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Thursday, December 9, 2004

• (1110)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.)):
Good morning, everybody.

I'd like to welcome you to the meeting today of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women. We are coming to the end of our round tables on hearings from community groups across the country. I'd like to welcome you and thank you for coming out today.

Before we begin, I'd like to ask you to not turn on the microphones. It will be done for you automatically. We've been running into some difficulty with people trying to turn them on.

I also want to advise members of the committee and the delegations that we're in a room where the committee hearing is being televised, so I just want to let you know that when you're presenting.

We have asked delegations, when they come to the committee, to present for no more than five minutes. The chair has been a little too generous in allowing extra time. So I'm going to ask you, if possible, to please confine your remarks to five minutes or not much longer so it will allow for more opportunity for exchanges with members of the committee who are here.

I'm going to begin in the order that we have it on the agenda and ask Cheryl Hotchkiss from Amnesty International to begin.

Ms. Cheryl Hotchkiss (Women Human Rights Campaigner, Amnesty International (Canada)): Thank you very much. I appreciate the opportunity to come to present to you.

On March 25, 2003, 16-year-old Felicia Solomon disappeared on her way home from school in Winnipeg. Her body parts were found that summer. As of now, the crime has not been solved.

Nearly a decade after the 1992-95 conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina only a handful of those responsible for the widespread rape and sexual abuse of women have been brought to account.

These are just two examples of the lack of justice that women who have experienced violence encounter during times of peace and conflict.

The process of seeking and finding justice is the only way that a woman and those close to her can begin to rebuild that life that has been decimated. Justice is not only what happens in the court of law, but it comes about as a result of feeling safe to talk about the violence, to have public acknowledgement of the crime, to identify the causes of it, to see that the person or persons who committed the

crime are punished, and to find the resources to repair and rebuild her life and the lives of her family and community.

Impunity for perpetrators of violence against women is rampant the world over. Thus, violence against women is often understood to be a normal and acceptable part of society rather than a criminal act.

Justice in peacetime is one subject I'm going to cover. When women pursue legal action they are often faced with a hostile, abusive criminal justice system. Deeply held attitudes that denigrate women, deny them equal rights, and betray them as property are built into many penal and family codes, criminal investigation procedures, rules of evidence, and customary legal systems. Discriminatory attitudes within the criminal justice system can undermine law reforms and lead to perverse outcomes where women's rights, rather than being enhanced, are further restricted. Women are under-policed, but over-criminalized.

Women from marginalized communities may be particularly reluctant to press charges or act as witnesses, having little or no confidence in the outcome of the interaction with the police and criminal justice system.

There are flaws in the legal framework of some countries which contribute to impunity. For example, even though constitutional provisions may affirm women's rights to a life free from violence, the definition may not cover all forms of violence against women. In some countries, even if legislation does not condone violence directly, it is discriminatory. The laws treat women differently from men and confer fewer or lesser rights on women.

I'm going to move on now into justice in post-conflict situations. The comments I'm making cover not just Canada, but also the world over. Others will speak directly to the situation in Canada.

Rape and other gender-based violence during armed conflict have long been prohibited, both domestically and internationally, but these crimes are often ignored and rarely prosecuted. The reasons overlap with those behind the widespread impunity in peacetime for domestic violence and sexual abuse against women.

Perhaps even more than in times of peace, survivors of criminal acts of violence against women during armed conflicts have many difficulties in seeking justice. As a result, the perpetrators generally commit their crimes with impunity. Some of these difficulties are common to prosecution for crimes against women in any context, particularly sexual crimes. Women will not bring complaints or testify because they are afraid of being stigmatized or fear further attacks. Medical evidence is difficult or expensive to obtain. The authorities responsible for bringing prosecutions are indifferent to the violence, and the criminal justice system is biased against women.

In recent years the assumption that justice is an unrealistic goal in situations of conflict has been challenged, thanks to the activism of women's human rights activists. They have publicized the experiences of women and used legal analysis to develop methods to hold individual perpetrators to account. Through their advocacy, international criminal courts have been empowered to prosecute crimes of violence against women using more gender-sensitive definitions of crime. Individual perpetrators of crimes of violence against women have been prosecuted.

Some legal and practical difficulties common to prosecuting sexual crimes against women committed in peace and war have been addressed. However, these impressive developments at the international level have had little effect in the vast majority of cases of violence against women in conflict. Impunity is still the norm.

The international criminal system can only deal with a small number of cases. Therefore, states involved in armed conflict need to make a comprehensive effort to investigate cases, support victims and witnesses, and bring cases to trial fairly.

• (1115)

More needs to be done to ensure that all women victims receive full reparation and rehabilitation, including health care; the opportunity to tell their stories in a dignified environment; compensation; restitution of lost homes, livelihood, and property; guarantees that crimes committed against them will not be repeated; forms of satisfaction such as restoration of their dignity and reputation; and a public acknowledgement of the harm they have suffered.

As for what the Canadian government can do, the list is extremely long. I would like to address particularly the issue of missing and murdered indigenous women in urban settings, and the recommendations from Amnesty's report. I have copies of the report in French and English with me.

The main issues start with the fact that there is a fundamental problem because there is no core funding to front line women's service organizations—and that prevents women from having safe places to go to seek support and safety—as well as a general concern with government abandoning women's human rights issues. More specifically, acknowledging the seriousness of the problem of violence against indigenous women is necessary. Support research into the extent and causes of violence against indigenous women.

Immediate action can and must be taken to protect women at greatest risk. There must be the provision of training and resources for police and others in the criminal justice system to make

prevention of violence against women a genuine priority. And another large demand, but an essential one, is ending the marginalization of indigenous women in Canada.

Internationally, there's much again that the Canadian government can do.

The Chair: Could you wind up, please?

Ms. Cheryl Hotchkiss: Yes.

Very quickly, there's a role that the Canadian government can play in supporting bringing forward to the International Criminal Court that one of its first cases be that of sexual violence. We must play a role in demanding that there is abolition of all laws that discriminate against women. We must provide training for our police, peacekeepers, and others who go abroad into post-conflict situations, to ensure that they support women coming forward who are victims of violence and that they do not contribute to the violence.

I'll leave it at that.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Gina Simon, would you proceed, please?

Ms. Gasongi (Gina) Simon (Executive Director, National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence): Good morning.

I'm Gina Gasongi Simon. (*Witness speaks in her native language*).

Meegwetch from the Algonquin Nation.

Thank you, ladies, for inviting me here to provide witness on behalf of the National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence. I currently work as the executive director.

The National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence evolved from a conference held back in 1999 that brought together shelters and managers from aboriginal shelters across Canada. That was the first time they ever got to sit down at a table together and speak with one another. What they found at that time was this isolation they were working in, the remoteness, gave them a place. The result from that conference was an overwhelming need to have a unified voice situated in Ottawa, as the designated place, that would help unify their voice, help advocate on behalf of the aboriginal shelters, coordinate efforts aimed at reducing violence in aboriginal communities, and promote peace for our women and children

Our mission is to reduce family violence in the aboriginal communities. I'd just like to highlight some of our goals: to help promote a coordinated response by service agencies in the justice system, to advocate equity of access for funding and capacity building, to promote proactive policies and strategies that reduce partner violence and violence against aboriginal women, to create awareness on the issue of violence, and to develop education and information that is culturally appropriate and sensitive to all aboriginal women's needs.

Currently we hear the words “culturally sensitive services”, yet even Statistics Canada has not defined what culturally appropriate services are. We would like to be involved in the definition of culturally appropriate services.

Our membership consists of 47 shelters and havens located on reserves across Canada. We have recently opened our doors to off-reserve shelters that have a high volume of our women and children utilizing their services. Our organization is guided by a board of directors from across Canada. We're saying the problem of violence occurs in all societies and is not just restricted to aboriginal communities. However, the nature of the problem varies depending on the social structure, the institutions of that society, as well as public awareness and the response to domestic violence.

