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Chair: Mrs. Karen Vecchio



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• (1220)

[English]

The Chair (Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC)): I call this public meeting to order.

Welcome, everybody, as we continue with our women's economic empowerment study.

To our witnesses, we speak in both French and English at this committee, so make sure you choose interpretation. As well, make sure your earpieces aren't close to your mic, because otherwise you can really hurt the ears of our ladies and gentlemen in the interpretation booth.

We have three witnesses today for our women's economic empowerment study. From the Canadian Health Food Association, we have Jules Gorham, the director of regulatory affairs and policy online. From the Réseau des Femmes d'affaires du Québec, we are joined online by Ruth Vachon, the chief executive officer, and also online, from 3M Canada, we have Penny Wise, the president.

We will start with five-minute opening remarks.

Jules, I will pass the floor over to you.

Ms. Jules Gorham (Director, Regulatory Affairs and Policy, Canadian Health Food Association): Thank you.

Good afternoon, Chair and committee members. Thank you for having me for this important conversation.

My name is Jules Gorham. I am the director of regulatory affairs and policy at the Canadian Health Food Association.

The CHFA is Canada's largest trade association dedicated to natural, organic and wellness products. The natural health product, or NHP, industry is a vital component of Canada's economy. NHP businesses contribute \$5.5 billion to the Canadian economy and \$2.8 billion in taxable revenue.

I am here today as one voice among the many who are deeply concerned about Health Canada's proposed changes to the NHP industry. In particular, I'd like to talk about the impact of these changes on women living in Canada.

Right now, 82% of Canadians use NHPs. If you have brushed your teeth, worn sunscreen, applied deodorant or taken a vitamin, then you too use NHPs. According to Stats Canada, women are much more likely to purchase NHPs to manage their health and wellness.

It is critical to understand that every time a consumer chooses a natural product, they are already paying more. NHPs are not covered by health insurance programs and are subject to provincial and federal taxes. These tax dollars are estimated to amount to over \$500 million a year.

Health Canada's proposed changes will increase the cost of NHPs in Canada even further, unnecessarily burdening Canadians and disproportionately impacting women and women-owned businesses during a cost-of-living crisis. These changes will force businesses across the country to close. One in five are contemplating shutting down, with many micro, small and medium-sized businesses already leaving Canada.

The barrier to entry is high too, with a backlogged licensing system and heavy pre-market processes. Profits are much less than what one would expect, as there is no patent protection for NHPs, minimizing research funding and making it difficult to attract investors, something that 51% of women entrepreneurs are already challenged by. To bring an innovative product to market is already a costly undertaking. Health Canada's proposal adds another \$58,000 price tag to the cost of every single novel product application.

Over 80% of businesses in this sector are micro, small or medium-sized; 51% are Canadian owned and 28% are family owned. Although the exact number of women-founded or women-led NHP companies is unknown, a recent Women in Nutraceuticals report indicates that 50% of small businesses in the sector do have a female CEO. As well, 17% of companies attending CHFA's upcoming trade show are owned by women.

Unfortunately, it's a well-known fact that women have been historically neglected in research. There is a scarcity of data on women. Health Canada's latest regulatory reform on NHPs is yet another example. Prior to publishing its proposal on cost recovery fees, Health Canada did not conduct any analysis on the impacts to Canadians, including a gender-based analysis. They left it to business owners to do the math and decide if they can afford to stay in business.

We are deeply concerned about the impact of Health Canada's changes on the health of Canadians, particularly for the many women who rely on NHPs to maintain their health and wellness. While women-owned NHP businesses are responding to women's health needs, these micro and small-sized businesses can't afford to absorb the cost of the changes. Even the largest companies will be forced to reduce product selection by an estimated 20%, leaving far fewer options and almost nothing new on Canadian shelves.

What has been falsely promoted by Health Canada as regulations to keep Canadians safe will actually send more and more Canadians to the Internet, where unapproved and unsafe products can be shipped right to their doorstep.

As someone who speaks to members of the NHP industry every day, it is abundantly clear to me that recklessly pushing through regulations will decimate the NHP industry, innovation, research and our much-needed Canadian brands. It is my pleasure to try to peel back the numerous complex issues these regulatory changes will magnify and create for women across our country. The impacts to women need to be recognized by the Minister of Health before it's too late.

