things fall under provincial jurisdiction. Do you think that one potential solution would be to increase health transfers to the provinces, knowing that the Quebec government has published a study entitled, "Étude sur l'accès aux produits menstruels", that was conducted by the Conseil du statut de la femme du Québec. Many cities in Quebec have adopted measures to facilitate access to menstrual products. The thinking is that increasing health transfers could help promote this kind of initiative that Quebec, the provinces and many municipalities are already considering.

Do our witnesses have anything to say on the subject?

Ms. Clara Bolster-Foucault: I can say something again. In my opinion, the answer is, "Yes, but..."

I think that could help, but it's not the only solution I would propose. It also has to come from various sources and from everywhere. If people don't have access to the health system as a result of barriers to access to primary care and so on, they won't have greater access to menstrual products if they come solely from the health system.

To sum up, that could be a source of assistance, but it would also have to come from elsewhere.

• (1655)

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Thank you, ladies.

[English]

The Chair: Okay, now we're going to go online.

Bonita, you have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo (Port Moody—Coquitlam, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for the important testimony we're hearing today.

Outside of the products that we know are so important, there have been discussions today around the impacts on public life, the ability to earn an income, the impact on the ability to take part in public life.

My questions will start with Ayla Banks.

You used the words “health, growth and success”. I think for this study there's an opportunity to have recommendations from testimony, so I wonder if you wouldn't mind sharing. How does not having access to these products—going through the stigma—affect opportunities? What are the opportunity costs? What are the effects longitudinally over a lifetime? How can we make changes at the federal level to make it better?

Ms. Ayla Banks: I would say the simple nature of just going to work in clean clothing and making a living, a simple thing like that is so impacted by this lack of access. I've seen folks lose their jobs either because of having accidents at work, which is a reality that everybody experiences, and not having a solution for that, or because they are just not able to go to work.

As was said earlier, people sometimes experience menstruation for more than just a week a month. That could impact folks being able to work long term. That wouldn't make them qualify for disability, for example, which would help to supplement income. The constant starting and stopping of attempting to get back into the workforce is really impeded by not having access to any sort of menstrual supplies.

Even if workplaces provided them across the board, that would make an impact, but in terms of the stigma that already exists, folks having access to them before they go to work in the first place so that they can be prepared would make a huge difference.

It's access across the board, not just in workplaces, but more places. Not having it just for folks who identify as female, I think, would be another big one, because it is a danger factor for a lot of folks to have to out themselves in workplaces if they are male-presenting or something like that.

I wonder if that answers your question.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Yes, that's great.

Thank you so much for talking about the ability to earn an income in the workforce. I'm sponsoring a petition right now by a community group that's interested in the ability to have...you mentioned having it as a disability and you might need more days a month to assist.... This is around having workdays given to those who can't necessarily...the pain is too much or the inability to.... It can make them very ill throughout the cycle.

I wonder if you could share a bit around whether you've had any experience of folks who are not able physically to go to work because of the pain or the experiences they have during their cycle.

Ms. Ayla Banks: Another big thing that would be really helpful is education alone. I see a lot of people who don't understand that they are experiencing something that is not a regular occurrence, such as endometriosis, PMDD and things like that. That language and those diagnoses don't often exist for folks in the first place, let alone once they know they have it. The stigma and taboos often take away from anybody taking it seriously it enough to qualify for any sort of supported work environment for those kinds of experiences, extreme pain or other side effect situations.

I was talking about the bleeding alone, but yes, on the pain factors, the behavioural changes and all of those, there's not a lot of education, especially if you come from a less educated...or have a

lack of education in your background. Knowing about that, but then also having the follow-up of it being taken seriously and making it accessible for people to be able to work around that to work....

• (1700)

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you so much for that.

I want to move over to Moon Time Sisters.

I want to talk a bit about teenagers and young people, and some of the effects that come alongside menstruation, like migraines, pain or being ill, like throwing up. It's all of those things, where there isn't necessarily a lot of education around them and a lot of stigma of not being able to share them.

I wonder if you could share a bit about the impacts for young people of the stigma and of the missing education piece, and how we can correct it.

Ms. Veronica Brown: Go for it, Nicole.

Ms. Nicole White: I know Veronica has done a lot more in regard to pain care and sending hot water bottles and that type of thing, so there's access to those basic pieces that we sometimes take for granted. We absolutely hear from folks that it is a limiting factor.

I want to answer some of the other questions that have gone on in the room, but I want to throw it to Veronica at this point.

Ms. Veronica Brown: In our research study, we asked about access to pain relief, because that is something we would like to know about. Not only are menstruators missing school, work and exercise because of a lack of access; this could also be because of lack of access to pain relief.

After a couple of years of doing this work, we got a request for some pain relief, so we send up hot water bottles and heating pads. Microwaveable beanbags are often a bit too heavy.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We are coming down to the last few minutes before the vote. As I'm looking at this and reading the room, to give you an idea, what I'm going to do is four minutes, four minutes, two minutes and two minutes. We will be closing off at 5:15 so that those who need to vote can go and vote, and then we'll be done for the day, if that's okay.