What we do know is that Canadian women living in poverty are more likely to experience violence and abuse. The structural inequality women face in Canadian society has had a particularly harsh effect on the health and well-being of aboriginal women. Aboriginal people are more likely to face inadequate nutrition; substandard housing; sanitation; poverty; discrimination; racism; violence; high rates of physical, social, and emotional injury; disability; and premature death. Our numbers escalate in all those areas.

Why is there a need? The legal and judicial framework that applies to aboriginal women makes the fight against violence more complex. Aboriginal women are caught in the cross-fire of jurisdictional boundaries by all levels of government. Fear is the number one factor—fear that our confidentiality will not be respected, fear of breaking the unity within the community, fear that complaints to the law authorities will not be taken seriously, and fear of no shelter or support. This serves to preserve the taboo nature of revealing domestic violence, and silence becomes the norm.

Based on 2001 and 2000 statistics of Statistics Canada, of the 482 shelters in Canada—and I'm talking non-aboriginal specifically—28% of those shelters serve aboriginal women from reserves. Of those 482 shelters, 12% could provide services in Cree—that's having someone on staff—9% in Ojibway, and 4% Inuktituk.

• (1120)

Of the current shelters existing, 6% are owned by band councils, 5% are operated by band councils, and 7% are located on reserve.

Here are snapshot facts: a quarter of the women and children admitted to shelters in 2001 and 2002 were admitted to shelters serving reserves, 59% of the annual admissions in shelters serving reserves were aboriginal children, 2,400 women were residing in shelters in Canada to escape violence on April 5, 2002. Of that 2,400, over 500 of these women were aboriginal women in shelters serving reserves. Also, the majority of facilities providing residential services were transition homes and second-stage homes. In transition homes, 50% were aboriginal women served in these shelters, 54% in all shelters. In women's emergency centres, 15% of these shelters were serving women from reserves, and 11% of all shelters. In emergency shelters, 9% of those shelters were serving aboriginal women, and 9% to all shelters. Shelters serving reserves: in 1997-1998, 29%; 1999-2000, 34%; 2001-2002, 28%.

We have challenges in terms of no national standards in relation to funding our policies. Issues get convoluted with provincial policies. For instance, in Ontario—and this is on a per capita basis—the province provides approximately \$34,450, INAC provides about \$10,050, and the discrepancy just in Ontario alone is \$10,570. And I'm talking about what goes to aboriginal shelters and non-aboriginal

shelters. In Manitoba, the discrepancy is almost \$8,000; in Alberta, it is almost \$9,000.

• (1125)

The Chair: Could you wind up, please?

Ms. Gasongi (Gina) Simon: Okay.

What we're saying is what we need is equity of funding. We need to develop national standards. We need long-term funding to promote better possibilities of developing better strategies, rather than the crisis management that we're operating with now. We need to make cost analysis a reality with aboriginal communities, women and children. We need follow-up and better prevention because six weeks is not enough. And when we talk about violence against aboriginal women, we're not pointing the finger at our men. We are saying that the Canadian population must change their attitude toward aboriginal women. Aboriginal women must be valued for their contributions to society, and aboriginal women cannot be continually blocked from their rights and benefits by legislation and policy. Aboriginal women must be encouraged to take their rightful matriarchal place within our communities and within Canada.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Going on the order of the agenda here, I'm going next to Kim Pate from the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies.

Welcome.

Mrs. Kim Pate (Executive Director, Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies): Thank you.

I work with an organization that works predominantly with women and girls in the justice system who have been oppressed, marginalized, criminalized, and many of them imprisoned. In fact, that's a trend we're seeing, not just in Canada, but worldwide, that women are the fastest-growing prison population, especially when we talk about, as my sister at the table has just discussed, aboriginal women. We're seeing a huge increase in the number of aboriginal women and women of colour, racialized women, being criminalized.

We're seeing also a direct link between what both Amnesty International and Cheryl and Gina have already talked about, between the 1996 federal cutbacks and the virtual elimination of national standards, to what we've seen as an elimination, really, of the provisions that ensured that provinces were spending tax revenue on social services, health services, and education services. With the virtual elimination of those national standards, what we've seen is provinces basically being given fairly free rein to eviscerate those services in provinces. When we know that women have historically relied on those services, when we know that the majority of single-parent poor families are headed by women, we know very well the impact that's having, not only on women, but also on our children across the country.

So we're seeing very clearly linked to inadequate welfare rates, in fact, we would argue, criminally low welfare rates across this country.... It's virtually impossible for people to survive on those rates. We're seeing women who are trying to make ends meet, to feed their children, to put food on the table, to pay the rent, selling their bodies, carrying packages across the country, across town, across borders. We're seeing women being picked up for things like fraud, soliciting. We're seeing not only the feminization of poverty, but the criminalization of poverty.

And with the cuts to health services comes the trend that we've already seen documented by Human Rights Watch internationally, particularly in the United States, where more people with mental health issues are now in prisons than are in mental health facilities or in psychiatric hospitals. And we're seeing a similar trend when we talk about our Canadian prisons. Again, particularly for women who have historically been more likely to have been pathologized and put into mental health facilities, we're seeing more of them ending up in our prisons.

We're also seeing the backlash towards violence against women, and the virtual sliding off of the national agenda of issues of substantive equality of women, directly impacting what's happening when we look at the criminalization of women.

So the end result is that we have a number of recommendations. We would like the support of this committee and certainly other members, obviously, to encourage that we do have a reinstatement of national standards. Many of us felt that the standards that existed before 1996 were insufficient. We need, at the very least, sufficient resources so people can actually live, not just barely scrape by, survive, maybe be on the streets, be in prison, or die, as we're unfortunately occasionally seeing. We need to have sufficient resources so that people actually can participate in communities.

We're seeing the impact of these cuts and most devastatingly on those who have the least to start with, particularly women. We also need to see a recognition that unless we continue to take seriously the issues that women face, we will continue to see them slide, not just off the national agenda, but literally end up in more precarious situations. I think others have already talked about that, and some of those who are going to speak after me will speak more to those issues.

So we're recommending not only national standards, but we're recommending that there be some accountability, particularly in the area of women's corrections. Many of you will likely be familiar that this year the Canadian Human Rights Commission issued a report coming some eight years after Madam Justice Arbour issued her report documenting clear human rights violations in our federal prisons. Yet many people recognize that our federal prisons run far better than our provincial prisons and our local lock-ups. There's a clear need for something like an inspectorate of women's prisons. There's a clear need for accountability. The legislation that governs corrections already allows for, by virtue of section 77, a governance type of body that could assist that inspectorate. We also need to look at some resources so people can actually challenge the system once they are a part of it.

● (1130)

Not only do things like legal aid cuts to criminal law impact women, but so do legal aid cuts to family law, because increasingly we're seeing women pleading guilty in situations where we have lawyers refusing to follow through and take cases, in fact saying they will not proceed with a client because she is insisting on pleading guilty. And what we're seeing is in provinces like Alberta, where there's now an automatic move from temporary guardianship status to permanent guardianship status once a child has been in care for six months, women desperately doing whatever they can to try to get back on their feet, to try to get access to their children. It's often futile, because the court backlog is so great that in fact by the time they get out, even if they plead guilty, by the time they get to court, by the time they're able to plead guilty, by the time they're sentenced, their child is already a permanent ward. So there are many interrelated issues there.

So we have a number of recommendations. And we appreciate that it was fairly short notice to be able to come together, but we appreciate coming together. We've sent a paper and we'll be able to have copies of that, and there's material on our website as well.