I am but one voice, but I thank you for this opportunity to represent the women leading NHP businesses and the women and moms, like me, who choose natural to care for themselves and their families.

Thank you.

• (1225)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Jules.

We'll now go online to Ruth Vachon, from the Réseau des Femmes d'affaires du Québec.

Ruth, you have five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Ruth Vachon (Chief Executive Officer, Réseau des Femmes d'affaires du Québec): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to thank the committee members for allowing our network to speak with you today about women's economic empowerment.

My name is Ruth Vachon, and I am the chief executive officer of the Réseau des Femmes d'affaires du Québec, a not-for-profit organization whose aim is to accelerate growth in the number of businesswomen so they achieve inspiring success and are able to shine all around the world. We have been pursuing this goal for 43 years in Quebec, and, starting this year, we will be able to take it everywhere in Canada thanks to the government funding we have received. We support businesswomen in developing their skills, expanding their professional network and conquering new local, national and international markets.

To begin, we want to highlight the significant progress made in relation to equality between men and women. However, we must not forget that setbacks are always possible. Between 2018 and 2022, for example, Canada lost 61,000 women-owned businesses, 35,000 of which were in Quebec. That means that almost 60% of those businesses were Quebec businesses.

A study has been done by the WEKH, the Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub. It showed that the real problem for women's entrepreneurship in Canada is not when it comes to creating businesses, but when it comes to growth and development. To learn how to stimulate growth, we ourselves did a Canada-wide survey in 2020. The results are unequivocal: almost 80% of women entrepreneurs surveyed say that expanding their customer base is the main vector for the success and growth of their business.

There are several ways to expand your customer base. One of them is to sell your products and services to big corporations, or respond to invitations to bid for public contracts. When major institutions and big corporations want to diversify their supply chains by incorporating more enterprises belonging to groups that are under-represented in entrepreneurship, of which women are one, this is referred to as supplier diversification or responsible and inclusive procurement.

It is important to know that women represent no more than 5% of suppliers to big corporations, hence the term "minority suppliers". We see this as an unprecedented opportunity and one to be seized. According to Status of Women Canada, initiatives to promote supplier diversification are not very widespread in the public sector in Canada. One leading cause of this is the absence of legislative/regulatory requirements, but there is also a lack of awareness on the part of actors involved in the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

We are very aware of this unique growth opportunity for women entrepreneurs. At the Réseau des Femmes d'affaires du Québec, we have devoted significant effort to this in the last 12 years. We have become a key actor in promoting and supporting responsible procurement.

In Quebec, for example, the Accélérer la relance des entrepreneurEs program has provided support for over 500 women entrepreneurs of all origins and all under-represented groups, to help them get contracts with big corporations here or at the international level. In three years, over 130 contracts have been signed, with a total value of a little over \$81 million. That took a lot of effort on the part of the small staff we have, but the results have been hugely impressive.

In addition, we get big corporations involved by going out and knocking on their doors to have them commit to more procurement from women-owned businesses. The Réseau des Femmes d'affaires du Québec believes that if our women entrepreneurs went to their banker with contracts in their pocket, that would greatly facilitate getting financing approval. That is not what is being done, in reality, however. In our opinion, efforts on the government's part to stimulate financing are totally disproportionate compared to efforts to support women entrepreneurs getting access to the market.

• (1230)

So for a more inclusive society and economy—

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Ruth Vachon: Thank you. I had finished.

[*English*]

The Chair: We'll finish the rest of your time shortly. Some of the things just had a little bit more, but we'll let that go on.

We are going online to Penny Wise. Penny, you have five minutes.

Ms. Penny Wise (President, 3M Canada): Thank you very much for the invitation to speak to you today.

It's timely for me to be here to discuss women and economic impact, as it was International Day of Women and Girls in Science on Sunday.

In Canada, women make up 47% of the workforce but only 23% of science and technology workers and only 5% of trades workers, yet science, technology, trades, engineering and mathematics, or STEM, occupations are among the highest-paid and fastest-growing occupations in the country. These jobs are also critical to creating a net-zero economy. Canada has ambitious plans to be a world leader in sustainable innovation, and to do this we need many more people in STEM-related fields.

As a science company known for innovation, 3M cares deeply about creating equitable access to STEM education and STEM job. We know that the best ideas, the biggest breakthroughs and the growth opportunities ahead come when you have a diversity of perspectives and input into solving a problem.