We will end at 5:15 rather than come back. We'll adjourn at the time the vote starts.

I'll start off with Michelle Ferreri for the first four minutes.

Go ahead, Michelle.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thanks, Ms. Chair.

Thank you all for being here today. I really appreciate your time, insight and the work that you do for a lot of the most vulnerable.

Education would probably be my biggest interest, because I think it's a big piece for kids who maybe don't have access to somebody who can help them or give them that guidance.

I have two questions. I'm curious, from each of you, where education falls in terms of how you reach the people who need it most if you don't even know where they are. Also, how are you each funded? I'm very curious about that.

I will open the floor and let everybody have a chance to answer that.

Ms. Meghan White: I can start out, if that's okay, because the education piece is so important to me as well.

The most success we've found of the different models that we've tried over the last five years is peer-to-peer, without a doubt. That is gathering young people who are leaders in their community or have an interest in communication in drama or in the arts and who want to use those skills through mentorship from the adults in the organization and then take that back to their own institutions and share the information that way. They are provided with a tremendous amount of literature and training. Then they can go off into their own communities and speak on a peer-to-peer level, young person to young person, to supplement what I will have to say is inadequate puberty education in these systems.

I find that extremely complementary to an alternative of having a bigger conversation about correcting through education.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: I'm sorry; I'm going to jump in. I'm just going to ask a quick question, because it comes to my mind as you speak.

Are there any apps or social media platforms you're using to reach these young girls? I would think that may be a really useful tool.

Ms. Meghan White: Yes, definitely. We were using YouTube. They were creating a YouTube channel.

Again, it's excellent because of co-creating skills and leading them. Most of them were between the ages of 12 and 17 creating YouTube so that they can share those channels with other folks. It's just them, informed by research that's been done, talking about periods to other people their age.

YouTube has been a very helpful model for us.

• (1705)

Ms. Hayley Newman-Petryshen: I'll go ahead quickly about how we're funded.

First of all, we're not really funded. We get zero dollars. We function almost exclusively on in-kind donations from companies and from the community.

A high school recently did a fundraiser for us, and that's the most money we've taken in this year as opposed to government funding, funding from private foundations or anything like that.

We operate purely on in-kind donations.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: This pilot program of \$25 million that's coming from the federal government, will you be able to apply for that? Are you eligible?

Ms. Hayley Newman-Petryshen: We haven't quite been informed about the eligibility criteria. We are on the eligible list. We don't have registered charity status, but we are a registered non-profit. That's a barrier for a lot of grassroots organizations, because the process to get that status is very expensive.

I can speak a little to education, if that would be helpful.

Education is something that we're expanding our portfolio on right now. I also work with an organization, Free Periods Canada, out in B.C. We're working on a publicly available menstrual health course. We're doing a scoping examination of everything that's happening in each province.

As I've looked through each province's curriculum for sex ed, it kind of stops and starts in grades 4 and 5—understand the process of menstruation, done, end of sentence. They don't understand what level of pain is normal, don't understand what products are available and what they're allowed to use and don't understand that you can talk about your period and your needs.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We're going to Jenna Sudds.

Jenna, you have four minutes.

Ms. Jenna Sudds (Kanata—Carleton, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you to all of our witnesses for joining us today and the incredible work that you're all doing.

I'd like to start with Moon Time Sisters.

One of the questions I've been asking through the consultations that I've been doing on the menstrual equity fund is: Who are you not able to reach in the services that you're providing? Ultimately it is those people who are hardest to reach who we want to ensure get the support they need.

Veronica or Nicole, whoever would like to answer, who are you not able to reach?

Ms. Nicole White: Gosh, there are a lot of people we're not currently reaching. I think a lot of our work is by word of mouth, through presentations and through partnerships with labour. We absolutely need to do deeper work to get the word out there that we're here to support people. There are tons of communities we have not sent product to. Obviously, we are hoping that funding will come our way to sort of build our capacity to strengthen our reach.

Veronica.

Ms. Veronica Brown: One limitation that we really have is communities that do not have access to Internet. We found this when we were doing our survey, because it was an online survey. That is a limitation of our data, but it is also a limitation of our request forms. When a community is requesting items, they have to do it online. For those communities that don't have access to Internet, this is a very huge barrier. Sometimes people have community members who work in remote communities who do request forms for those communities that they work in.

Going into smaller remote communities that do not have access to stores, food banks, dollar stores, the Red Cross, and things like that.... We are definitely really trying to moving into those communities. Working with the Nunavut government, we've partnered with them in their sexual health program as well as their education ministry to help pinpoint some of those smaller communities that have zero access and Internet.

We all talk about Internet. It's a wonderful thing, but it is definitely a privilege in this country. It's something that we're working on.

Ms. Nicole White: To add on to it, one of the great things we've been able to do is to reach out to a number of band offices and a number of education departments so they can actually disseminate the product to whatever schools need it.