Perhaps I could leave you with the thought that we don't want to see the continued slide from victimization to criminalization that we're seeing for women in this country. Jails are not the solution to our national homelessness problem. They're not the solution to the feminization and criminalization of women. They are not the shelters that battered women need, and they are not a place to presume to be able to provide mental health services to those who slide off an overpacked health agenda.

So we encourage you to ensure that prisons do not continue to be the accepted fallback response to the evisceration of social and health services, especially for women. And that's exactly why women are the fastest-growing prison population. It's directly linked to those cuts in other areas and directly linked to the slide off the agenda of women's substantive equality issues.

I thank you very much, and I look forward to the discussion.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'm moving to Tina Schoen, from the Cowichan Women Against Violence. Welcome.

Ms. Tina Schoen (Program Supervisor, Somenos Transition House, Cowichan Women Against Violence): Thank you. I welcome the opportunity to be here.

Violence against women in B.C. is still a critical issue, as it is across Canada. I work in a women's shelter, Somenos Transition House in Duncan, which is a program of Cowichan Women Against Violence. We have other programs within the organization as well that support women in their journey back into hopefully safer lives.

We have a pre-employment program that suffers from project funding. We desperately require core funding for services for women. The continual cycle of project funding does not support programs to look into the future to provide consistent, continued support for women. We are continuously in the position of having to rework our programs to accommodate the changes that happen in the yearly or bi-yearly cycle that we seem to be in.

Within the women's shelter, things have not improved. There have been multiple cuts in B.C. to legal aid and to social assistance, among other programs. We are seeing more and more women come into our shelters with mental health and addictions issues. They have a very difficult time living in the cooperative environment of a shelter.

As some of our other speakers have mentioned, women are falling through the cracks. They are ending up in jail. They are ending up in unsuitable living environments. We are seeing more women who are of an age where their ability to secure meaningful employment is compromised, and they are slipping through the cracks and falling into a cycle of homelessness. They are entering into roommate situations that are dangerous. They are staying in abusive relationships because they know that to leave those relationships means poverty. We are seeing more and more women who are choosing not to report the assaults against them to the RCMP.

The cuts to legal aid are not providing women with adequate legal representation, and for women in crisis who are coming into shelters, the thought of dealing with the complexities of the legal system on their own are just too daunting. So more and more we are seeing women who are using the shelters who are not reporting the crimes against them, who are choosing to go back into abusive relationships because of the lack of support.

The cuts to income assistance in B.C. have created quite a dangerous situation for many women. At \$535 a month, a woman cannot expect to find secure, affordable housing. Women who are 19 years of age need to be independent for two years before they can access social assistance in B.C. This means they are living in unsafe situations often. Home is often not an option. They may be couch surfing or entering into unsafe relationships simply to have roofs over their heads.

The number of women falling through the cracks due to mental health and addictions is absolutely astonishing. Due to the nature of the programs that we provide, we require women to be able to be within that program in a fairly stable way. In order to provide that support that they need within the transition houses, we need specialized staffing. We need extra training. We need to be able to provide women with focused support to make the changes they need in their lives.

●(1135)

I believe that transitional housing, second-stage housing, affordable housing are critical issues for women. They're our primary needs, food and shelter.

Additionally, education is a key. Many women are caught in a trap of poverty that is added to by the lack of decent employment. We need programs that provide women access to education and skills development that will help them to be competitive in finding employment that can actually put a roof over their heads and food on the table. Apprenticeship programs into the trades are critically important. Women need access to those programs.

In closing, I want to encourage the attention brought by this committee to the very real issue of homelessness in our country, which is affecting far too many vulnerable people, and in particular to pay attention to the issues of women in terms of homelessness as well as access to training and legal aid.

Thank you.

●(1140)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Lee Lakeman, from the Canadian Association of Sexual Assault Centres. Welcome.

Ms. Lee Lakeman (Regional Representative for B.C. & Yukon, Canadian Association of Sexual Assault Centres): Madam Chair, I'm happy to be invited here and I'm happy for the existence of the committee.

Certainly the shortest thing I'd like to say is that if I could leave you with only one thing, it would be alarm.

It's clear that we're facing the loss of the very structures that have advanced changes in violence against women in Canada. I've been active since 1973. That's the year in which transition houses and rape crisis centres first opened in Canada, and it's my position that we are watching the dismantling of those services as we speak.

The loss of welfare as a basic accessible support across the country underlines that. The increased criminalization of the poor underlines that. But I'd like to speak specifically to the creations of the independent women's movement within Canada that have been behind every significant reform on violence against women in the last 30 years, every significant reform. I can think of no reform that was generated by government or by any force other than by the independent women's movement. And we're facing the fact that at the moment there is no national funding for the independent women's movement in Canada that allows that reform movement to continue.

There's no doubt that I support everything that's been said by the witnesses before me about the conditions that women are facing, and those are more comprehensively documented in our report, which I hope the committee members will take the time to read. There are specific recommendations in the back about the criminal justice system and about the Canadian governance in general. It has been made available to the committee in both English and French, and I'd be happy to supply more.

Since there's only three to five minutes, I'd like to leave you with some very specific things. I'd like to point out that there is no national funding at the moment for any women's groups on a core funding basis, and there is currently no national women's group dedicated to violence against women receiving any national funding.

CASAC receives no national funding. There has never been an association of transition houses across the country funded nationally, and there still isn't. There's no funding for the varied kinds of consultations that this committee seems to be trying to regenerate. For a while we had a five-year period of annual consultations with the justice department of 60 women's groups from across the country who could specifically speak to justice issues. That has been discontinued. Nothing has replaced it. Those conditions have not changed. The urgency of the need for justice reforms has not diminished; it has increased.

I'd like to point out that there is a history of parliamentary subcommittees trying to deal with this issue. The last significant report from a parliamentary subcommittee was *The War against Women* report. Our report picks up from that history and tries to make a link back to that. It is very significant, I would say, that what we got was the boondoggle of the blue ribbon panel on violence against women and we've no significant assistance from government to deal with this war on women since.

In fact, we're dealing with quite manipulative government policies that undermine the independent women's movement, rather than reinforce it since then. I know I'm speaking boldly. I'm doing it on purpose.

Our report takes as its basis that there has been instituted a Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which, somewhere at its heart, has a promise that women will have equal access to law and equal access to the rule of law. That, of course, should apply to violence against women, which is one of the main instruments of the repression of women and the prevention of women's equality.

But where is the charter when women call police? Where is the charter when women try to call police? Where is the charter when women defend themselves? Where is the charter when we're trying to get access to intervene in court cases? Where is the charter when women need legal aid to have access to their children and to protect their children from incest? Where is the charter when aboriginal women are trying to prevent the imposition of racist policies?

Since 1995, we've not only dealt with a failure to apply the charter in a progressive, positive way, but we're also dealing with an undermining of the very structures the charter was laid on top of. The restructuring of Canada since 1995 has completely undermined the governance we counted on.

•(1145)

We now have a fragmented social system across the country, a fragmented health care system across the country, and a fragmented immigration policy across the country, and nobody is applying the sense of women's equality to those governance or policy or finance issues.

What is the point of a transition house if a woman can't get access to adequate welfare on which to live? What is the point if she can't get legal aid to fight to keep her children protected from the man who was beating her up? What is the point if I have to go to Prince George and fight a judge who's hiring the young aboriginal women who appear before him in a court, using them as prostitutes in the street? No one yet has revealed what the role of the RCMP was in hiding that judge's culpability. What is the point?

We're in a serious emergency here. Things are worse now than they have been in a decade, considerably worse, and I'm alarmed. I'm alarmed at who's not at this table. I'm alarmed at having three to five minutes to describe this situation. I'm alarmed at the loss of transition houses and rape crisis centres. I'm alarmed at the state of the national women's movement. And I'm shocked that there isn't more attention being paid to these issues. We are in a crisis, a serious crisis.