In recent 3M Canada-sponsored studies on science and barriers to STEM in Canada for under-represented groups, we found that almost 70% of Canadians believe our STEM workforce would benefit from diverse perspectives. It would drive more innovative ideas, further enabling Canadian businesses, the academic community and the broader industry to collectively come together to help solve some of our biggest problems.

Since releasing those studies, we at 3M have focused on understanding the barriers that women and other under-represented communities face when they choose STEM careers. Over the last three years, we've convened panels, experts, and advocates to understand the barriers and how to overcome them, and what businesses, academia, and governments can do.

For 3M and me personally, this advocacy committee has provided input on how we direct our philanthropy and where we should

show up to be most effective in supporting STEM for women so that we can take action.

In our study on barriers to STEM, we sought a better view of the weighting of the barriers to STEM and to define someone's STEM journey. We found that every woman's experience in STEM, whether in education or career, was different, but 71% of women reported encountering some type of barrier in pursuing a STEM career, and 40% of women believed STEM was not an inclusive field because there were systemic barriers and biases.

What I found particularly heartbreaking in the work we did in these studies was that when we looked at a woman's journey from middle school through to finding a job, there was a tremendous dropout rate of STEM women in the second year of university. They've gone through middle school, they've made it through high school, and they've survived all the weed-out courses at the beginning of university, only to give up after their second year.

We identified several barriers to finding a STEM role for women. Financial burden is at the top of the list. STEM education continues to be one of the most expensive educations to obtain. As well, where jobs are located made it fiscally challenging for women to participate. Women also didn't necessarily have a full view of the kinds of roles they could take on in STEM and believed that only low-paying jobs were available to them. There's an assumption that a STEM degree means you'll work in a lab, or if you're in skilled trades, it's dirty, but there's a world of opportunity that is not clear to people.

There's a lack of champions and mentors. Not only do women need mentors; they also need supportive leaders who lift them up and find them opportunities. Every single one of us here today has benefited from someone in our working career who has opened a door for us.

About 24% of women who started in a STEM career changed roles. That's a quarter of women who have changed roles. They did that because they were unhappy in the field and they didn't know what else they could do.

Some 13% of women said there was an inability to manage their personal commitments and choices, whether it was children in day care, elder care or other home commitments. Women in STEM, like all women in the economy, face this challenge.

At worst, women faced a hostile work environment. About 16% of women who responded said they left because of a hostile work environment. At best, 11% said they were working in an environment where they didn't feel like they belonged.

For other under-represented groups, such as racialized, indigenous, or LGBTQ+ members, there were similar barriers but different proportions. Intersectionality makes the barriers more pronounced and complicated.

As we think about recommendations, traditional approaches are not necessarily moving the needle fast enough for our STEM economic needs. We have a handful of recommendations, but I bet I'm almost out of time, and I—

• (1235)

The Chair: You have 30 seconds, Penny.

Ms. Penny Wise: That's perfect.

There are some things around building EDI—equity, diversity and inclusion—into the future work environment, creating champions, developing a focused industrial policy for Canada, providing flexibility, moving to actions and coming together to drive actions.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'm just going to put a little plug in for Penny Wise here. When we talk about that leadership, we also see the philanthropy from 3M and we know that it makes a big difference.

I think you were the champion for the United Way campaign last year, correct? You were the....

Ms. Penny Wise: I was, two years ago, but thank you, yes.

The Chair: It was two years ago.

Thank you very much.

To the committee, we have 20 minutes left on our time. We can go further today because of resources being extended to us because of votes. I want to look at the committee to ask whether we should go one round or whether we would try to extend it to two full rounds, which then would take us closer to 1:30. We could go to our regular ending at one o'clock or we could go to 1:30.

I'm looking for the will of the committee on how we would like to proceed.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I can't, Chair, today.

The Chair: Okay.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I am so sorry.

The Chair: Then what we're going to do is have a 24-minute round with six minutes for each. I would ask that everybody divide the time as you see fit.

I'm going to now pass the floor over to Anna. You can split your time among your groups. You have six minutes.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you to the witnesses for joining us today.

I have a question for Ms. Gorham.

I listened to your intro, and it was quite interesting. The question I have for you is this: Why would the government pass this legisla-

tion that affects women on the national health products? Maybe you could help me understand that.