Ms. Jenna Sudds: That's incredible. Thank you very much.

I'll pose the same question to Monthly Dignity.

Ms. Clara Bolster-Foucault: The reality is that, with programs like ours and with many other programs that rely on distribution, we don't actually know who we're not reaching. We infer who those people are based on who we have to turn away because we don't have the capacity to say yes, and based on who we think aren't able to reach out to us in the first place. In our case, the reality is these are probably the most vulnerable or the most underserved communities. Since the size of our organization is quite small at the moment, we are limited to the Montreal region, so we're unable to reach any rural or remote communities, or even to reach people in the Montreal suburbs who are a bit farther out. That's one big element.

The other population is those who aren't accessing services because they aren't able to. We rely on these community partnerships to serve clients who access their services, and if people aren't able to access those services because of whatever reason, then there's no way we're going to be able to reach those folks.

• (1710)

The Chair: You have about 15 seconds left.

Ms. Jenna Sudds: It's much appreciated. I think that's one of the challenges many organizations have repeated in the consultations for the menstrual equity fund. I appreciate it's a hard nut to crack, but it's an important one.

I'll leave it at that. Thank you very much for all the work you're doing.

The Chair: We vote in four minutes and five seconds.

We will go for two minutes to Andréanne Larouche.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Once again, I want to thank the witnesses who have travelled here today and the other witnesses who are also online.

With regard to next steps, I also want to think about parallel issues that could feed into our current study.

For example, Ms. Emond, we know that people want to abolish plastic. That could come with some financial support for businesses that, like yours, work on menstrual products that are reusable or plastic-free.

In your case, Ms. Bolster-Foucault and Ms. Newman-Petryshen, I know you work extensively with volunteers. You say your organization currently doesn't consist solely of volunteers. Could various types of assistance and aid increase recognition of the unseen work done by volunteers? That might be helpful. The United Way, it's community organizations and the food banks that offer its products could provide their assistance.

We could also simply look into the "pink tax" issue, as a result of which every product for women costs more because it's pink. That has its consequences. We're straying beyond the scope of our study on menstrual products, but that's another reality that has an impact on women's insecurity.

Would each of you please give a brief response? We have less than a minute remaining.

Mrs. Lara Emond: I have an additional comment, if I may.

Plastic in products should absolutely be abolished. We see businesses that say they have bioplastic applicators. However, in certain cases, when you look carefully and read the fine print on the product, you discover that a percentage of the product consists of bioplastic. Bioplastic is a mixture of plastics. Plastic essentially isn't really biodegradable, a fact that then represents a real issue with our blue gold in Canada.

Ms. Clara Bolster-Foucault: I'd like to make a brief comment.

You've raised a really important point. Menstruation is related to many other things, including women's rights and the environment. That creates opportunities to address the the environmental aspect, for example. There are opportunities and perhaps subsidies—

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We're now going to Bonita, who's online.

Bonita, you have the final two minutes.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you.

I'm going to ask three of our witnesses today to give us 30 seconds on what they'd like us to have on the record for this report. Perhaps I could ask Monthly Dignity, Moon Time Sisters and then Ayla to tell us in 30 seconds what they want us to know as we wrap up today.

Ms. Hayley Newman-Petryshen: All right. I have 30 seconds and a community full of a lot of needs.

I can say that what keeps Clara and I up at night is that we are constantly getting, especially over the past year, new requests for new partners. It feels as though we've been getting requests on an almost biweekly basis. We just can't fill them. We are women doing unpaid care work, like all the other women sitting on this panel, to fulfill the needs of women who are also doing a lot of unpaid care work. This cycle is how everything continues, and this cycle is why we see this need growing. We have to say no. We have to rank needs, and that's messed up. That's messed up.

We need support from the government. We have no government funding. We have it from grandparents and high school people's parents. High school students have given us more than the government has. High school students have given us more than private foundations have.

I think we're all tired of hearing people's stories about using socks when we live in a country where we have a lot of pads. We have a lot of pads, and we can figure it out.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you so much for those comments.

I'm going to move to Moon Time Sisters, please.

The Chair: You have 10 seconds.

Ms. Veronica Brown: Thank you for this.

First of all, Inuit and first nation and Métis communities need to be brought to this conversation 100%. We need to remember that northern communities exist in this country and that people are living in pretty severe poverty due to colonialism in this country. We need to address the menstrual inequity that is going on. It is creating another barrier for menstruators that is absolutely not required.

We need to be doing better to support indigenous nations in this country. We need to have them at the table.

● (1715)

The Chair: Perfect. Unfortunately, I do need to cut everybody off. We are down to zero on the clock, meaning that's it's time to vote.

On behalf of the status of women committee, I would like to thank all the incredible witnesses who brought forward their testimony today.

As a reminder, we'll be meeting on Monday at 11 a.m. to do the committee business that we didn't get to today.

Have a safe and great weekend.

This meeting is adjourned.

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