Internationally, the Canadian women's movement took the lead not because the women involved were brilliant, but because we had an economic possibility after the Second World War. We led, and out of that leading we managed to create several little structures, women's centres, transition houses, and rape crisis centres among them. These have only begun to be instituted as useful bases for women organizing to fight for women's human and economic rights across the country. They're not yet fully accessible to the disabled, never mind to aboriginal women or women with multiple languages.

We haven't even fully achieved those tactics yet, and already they are disappearing. They are disappearing, and there is no counter-strategy, no emergence of a new strategy to see to it that women reach equality and that they can live a life without being beaten up and without having their children become victims of incest.

The Chair: Thank you.

For those of you who haven't been before the committee in the past, let me just tell you how we operate. It's somewhat confining, but we try to do it as flexibly as possible. We have a speaking order. In the first round members have seven minutes to ask a question, and the reply from the person to whom the question was directed is included in this seven minutes.

I've tended to be fairly lax in my timing, but I think I'm generous; I've been caught up a little bit by it. I'm going to try to adhere a little bit more to the timeframe. We have several rounds and we have a prescribed order.

So I'm going to ask my colleagues to keep their questions as direct as possible and to address them to the individual from whom they want a response. I want to assure you that we're meeting here today, but there will be other opportunities to follow up with you and address your concerns, because we've heard some very powerful comments today.

We'll start with our colleague from the Conservative Party, Lynne Yelich.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Blackstrap, CPC): Yes, we have heard some very powerful representation here.

I'm going to ask a different question. I think our city of Saskatoon was traumatized this past week by the death of an eleven-year-old girl who had nowhere to go. She had been on drugs and alcohol—eleven years old. She had no parents home at the time, so we don't know whether they were....

That's terrible, and it's a tragedy; and I want to know, what are we doing wrong here? Who should we be asking questions of—the teacher, the community, the parents? Who's responsible? Is it all about funding?

Today most of the connections were made to the funding—and I will not disagree with that—but is there more to this? Something is really wrong when an eleven-year-old had nowhere to go and died. It wasn't because she was a girl, or because she was a native, if she was. I'm still really quite shaken up about it, because I think it's really, really sad, especially in the city of Saskatoon, a city that I think should never have had something like that happen.

If you were legislators right now—if you were us—I want each of you to tell me who you would be holding responsible for that death.

• (1150)

The Chair: Who wants to take that on?

Ms. Gasongi (Gina) Simon: I'll try.

The Chair: I'll start with Gina, and then I'll come to Lee.

Ms. Gasongi (Gina) Simon: I would beg to differ. I'd say it was because she was an aboriginal, and it was because she was a girl. You say that it's not so, but I say those are contributing factors.

I think right from the get-go, from the colonization, which started the whole systemic impact of racism, discrimination.... You're talking about a child; yet probably her parents are in the same state, the state of an eleven-year-old, in terms of their education and in terms of anything they've ever had. It goes back to root causes that have never been addressed to this day in this country.

The Chair: Thank you.

Lee Lakeman.

Ms. Lee Lakeman: I'm here to hold you responsible. I'm here to hold you to use the power in your hands right now to make sure there is no mother out there of an eleven-year-old girl without a way to feed and protect her. Nobody's going to do it better than that mother.

That mother now requires national standards across the country that allow her to get access to a liveable amount of money and allow her to protect her child. It's quite straightforward. There's a huge government responsibility, and it's a national government responsibility.

The Chair: Does anybody else want to respond?

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: Is there a trend, do you think? Are we more exposed to it because there has been more desperation? Why is it becoming so rampant?

Ms. Lee Lakeman: Yes, there is a trend. There absolutely is a trend. It is getting worse. There are fewer and fewer places for people to go, fewer and fewer ways to survive.

Our report started out to be about the criminal justice system. We decided that it was impossible to talk about convicting violence against women in this five-year history of the report without talking about the loss of welfare, the changes to immigration, and the changes to the treatment of people, which are driving women into more and more dangerous situations. The women on the bottom are being driven into more and more dangerous situations. And the bottom, by the way, is getting bigger and bigger. There's no doubt at all in my mind that in the family you told us about, that woman and that girl child had more options a few years ago than they have right now.

It absolutely is a function of government policy. It's certainly a function of international economics, too. There are things government policy can do to make those people more at peace, at ease, safe, and able to fight for themselves.

Ms. Gasongi (Gina) Simon: I'd also like to say that we're tired of the economics of pain of our people, economics of pain in all areas, health, education, social, you name it. There's a whole economics of pain when you look at the statistics.

Our people have been stripped of the matriarchal way in which they governed themselves traditionally, where women and children were honoured and upheld. Now our national leaders, after the housing round table we participated in, don't even mention the points we brought up about matrimonial property rights in their report to the chiefs, or that the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms doesn't even apply on reserve.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: How did that evolve? You said that it has evolved to where you're not now respected, women and children. How did that evolve to be so backward?

Ms. Gasongi (Gina) Simon: It derives right from the roots of colonialism, where people come in and deny people's religions, their beliefs, the way they govern themselves—dismiss it, burn it, make it illegal to practise anything.

Today the most vulnerable people, children at the age of 12, boys and girls—we say traditionally that their mental and physical spirits battle at this age. Many times, in this day in society, the physical spirit is allowed to win over the spiritual. Once upon a time our ceremonies took those boys and girls in, so they knew the sacredness of life and the sacredness of their bounds. That's not even being promoted any more. There's not even room for it.

• (1155)

The Chair: Kim.

Mrs. Kim Pate: You ask how that's happened. Historically, patriarchal and colonial intervention meant that matrilineal and matriarchal cultures weren't recognized when contact happened. So in fact all women's leadership was virtually wiped out at the start of the process that we're now continuing to deal with.

When you ask how it happens, it's that Saskatoon is the same city where a few years ago we had meetings around youth justice issues and the police who were there were talking about how they were no longer going to be charging young girls with prostitution; they were only going to be going after the pimps.

This is the usual trick that gets played when we're having some of those discussions. Within less than a year, we were seeing girls as young as 12, 13, 14 being charged with pimping and living off the avails of prostitution in Saskatoon. We've just had the Stonechild inquiry. I don't know how much clearer it can be, the crisis we're in, when we start to see children literally dumped in the streets.

What happened to us is similar to what happened when Lee started to look at her report, when Gina mentioned some of the work they're doing—work we're all doing, everybody at this table. When we started looking at the whole human rights issue for women in prison, we had to broaden it. The Human Rights Commission focused on corrections. We said the entire context in which women are living right now is contributing directly to the increased criminalization and the increased reliance on the most punitive, most expensive—and I say “expensive” not just in fiscal terms, but in human costs—and least effective way of intervening in social issues.

No wonder an eleven-year-old is anesthetizing herself to the reality if her reality is that she's not even sure if she has a home, not even sure her mother can afford to feed her, not even sure how she's going to get to school—if she can even get near the schools. Those are the realities we're facing.

One of the things I think is increasingly clear is that people in positions of power, with the resources and the authority to make decisions, are so far removed from the lived reality of what so many people are experiencing in Canada.... I don't know how those questions can be asked without there being an indictment of those who have the authority and power and aren't using it to in fact rectify the situation.

I make my living off the backs of women in prison. I don't deserve my paycheque if I'm not trying every day to alleviate the very conditions that contribute to more women going into that circumstance.

That's the reality we're faced with. Increasingly, groups like those of us at the table are being cut as well. Our fear is that...as Lee pointed out, the independent women's movement is being torn to shreds. People are literally having to chase funding dollars project to project. The very core of what our work is, what you rely on us for—to have the kind of critical analysis that feeds reports like *The War against Women* and *Canada's Promises to Keep*—which ensures that this sort of analysis continues, is being virtually eliminated. We're being taken away.