Ms. Jules Gorham: I'm still trying to wrap my brain around it as well.

What we do have is a piece of regulation. It's a cost recovery proposal. It's been proposed as a ministerial order in the name by the Minister of Health.

The cabinet directive on how to properly come up with regulations does include gender-based analysis and such things as early consultation with indigenous people. Those steps in the making of these particular regulations were skipped. They failed to do those steps. The implications that we are now hearing from industry every single day, the implications that we outlined in our response to that proposal when it was in the Canada Gazette, part I, have pointed that out. However, a proper analysis on the impacts on gender-based marginalized communities has still not yet been done.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: What I'm hearing is that there wasn't really a pilot project or enough research done to see the impacts of it, and as you stated, women make up 51% of this industry. Thank you very much for sharing that. I think there's a lesson to be learned here that we can't ignore women, because we're pretty good. Thank you for that.

My next question is for Ms. Penny Wise. It is this: What were the barriers or struggles that you experienced prior to your role as president or CEO?

I come from the banking industry. I know it took a long time for women to excel in these executive positions. Could you share with us what your challenges were?

Ms. Penny Wise: This is a really fascinating question that I have been asked before.

I think working for 3M has actually put me in a very unique position in terms of the kind of support and focus that this company has put on women. I use it as an example of how other companies can think about it.

3M has had a very specific policy about making sure that leadership in the company is at least 50% women. They have had an incredible amount of support through time and over the years, whether it was finding me new opportunities to stretch or putting me into roles that I didn't expect to have or giving opportunities to get in front of leadership or to learn or go to training or to network with others. These are things that perhaps other companies may or may not choose to do. I see all of those as opportunities that were given to me that could have been potential challenges.

I would also say that if there was ever a challenge that 3M was lovely in helping me overcome, it was in raising two children. We're a two-income family. My husband and I both have our careers. They were always very flexible in terms of how we worked and where we worked, and this was even further developed as we moved into the pandemic. I think those could be challenges for women, but for me they turned into opportunities and supports because of the kind of company and direction on inclusion that 3M has had in my 24 years of being here.

● (1240)

Mrs. Anna Roberts: Thank you very much for that.

I appreciate the comments. I think that women do have a lot to give to this country. I think we can learn from both you ladies, so thank you.

I'm going to pass the last few minutes to my colleague Dominique.

[Translation]

Mrs. Dominique Vien (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis, CPC): Thank you, Ms. Roberts.

I would like to welcome our three witnesses.

Ms. Vachon, thank you for being here and welcome. I am pleased to see you here today.

I do not have a lot of time, but I would like to talk about the situation of businesswomen: women heads of companies.

If I understood correctly, you said that they did not have much access to public tenders. You say you have helped almost 500 women to navigate that universe and ultimately they got about 130 contracts.

What is root of the problem? Why do women not have access to these tenders? What are men heads of companies doing that women are not doing or do not know they should be doing?

What would you like to see in our committee's report that might change things?

Ms. Ruth Vachon: We can look at the situation for access to tenders by dividing them into two: tenders issued by the government and tenders issued by big companies.

Among the big companies, fewer than 5% of contracts are awarded to women-owned businesses.

It is not a matter of ill will on anyone's part; rather, it is because women-owned businesses are often smaller, so they need help to be able to access the supply chain.

The big companies that have a supplier diversification program help these women to access contracts. They are aware that the business they are awarding a contract to is not a multinational, it is a business they want to contribute to and they want to help to grow, but in line with its capacity. So that is a very different concept.

For the government, given that there is no—

[English]

The Chair: Ruth, I'm the evil person who has to cut you off because we're over time on this. I know you have a lot more to add, and at the end of the committee I will be putting in some comments, but I do need to pass it over for the next six minutes to Lisa.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to turn back to Ms. Wise from 3M.

I noticed you were quoted in an article in the Financial Post last year. One thing you said was this: "It's important for us to make sure that we're making the economy, making jobs, making opportunities available and attractive to women." I thought that was a very key statement to make.

Would you explain to us exactly how you'd make these jobs more attractive to women? I know you've gone into that a little in some of your previous testimony, but maybe you can expand.

Ms. Penny Wise: Thank you.