If you can imagine this happening to us, imagine what's happening to women who are actually living those experiences.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madame Brunelle.

[Translation]

Ms. Paule Brunelle (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Good day to the witnesses.

In Quebec, we understand very well the meaning of colonialism. We experienced British colonialism first hand and we were forced to defend ourselves. However, we were fortunate enough to have a francophone population large enough to stand up for its rights. As I understand it, aboriginal peoples are scattered across Canada.

I am very sympathetic to your plight. If I were in your shoes, as an aboriginal woman, I would be completely disgusted. It's unacceptable that the federal government has totally abandoned aboriginals and created a system that makes resistance difficult. At a time when the federal government is racking up surpluses, I urge you to continue making these claims and voicing your opinion.

Can one of you give me report on the status of aboriginal women in Quebec? Is their plight equally dramatic? Some know the answer to that question. I understand that there are 85 shelters in Quebec for women who suffer domestic abuse. Yesterday, the Quebec government announced 72 undertakings to counter the problem of violence against women. A total of \$65 million over five years will be committed to this cause. In your opinion, are these undertakings on the part of the provincial government to provide financial and awareness programs a first step to finding a solution to this problem? Do you think it might be a worthwhile initiative to develop an action plan that brings together all law enforcement and political authorities?

• (1200)

[English]

The Chair: Lee.

Ms. Lee Lakeman: Certainly there are many lessons we can take from criminal justice system activities in Quebec. I don't think anyone who is informed would not say several things are better advanced there. However, I want you not to have any false confidence that the shelters and the rape crisis centres are in a good position in Quebec. The CALACS Centres are members of my association, as well. I'm quite clear that in the recent cases of child sexual assault and of sexual assault involving Mr. Rozon, for instance, one wonders about what's going on in Quebec when somebody can be convicted of sexual assault and still have the sentence completely overturned. There's apparently no need for public accountability of large powerful men in Quebec when they're committing not only sexual assault, but child sexual assault. I won't speak to the particular situation of aboriginal women, which Gina can take better than I can, but I would not have any outstanding confidence that things are so much better.

At the very least, why must it be either/or? We're relying on the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms to apply to all the women across the country and to be there as an asset for all the women across the country.

Social programs that are produced and funded at the national level have to be available for women within Quebec as well, and currently they are not. The women's groups within Quebec do not have the money to meet, for instance, with the women across the rest of Canada who are a basic source of information back and forth. Criminal law does not begin in Quebec; it begins in Ottawa. Policing is not only controlled in Quebec, it's also controlled in Ottawa. We require that alliance at the national level to be able to reinforce each other's work.

The Chair: Gina.

Ms. Gasongi (Gina) Simon: I'd like to thank you for your acknowledgement of the disparity and, as Kim said, the alarm about what's happening in aboriginal communities.

Of the dollars that you speak of now, none of them are going to the aboriginal shelters. What has been able to happen to aboriginal people is this whole divide and conquer tactic. As long as you keep people segregated, then that way you can pick them off. I would say Quebec seems to have somewhat more of a unity than most provinces. Maybe it is that the French language, being their second language, somehow keeps some unity for them. They can converse, aside from English, in French. Most of the women who speak their native tongue also speak French.

I would say it's also because of the lobbying efforts of the aboriginal women in Quebec. Femmes autochtones is one of the most active aboriginal women's groups in Canada. It has had some excellent leadership over the years, and I hope for that to continue.

I wanted to say that within the shelters—and I'll just use an example of a shelter in Quebec, Listuguj.... The shelter manager and the staff there have been at their jobs for fifteen years to eighteen years, with the same core of people from the existence of that shelter. There's something to be said for the work those women are doing and the fact that they've lasted this long. In my mind, it's a question of how much longer they are going to last. They need some help. They're doing the best they can, and we need the men in this country to stand up and call themselves on what's happening to women.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm going to move on to the next member, Susan Kadis.

Mrs. Susan Kadis (Thornhill, Lib.): I appreciate your forthrightness today. Obviously we can't go forward if we don't know exactly what's going on.

I have multiple questions—I'm sure far too many.

Firstly, there has been a lot of condemnation of the federal government's apparent lack of support, obligation, etc. We've heard about Quebec now. I'd like to understand, again fully, regarding other provinces. Is it only the federal government that you feel has not been providing the core funding, or do you feel it's also provincial? Or are you looking up on the federal to again implement these national standards to encourage the provincial? I want to understand that a little better. That's one.

Also, who would you like to see at the table? I think Lee said some of the people who need to be here are not here.

And I think Cheryl referred at the very beginning to the idea that the criminal justice system is biased against women.

So I put those out there for now.

• (1205)

The Chair: Who wants to start? Lee.

Ms. Lee Lakeman: I could have delivered 15 minutes on what has been achieved by the Canadian government in relation to violence against women, but I have five minutes, so I'm focusing on what I want you to do.

The significant point of federal-provincial relations is that they changed dramatically in 1995. Since 1995 we can point specifically to the changes in governance that have resulted in undermining what we've been able to do about violence against women. The changes in 1995, with the end of CAP funding, the changes in health funding, the changes in social welfare funding, have directly impacted every transition house across the country, have resulted in the elimination of women's centres in much of the country, have absolutely affected the rape crisis centre movement across the country, have directly meant that women can no longer be sure that they can get welfare and they can feed their kids. I think most of you probably don't know that is the case. You can no longer be sure.

I've spent my entire life knowing that my kid would not starve to death in Canada. That is no longer something one can be sure of.

Mrs. Susan Kadis: What we need to know clearly is whether this is a function of the provincial government per se in a given province.

Ms. Lee Lakeman: No.

Mrs. Susan Kadis: Is it both? Exactly where is that coming from?

Ms. Lee Lakeman: Of course it's both. It's the change in the federal-provincial fiscal arrangements, the loss of national standards on those things, which were never fully achieved in the first place, but they were a lot better than they are now on health and welfare funding. You'll hear more about this. There has been a coalition of women's groups that took our complaints about this under the CEDAW conventions to the UN. You've been criticized by the UN on this basis. I expected that would be pre-understood before I got here, but that's part of what we're talking about, for sure, the impact of those decisions.

On top of that, I think there's a separate stream of expectations that are tied to the charter. Once the charter was instituted, we expected that there would be an ongoing process of applying that charter promise further and further into the fabric of governance and social policy. That promise has been abandoned. That stream is no longer in play.

And there's a third stream, which is there is an overt attack on feminism going on in social policy and in government policy. There is simply no other way to describe it. At one point we had a hit-and-miss possibility of being consulted and of getting some funding. We are currently experiencing exactly the opposite. It is very, very difficult to access the ear of government or to get any funding at all if you are clearly understood to be about the business of establishing the equality of women. It's harder now to get the ear of government and to get any money if you are identified as a human rights activist on behalf of women.

The Chair: Tina.

Ms. Tina Schoen: Thank you.

I strongly believe that it is both a provincial and federal responsibility to address the underfunding of women's services. We need a national standard across the provinces. The cuts that women's services have been experiencing and the lack of increased funding, for example, in the transition houses in B.C., where we have not experienced cuts, but we have also not experienced any increases to support the increased operational costs that we face.... It's essential, and short-term gain is in no way going to minimize the longer-term costs that we will be facing.

The Chair: Thank you.

Gina.

Ms. Gasongi (Gina) Simon: I would just like to add, in terms of speaking about shelters on reserve, because that comes under the arm of INAC, that INAC has become this huge monster. No one knows the head or tail in that bureaucracy. And as INAC continues with the devolution of their fiduciary responsibilities—things go to the provincial level and money for shelters comes through INAC and then through to the regions and from the regions to chief and council—shelters are asked to carry out so many reports and statistics and stuff, and then at the end of the day, we try to gather those statistics. I mean, our women do it because the government says to, and in order for you to get more funding you have to provide the statistics. But when we try to have a look at those statistics and use them to somehow get a picture of what's happening for us nationally, they're nowhere to be found or there's no condensing of them. So the headquarters doesn't even know what the regions are doing. When we try to talk about enhancement of funding or whatever, we're not even sure who to go to and who to address.

• (1210)

The Chair: Kim.

Mrs. Kim Pate: With regard to the issue of discrimination within the criminal justice system, in the context of the report on stolen sisters, we became aware—and these women here can speak to that in broader terms than I can—that within police colleges and training programs, training around learning about indigenous communities—their experience, their history, and how that impacts on policing and how to police—is not a critical core part of the training program for police. If it's a core program, it's an hour or two after a series of other things

We know that within the police college system that is true. Also, we believe that judges and anyone who's part of the criminal justice system needs to have the same type of training and awareness. It's clear just in talking to front-line organizations ourselves, in the context of the stop violence against women campaign, that even for women going to police to seek support here in Ottawa there's a sexual assault protocol that's not implemented. It was designed to ensure that women who do seek assistance and support and want to seek justice don't encounter a lot of difficulties. Where arrangements are made, they're not even followed, because police officers are moved around and it's not a core fundamental part of how they police.

The Chair: Briefly, please.

• (1215)

Ms. Cheryl Hotchkiss: If I heard your question correctly, it was whether there is discrimination in the justice system. Maybe I can

give some examples of how we see it just to exemplify. You've heard one—the police don't come often when they're called. After I'd made those statements on a national women's television network, as it then was, out of Winnipeg a few years ago, the police superintendent I was on with, after the fact, acknowledged that, yes, that's right, there are situations where police don't come when they're called, but it's a delicate situation. My response was that it would have been far more effective if he had said that on the air rather than it always being us saying it on the air.

I then had a warden of a prison, as we were relating a number of different incidents, talk about the time he called the police because he heard a woman being beat up on his block. When the police arrived they said that if they'd known it was that house, they wouldn't have come so fast. I said again to him, why don't you start speaking out about some of these issues?

So we know that it's not just a case of education. These issues are known too often to those...but there's a lot invested, and I think you need to think of who benefits from continuing to hide or not to disclose the true nature of the extent of the discrimination experienced by women. Who benefits from not having women being equal? I think you come very quickly to your conclusions.

We know that we're seeing more women being charged in situations where they've actually called the police because they were in need of assistance. Police will say to us they have a mandatory charging policy, a gender-neutral approach. Gender neutrality was never what was being asked for. It was to have in fact the issues that women were concerned about be taken seriously. When the police arrive and there are defensive scratches on the man, he will say she assaulted him. Actually, in some cases they're not even charging the man then, even though the house may be trashed, even though they've listened to 911 calls where they're keeping the woman on the phone as they're listening to the house being trashed, and asking whether he has the children or hit her again. Then when they arrive, they charge him maybe with mischief and her with assault because he has defensive scratch wounds on him.

Then we end up with the woman, as I indicated earlier, pleading guilty to avoid having to stay in custody awaiting her trial because of limits in legal aid funding. Then they can't even get access if their kids are taken into custody themselves, and I say custody because it's a fast track into the juvenile injustice system for many of those young people. If they're taken in through the child welfare system, the women don't have access to legal aid for family law matters, even though women will often say it's far harder for them to be separated from their kids than it is for them to actually do their time.

Then if they get out of prison, whether it's remanded in custody or after they've served their time, they have no way to support themselves. And then they're told to literally stand on their feet.

We've just come through this whole process of human rights, and even after Madam Justice Arbour found concerns about human rights and charter violations for women prisoners, and after the Canadian Human Rights Commission found it, we're still in the situation just over a month ago with Correctional Service Canada still not willing to accept that there's discrimination against women and their human rights are violated.

Within that month, since those meetings with Corrections Canada, we've had two incidents where we've had to alert them to the fact that they've denied women rights to counsel in those prisons and other human rights violations. So that's the reality we're facing.

Of course, those of us who advocate are often then linked as though we are the women who are experiencing this, and to be the women experiencing this means to almost automatically be discredited, because instead of looking at who's benefiting from the policies and practices, it's often seen to be self-serving on the part of the women trying to seek the support. So when you ask how is it discriminatory, that's a bit of a snapshot of how it's discriminatory.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Crowder, before you begin, I have a real non sequitur.

There is a light lunch available for everyone here. Please, help yourselves.

Jean.

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): First of all, I'd like to thank you all for coming. I think it's somewhat fitting that a lot of the comments that came out today were very passionately delivered with a force that I think needs to be heard.

When we talk about violence, I think that many people assume it's physical, but we also have verbal, emotional, economic, and social violence. It's endemic and it's systemic.

In Britain, *The Guardian* released a report this week. The headline reads: "Bullied, patronised and abused - women MPs reveal the truth about life inside Westminster". They're talking about MPs. I'm not alleging that's what happens here; however, it is systemic. We have people who are making decisions about women, children, families, and violence who have no conception and have no understanding.

A couple of times people talked about consultation. I'd like you to specifically talk about some concrete ways to shift into action. Lee talked about it. I assume you have the information. We have stacks of reports. We could probably fill a truck with the number of reports. How do we shift into action?

I am very frustrated by the amount of information we have, and yet we don't see movement on making any significant difference in women's and children's lives.

The Chair: Who wants to go first? Lee.

Ms. Lee Lakeman: I'm probably the oldest hag at the table.

I think we have seen a difference. There have been victories within the Canadian context that we need to hang onto. Part of why I'm alarmed is because I see us moving backward.

What has worked in Canada to actually save lives, promote reforms, and make a difference has been the existence of a strong, independent women's movement that was in existence because there was some support from government.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Could you actually talk about how we get over the inertia? We understand that we need to fund women's organizations. There are enough reports out there that talk about it. Yet we don't do anything about it.

Ms. Lee Lakeman: Yes.

Ms. Jean Crowder: I know that's more of a challenging question.

Ms. Lee Lakeman: I got on the plane because I think this committee is a starting point. I think it's very important to have this subcommittee. This subcommittee has to make a lot of noise, and I'm counting on you to make noise. It has worked as a base for action over the last 30 years to concentrate women's attention in a subcommittee and to use it to make noise. That's certainly part of what we need to do here.

We need a forum. We need national fora in which we can address the public and in which we can address Parliament. It would be helpful to hold more hearings. It would be helpful if you would come to us across the country. It would be helpful if you would give us more time to speak. I could bring you women who want to speak for themselves. I can bring you the shelter and crisis centre women from across the country. They want to talk to you, but it takes time and people need to be able to put things to you.

Overwhelmingly, we are going to lose the one weapon that we've had in this battle, which is the existence of front-line women's groups. The provinces are de-funding them. The federal government has a fiscal responsibility to them, which I believe can be argued on the basis of the charter. I don't know why you're not doing it. The charter promises us the advance toward the equal status of women. It requires direct funding from the federal government for the equality-seeking initiative of women's groups. There is no way around that.

Clearly, we're supporting the call for monitoring groups at the national level. Clearly, we're participating in coalitions, the CEDAW-based coalitions and the others that exist.

What has made a difference in Canada is for women to be able to call a local women's centre, transition house, or rape crisis centre, and know that they could. It has made a difference in the behaviour of men, because men know that women can call and women can leave. When you have centres that are actually functional, it has saved lives—the lives of children, the lives of women, and the lives of men.