I think one of the most important learnings I've had over the last years, as I've examined women in STEM roles especially, is this idea of making roles attractive. It's also about making sure women, and people in general, who are interested in STEM careers understand the breadth and depth of the STEM careers that are available to them.

Also, it's important that people understand that it's not just about working in a lab. Trades are different. It's about making sure women understand that. It's also about companies embracing EDI and making sure they are building workplaces that are engaging, recognizing of flexibility and supportive of women, and that lift women up and provide champions and mentors. I think there are a number of different elements that come together.

I can't speak enough about the importance of champions. You need people to lift you up. It's about more than just seeing people as role models; it's about having people to help lift you up. It's both of those pieces.

I think there are several elements that help create an engaging environment that attracts women to come and work in these roles.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Thank you.

You also said that it's "never been more pressing", since the pandemic, "to devote greater focus to women's presence and achievement". You've talked a lot about the need for more women in all kinds of different workplaces.

Would you explain further to this committee why that's so important?

• (1245)

Ms. Penny Wise: I came back to be president of 3M Canada six weeks before the pandemic started. What I saw was women being more adversely affected by all the shutdowns and closures—by what happened during the pandemic. That's because so many women are part of the service industry, which was the one hit hardest. What I saw happening at that time during the pandemic was policy on women and support of women sliding back to the 1970s or—as somebody said—the 1960s. I have a 26-year-old daughter, and I wanted to be able to pass the torch to her so that she could stand on my shoulders and not slide back.

That's why I think we need to focus and push hard. It's why I've been so passionate about making sure we're continuing to move women ahead and that when we're talking about STEM and finding high-growth opportunities, growth sectors and industrial policy, it's very clear where the dot jobs need to come from so that people can trade, re-skill, upskill or whatever it is we want to call it. It's so we can have the right talent here in Canada and so women are properly represented in the talent across all the jobs we need to grow the economy in this country.

Ms. Lisa Hefner: Thank you very much.

I really appreciate the leadership of all the women in this room today.

I would like to turn to Ms. Vachon.

This government has launched a women entrepreneurship strategy. It is helping women access money, to export and to improve knowledge, and it is creating more data on women and entrepreneurship.

Would you give us your impressions of this program, how it's working and what more we can do to help women achieve excellence?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Ruth Vachon: I think that program has made it possible for us to make some good progress and get a much broader overview. It has given us data that we did not have and a directory of all the actors in the ecosystem.

Now, there is a lot to be done on the ground. One part has to be done with women entrepreneurs, but the part with the big companies is also very important. Ms. Wise from 3M Canada was just talking about women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Everything that is happening with those women also needs to be done with women entrepreneurs. It is important that our supply chain resemble our production chain. We still have a lot of work to do for that.

The organizations are working with a multitude of women entrepreneurs. The beauty of the thing is that these programs are not aimed at particular sectors, they are for women in all sectors, in both the service sector and manufacturing. Financing is definitely a problem, but women entrepreneurs' access to the market is also a major challenge. We believe it is important to have measures to promote women entrepreneurs' market access.

Ms. Lisa Hefner: Do you have suggestions as to how we could facilitate women's access to financing or to the market?

[*English*]

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Ruth Vachon: In fact, access to financing is not really an issue, it is more about market access. We have to support women and get out to see the big corporations, to make sure they are aware of this aspect of the subject and that they can be part of the solution.

Ms. Lisa Hefner: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

That was excellent French, Lisa.

We're going to pass it over to Andréanne. You have the floor for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Thank you, Madam Chair.

First, I want to thank our three witnesses who are here to contribute to such an important study. I can only lament how little time we have. One round of speaking time will not be enough to ask them all the questions I would like to ask.

I know how important this study on women's economic empowerment is. I have been very involved in my region's chambers of commerce. I have also followed work being done with community groups on women and poverty. I also know the importance of networking and business development for empowering women economically. This is essential in order for women to achieve their full potential.

Ms. Vachon, you have been named one of the 100 most influential women in Canada. Congratulations!

Ms. Ruth Vachon: Thank you.

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: In fact, I had the opportunity to hear you at a conference in Sherbrooke. It was extremely stimulating and interesting. Also, at the Rencontre des entrepreneurs francophones, the Réseau des femmes d'affaires du Québec was unanimously selected to officially represent Quebec in the World Association of Women Entrepreneurs, the FECM. Congratulations, Ms. Vachon!

What can you tell us about what you would like to accomplish on the international scene and what you might learn that would be useful for our study on women's economic empowerment?

• (1250)

Ms. Ruth Vachon: Everything we do is done to help Canadian women access new markets. Representing Quebec and Canada to 120 countries in the world, in all the networks of women entrepreneurs, provides our women with an amazing showcase. Often, someone wants to grow her business, but not necessarily go abroad. Collaborative internationalization is a very important solution for growing our businesses. You don't have to go and set up outside Canada, but you can collaborate with people outside the country. Combining our expertise is a solution that is really worth considering in order to grow.

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: You were interrupted at the end of the first round of questions. You were talking about supplier diversification. I want to give you a bit of time to finish what you wanted to say about the importance of that.

Ms. Ruth Vachon: Thank you.

We have been doing this for 12 years. We have been talking about it for a long time, but the pandemic meant we could get doing things faster.

I think it is essential, in 2024, to take decisive action when it comes to responsible procurement. Everyone can only gain from it. It will enable our women entrepreneurs to contribute to the economy in a much bigger and more worthwhile way.

When you account for 5% of the market, I think we all have a bit of effort to make, to turn the wheel in the other direction.

We believe this approach is not just an innovative movement. It means thinking about buying power as much more than a financial transaction. It becomes a true economic and social lever to ensure the growth and diversity of entrepreneurship in our economies, which are also represented by women.

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: It is only 5%. I still find that hard to believe. It is a shocking figure, in one way. I think we could give them a lot more importance. That is a statistic that calls on us to do some thinking, and to take action.

I did not completely understand what you said when you talked about setbacks. I missed all the figures. You talked about a decline of 61,000 women entrepreneurs in Canada, 35,000 in Quebec, so a 60% decline.

Can you go back to that statistic, please?

Ms. Ruth Vachon: Between 2018 and 2022, we lost 61,000 women-owned businesses in Canada, of which 35,000 were in Quebec. Almost 60% of the women-owned businesses that disappeared during those three years were Quebec businesses. This is a very big concern that we have to look into.

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Yes, absolutely.

As we know, Quebec is a cradle and a model for small and medium enterprises. It is one of our hallmarks in Quebec. I come from the riding of Shefford, where we are on the side of ingenuity. Bombardier was one of the first entrepreneurs. Since then, the Quebec business model has really focused on SMEs and very small enterprises.

You talked about flexibility. We have recently had a situation that concerned me involving the future of women-owned businesses: repayment of the emergency business account loan. Women entrepreneurs like me are very concerned about the lack of flexibility expressed by the government, particularly when it comes to finding solutions that would allow for greater flexibility in repaying the loan.

How can flexibility in federal programs have a direct effect on women? I know women who are going to have to remortgage their home. It is often the smallest businesses that experience this situation.

How might the word "flexibility" be important in federal programs in order for them to be better adapted for women?

[English]

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

[Translation]

Ms. Ruth Vachon: I am part of a Canadian organization called Women's Enterprise Organizations of Canada, or WEOC. That organization has funds for women entrepreneurs. We would have liked for women to be able to turn to those funds to get a second chance for financing. I think that would have been a worthwhile solution for them.

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Do you have other recommendations for us?

We are talking about federal programs that could be better adapted for women. Often, given that their small businesses do not meet the criteria, they do not have access to this funding.

• (1255)

Ms. Ruth Vachon: Yes, that is often the case.

[English]

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you so much.

Now we're passing it over to Leah. Leah, you have six minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much, Chair.

My first question is for Penny Wise.

You spoke about intersectionalities and barriers. In my former life, for three minutes I was a vice-principal in a first nation school. One of the reasons we couldn't teach the science curriculum was that we didn't have a science lab. For example, the kids in the school couldn't take chemistry because we didn't have proper safety equipment to teach chemistry.

In your research, when you're talking about intersectionalities, did you find that particularly in remote or first nations communities one of the barriers was equal access to education in terms of being able to join STEM fields?

Ms. Penny Wise: I think that making sure there is funding and access is relevant across a number of racialized communities and indigenous communities.

Accessibility in general is an issue for engaging people, students and individuals in STEM across Canada, whether it's accessibility for people with disabilities, like actually being able to get into the lab, or people being able to be taught in a way that is relevant and meaningful to them.