• (1220)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Lee Lakeman: I don't know how you're going to do it. You have to do that part. I'm keeping them open.

The Chair: Okay. I want to let everybody respond to this, please.

I'll start with Cheryl, and then move across.

Ms. Cheryl Hotchkiss: Yes. I think that critically the issue of violence against women is not on the public agenda. It's not seen as a critical issue. It's not seen as a central issue to ensuring that a society is healthy and productive for everyone.

Globally, it's a huge problem. We have such a difficult time getting the ears of men in leadership positions to listen to the reality of women and children in Canada and abroad. Until they see that as central to ensuring that Canada is a safe and productive place, then we're not going to make any difference. There are a lot there, but they're not at the table. They're not the ones who are hearing this.

The Chair: Thank you.

Gina.

Ms. Gasongi (Gina) Simon: I'd like to say that when a child cries, a child wants its mother, and if they can't have their mother, then they want someone just as close who they know and recognize as the mother. That's what we're saying: allow us our children and allow our children to come to us, because this continual systemic racism that's happening in this country to our women and children....

Take this one community in Alberta, for instance. When we asked them the question, "What is the impact on the community of having that shelter", the women replied, "That we're here". And then we said, "Elaborate more—what do you mean?" They said, "It's just the physical presence of a shelter, because before this shelter"—and there are many still in this state—"we went down the road, down the beach, in the bush to turned-over boats and we made a lean-to, and that was our secret place where we went, and we never told anybody." That was just a place to go to cry, to go and talk with each other, and light a fire for warmth, if they were going to spend the night. There was no food or stuff, and that's it. There are still many communities like that. There are 647 aboriginal communities in this country, and 47 have shelters.

When it comes to violence, we see the numbers increasing with our women; even our women are becoming violent. A lot of the cases within prison and stuff are because women are so frustrated, the oppression is so heavy and so strong, and that's the last place they want to be, but the pain is so difficult.

We know we can't do this alone; we know that we need all our sisters in Canada, but right now we're doing things like starting with the national aboriginal women's organizations and we've created AWAVE, Aboriginal Women Against Violence Everywhere, and the National Aboriginal Circle is the secretariat of that coalition.

We really need to develop teams, because we're so spread out in the country. That's what we're trying to do, to develop teams that can go into the communities and start working with the shelters, helping them develop a template presentation they can give to their chief and council, so that they can feel like they have some support in the outside world. Also, the roots and the strength need to come from the inside; but until they're strong enough, we need to be able to go to them and help them.

• (1225)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Gina.

Tina.

Ms. Tina Schoen: I would have to say that the answer to your question is in your opening statement, and that as long as the abuses of power happen within our institutions, we are never not going to need women's shelters, transition houses, and counselling programs. Whether those institutions are Parliament, legislatures, our RCMP, our judiciary, it really doesn't matter. The support needs to be there within those institutions for the abuses of power to come to light and to be addressed, and until that happens, we are not going to see real change.

The Chair: Thank you.

Kim.

Mrs. Kim Pate: I think I would agree with what everybody has put forth. I think that providing more fora, more opportunities, for this information to be out there is important, but I don't think it's a

case of people not understanding. In fact, when I start to see some of the backlash, the so-called research studies that are coming out saying women are as violent as men, I see it. I walk in and see this.

When I see the two women who are described as the most dangerous in this country right now in our federal prison population, they are two young aboriginal women who were left in such desperate circumstances they were literally fighting for their lives—and one fighting for her child. They started with very short sentences; one started with 18 months and is now doing 18 years, all based on what's happened in the prison setting. She takes full responsibility for her part in responding in violent ways, but I think it's a fallacy to say that in fact we don't know about this.

We have starting seeing attacks saying that women are becoming more violent, but we know we're not seeing appreciable differences in terms of who's coming in. We are seeing younger women; we're seeing more desperate women; we're seeing women increasingly who are racialized; and we're seeing women whose options, when they actually go back out into the community, are increasingly limited. Maybe people don't know all of the details of those realities, and maybe we need to be making sure some of those details are more well-known.

But to put the question back to you, what can this committee do to ensure the status of women? And I understand it's a full committee, because I saw Paddy saying it's not a subcommittee but a full committee. I think it's great this committee exists, but let's now make sure that the status of women is firmly on the agenda of the government in every facet of its work—certainly its fiscal agenda and certainly its social policy agenda.

If in fact you can do that, then I think you go a long way in influencing what happens in the provinces too, to get back to the question earlier. The provinces are being permitted to eviscerate social programs, to eviscerate what is essentially our Canadian legacy, or what we pride ourselves on internationally. The result is that many of us are increasingly looking at international fora to take this issue up, because if we don't have a forum here in Canada—and many of us are hopeful this committee may be one of those—then in fact we have to go externally. The last thing we want to be doing is trying to figure out ways to embarrass Canada into doing right by women, but that's the only step we see left, quite frankly.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Kim Pate: And rising up.

The Chair: I'm moving on to Ms. Grewal.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and I would like to thank the witnesses for appearing before us and coming all this way.

This committee has invited many organizations such as yours in the past to identify key issues of concern to women, but what would you identify as the top three issues of concern to women in Canada, and what role could this committee play in addressing those issues?

The Chair: We're on shorter time rounds this time, so I'm going to be a little less generous to allow more people an opportunity to ask their questions. So I'd ask you to keep them as brief as you can.

Who wants to respond to that first?

• (1230)

Ms. Gasongi (Gina) Simon: I would like to respond in terms of the shelters' perspective. Shelters are caught in a catch-22, because they have to provide the statistics in order to get the funding, but if shelters were doing their jobs there would be no one in the shelters. So the issues of prevention, intervention, and education all need to be addressed before we're in this crisis mode.

For us at the shelters, six weeks is not enough of a window of an opportunity to assist a woman and her children. After that, there's no aftercare and no follow-up by many aboriginal shelters. It's as if, "There's the door; we wish you the best." That's a shame.

The Chair: Is there anybody else? Lee.

Ms. Lee Lakeman: There are lists of recommendations in the back of our report that you will have, but I'd like to focus on a couple in particular. The criminal justice ones are in the report. I urge you to look for those.

In the course of our five-year research, we decided, besides the criminal justice issues, which are huge—I don't mean to minimize those at all—it's very difficult to get a conviction on a case of violence against women in Canada. It's very, very difficult. There's less surety of a conviction on violence against women than there is on any other serious crime. It's a major issue.

I would also like to point out that once you get to criminal justice, you're dealing with after the violence. Our primary concern is how to prevent the violence in the first place. I think there are three key issues at the moment. One is the loss of access to welfare, or some other form of guaranteed livable income. I warn you that Canadian women are beginning to talk again about guaranteed livable income. There are meetings going on across the country. There are initiatives being taken. You're considerably behind in considering what form that should take to be of most use to women, and how we will have some kind of national control of that.

The second thing I'd like to say is that there's no doubt at all that prostitution is a hot issue at the moment. The question of how that applies to an issue of women's freedom and women's equality is a serious matter that needs to be undertaken by this committee. It's a fearful subject, I warn you, but we must be talking about this more seriously, how to protect the women trafficked into the country and between parts of the country from being criminalized and how to at the same time protect them from the economic forces that are jailing them in prostitution. It's a very serious matter and it's getting worse. It's worse than it's ever been in my lifetime and getting worse very quickly, both as a domestic and an international issue.

Third, and what I came in with, is that the very thing that has saved women's lives in Canada is being eroded—that is, the existence of the independent women's groups. I think this committee hasn't yet grappled with the question. If you leave it to the provinces to supply transition houses, rape crisis centres and women's centres, then you're reducing those centres to being fee-for-service, band-aid operations.