I guess the short answer to your question is “yes”. There is definitely a lack of funding and a lack of accessibility. That is one of the pieces we look at as a recommendation: How do we create accessibility to STEM education and give students the opportunity to engage with science, chemistry and all of those elements that you spoke about?

Ms. Leah Gazan: As a side note, it was hard to promote a love of reading, because we had no library books—talk about educational inequality in this country.

Ms. Penny Wise: That's heartbreaking.

Ms. Leah Gazan: My next question is for Madam Jules Gorham.

You spoke about your concerns with new legislation that impacts natural medicines. What were some of the reasons given for the need to put in the legislation?

Ms. Jules Gorham: I'm sorry, but I'm still in shock about the library.

It's all under the self-care framework.

Many years ago it was decided that OTCs, over-the-counter medications—our Tylenols, our allergy medications, etc.—along with natural health products and cosmetics, would go under a self-care framework, because they are essentially low-risk products. It was taking them away from drugs and moving them under their own framework. HESA played a big role in this, actually.

That framework, many years later, is still incomplete. The building out of it is still incomplete. There are still many operational problems in the framework.

The cost recovery portion of it was rushed through. It was scheduled to come in later down the pipeline. We were expecting a lot of stakeholder consultation, engagement and costing exercises to be done, but it was rushed through this summer with less than 24 hours' notice for stakeholders, and we're now sitting with a cost recovery proposal that was in the Gazette, part I. Hopefully we can push it off, but it was set to be enforced as of April 1, 2025.

Ms. Leah Gazan: What you're saying is that there's no coverage for natural medicines. Is that what the big issue is?

Ms. Jules Gorham: What we're saying is that they're changing the regulations on natural health products without taking into consideration the impact to Canadians, the impact to businesses and the entire supply chain.

If we talk about women in STEM, the entire supply chain is women in STEM—women who have roles to bring products to market that allow women to care for their families. That's all in jeopardy right now in Canada, because of these regulations being pushed through.

Ms. Leah Gazan: That's great. Thank you.

My next question is for Penny Wise.

You indicated that many women in STEM experience a hostile environment. Can you expand on that?

Ms. Penny Wise: Unfortunately, I can't provide you with a lot more detail. It was very specific—whether you encountered a hostile work environment, whether you felt not included—but I don't have specifics about what they mean by “hostile work environment”.

Certainly in any sort of company where fewer than a quarter of the women who are working inside a lab or inside a STEM occupation are in an environment where they are not necessarily brought in or feel part of the organization, or they are not supported or treated appropriately, I can see how, at the very least, they would feel not included, but to understand the hostile working environment, we would need to dig into it further.

● (1300)

Ms. Leah Gazan: You spoke about STEM building sustainable economies. You also spoke about the need for diverse perspectives.

How does the lack of representation of women in STEM impact us in terms of coming up with innovative solutions that will allow us to move forward?

Ms. Penny Wise: When we think about a problem and we have a room full of people who are all from the same group, have the same ways of thinking, have the same blinders or views to working on a problem, we're going to solve the problem in a very specific way.

When you look outside that group, you have people, women, with different opinions, with different life experiences, with different educations, with different points of view, with different ways of thinking through or solving problems. When you start to bring in people who have been exposed to some of these other ideas, these other opinions, whether it's indigenous people on the land or our connection to the land, or different views or different cultures, different ways of thinking about things, different medicines, all of those bring different ideas that make people think more broadly, that make people think widely. That's how we get to a better solution.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

On behalf of the committee, I would really like to thank Jules, Penny and Ruth for coming to our committee and for providing information. Because I know our time was so short today, if you have additional information or information on questions that you thought you might be asked but that weren't asked, please send that information to us.

I also note that I have some recommendations here that were put in by Penny Wise. I'll ask that those speaking notes be passed around, because Penny provided recommendations in them.

Go ahead, Marc.

Mr. Marc Serré: Madam Chair, since we didn't have a lot of time, if the witnesses want to write anything in to the committee—

A voice: She just said that.

Mr. Marc Serré: I mean both of them, not just Penny.

The Chair: Yes, absolutely—

Mr. Marc Serré: I thought it was just Penny.

The Chair: It was everybody. I mentioned Penny because there are recommendations specifically in this paper and I want to make sure they get out.

If there are no other questions or comments, I will see you Thursday at 3:30.

The meeting is adjourned.

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