In fact, they were always intended to be women's political organizations that were capable of serious advocacy to the equality promise of the charter. That's a federal government responsibility,

not simply a provincial government responsibility. I would say no one is exempt from that responsibility, but certainly it is a route to federal initiative.

Every transition house that is about the business of establishing women's equality should have direct access to the federal government and to some form of funding—perhaps not for all of its service work, but surely for the equality-seeking component of that work. That is the work that changes the community, that changes the attitudes, that organizes women into groups, that creates a voting body that can support reforms. That's where it is and that's what we're losing.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'll go to the next questioner, Mr. Powers.

Mr. Russ Powers (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, Lib.): You won't have time to answer this, but shall we assume that I'm a male? What am I doing wrong, and what can I do to help your situation?

The Chair: Tina.

Ms. Tina Schoen: I think it's essential that men speak out. Violence against women is not a women's issue, it's an issue of us all. Change will only come about when men start calling other men on their behaviours and actions.

• (1235)

The Chair: Kim.

Mrs. Kim Pate: I would reiterate that. If you can take into the male leadership within government the very issues that have already been talked about here, and in particular some of the priorities that Lee and others talked about—the need to ensure that there are national standards, that there's a guaranteed livable income for all people—that will directly impact the equality of women and children in this country. It will directly alleviate the poverty and homelessness issues. It will directly address many of the issues we've already talked about. If we have those national standards, I think we'll see some fundamental changes.

As Lee and others have mentioned, I think we also need the independent women's movement, as it has very many facets, as Gina's talked about, in terms of having leadership and the leadership being able to come together so that the pan-Canadian aboriginal women's groups come together with some of the women doing feminization and criminalization of poverty, anti-violence and all of us working collectively. The funding needs to be there to ensure that happens and that the perspective that drives the consideration of issues like prostitution is informed by that kind of equality leadership.

Third, I think you need to be ensuring that there's oversight. Perhaps this is the committee that should be best ensuring that there's oversight of all of those issues that we've talked about.

The Chair: Thank you.

Does anybody else wish to add?

Ms. Gasongi (Gina) Simon: I would like to add that as a man asking that question, I think you need to ask it more to other men.

Also, as part of our teaching, on the outside I may look like a woman, but on the inside my mother and my father made me, so I'm of both. So when you beat one, you're beating the other. We're like eagles: we have two wings, a male and a female. We'll never go anywhere if one of those wings is wounded. We will not have the far sight; we'll only be nearsighted and grounded. Until we can lift equally, as men and women, and fly like an eagle symbolically, only then will we address violence.

The Chair: Anybody else? Lee.

Ms. Lee Lakeman: I appreciate you asking the question. I appreciate that you're sitting on this committee. I think what you can do is support the leadership being offered by the independent women's movement and what needs to happen here. Take our recommendations seriously into your party in particular, into this committee for sure, and onto the floor of the House. There's no doubt that we're dependent on your actions.

The Chair: Thank you.

Do you have anything further, Mr. Powers?

Mr. Russ Powers: No, thank you.

The Chair: We have a couple of minutes left, Ms. Torsney. Do you want to...?

Hon. Paddy Torsney (Burlington, Lib.): I have a few things, and you don't have to answer them all.

It seems to me, also, that we have to have an education system that really does ensure that people are treated equally. I think, Ms. Simon, your example of the eagle is really indicative of how this country is going to achieve things, if everybody has the best opportunities. It's in all of our interests. Some of our communities are doing some great things on a local level, but we need to make sure that's pan-Canadian, as you say.

Nobody mentioned the issues around substance use and misuse, which is often a place where people are going because they're dealing with pain, but it also puts them at greater risk. I guess I'm surprised that there wasn't any comment. Maybe it's because there are so many things to talk about. But clearly, support for ensuring healthier living environments would make a difference, to my mind, for a lot of the women who are at risk.

Did anyone want to comment on that? We did have a special committee on that issue.

The Chair: Kim.

Mrs. Kim Pate: Yes. I'm sorry that you probably weren't in the room—

Hon. Paddy Torsney: I missed that, sorry.

Mrs. Kim Pate: —when we did talk about it.

Certainly the issue of substance use and abuse is a concern. I think so much of the focus now, particularly when we talk about FAS, alcohol-related neurological disorders, is.... What we're seeing is that it has a race, gender, and class analysis. What I mean by that is the focus is predominantly on aboriginal children being diagnosed and aboriginal mothers, who are then held responsible for those issues. That's one facet that I think you need to be aware of.

Hon. Paddy Torsney: Okay.

Mrs. Kim Pate: We don't have time to get into the long, full critique, but there is a really important critique around that issue.

The other reality is that when people are increasingly desperate and there are no other options, anaesthetizing yourself is one of those options that gets utilized. What we also know is that once you start using substances, two things happen. Of course, in terms of addictions, there are some realities about how difficult it is to extricate yourself from that, the financial implications and so on, plus the long-term impacts of some of those substances on people's ability to contribute, in terms of their ability to access education or to avail themselves of other opportunities.

I think I would go back to the very issues we talked about. When we see the direct correlation between people's states of desperation and the use or abuse of substances, there is a correlation. And the band-aid solution of saying we'll have a drug strategy, when in fact it's not really about alleviating the very conditions and context that give rise to the use of those substances, then that's all it is, a band-aid covering up a festering wound. It certainly isn't addressing the fundamental roots.

When we have people who can't even get into treatment who want to get into treatment, it's similar to the issue of the fee-for-service types of issues that are coming up with shelters and other areas. When they're told, "Okay, if you're not fixed within two weeks of detox, too bad", or if you use again within a month, because you're back on the street and have no other options, then you can't access detox for a while, these are the realities that people are increasingly facing.

So I go back to needing to ensure there's adequate liveable income, that people have those supports and resources. As we've seen many times over, when those options are provided we see things like mental health suddenly improve—and I don't mean to sound simplistic here—we see people's options, in terms of wanting to be participating members of the community, change. All of those realities change. It's by no means a panacea, but it's a significant step in that direction.

● (1240)

The Chair: Thank you.

I will go now to Madam Bonsant. We can incorporate answers into further questions.

[*Translation*]

Ms. France Bonsant (Compton—Stanstead, BQ): Good day.

Since becoming a member of this committee, I've learned that funding is an ongoing problem. As an opposition party, we call this a fiscal imbalance. We succeeded in having this issue mentioned in the Speech from the Throne and we intend to work on this problem.

I have no questions for you at this time. I just want you to know that if you do have any messages that you would like to pass along, now is the time to do so. You have a lot to say, Ms. Lakeman. Now is the time to speak up.

[English]

Ms. Lee Lakeman: Thank you.

I guess I'd like to come back to a concept that's disappearing, just to make my point about the danger we're in.

Ms. Torsney, I'm sure you'll agree, is not a conservative force within the country on women's issues. She said "those women at risk, or some women at risk for violence against women". It was a well-intended sentence; however, I'd like to point out that violence against women is a force against all women in the country, and all women in the country are at risk. There's a way in which government policy is creating the illusion that there is a small number of women somewhere—possibly uneducated, possibly intoxicated, possibly out at the wrong time of night, possibly wearing the wrong thing, or married to the wrong person—who somehow or other are part of an infinitesimally small group of women who are being subjected to violence.

I can assure you that the history of the last 30 years' work is that it's you and me who we're talking about. There isn't any woman in the room who isn't subject to violence against women, whose life is not affected by the fear of being punched out, raped, and left in the street. Until that concept is taken seriously and we're treating ourselves and the women we're talking about with the same dignity, the same access to social programs, privacy, confidentiality, and confidence....

I'm sorry, I don't mean to impugn what you were saying. I just thought it was a great example that we're beginning to talk as though it were somebody else.

There are no longer adequate services available to Canadian women, and there is no longer enough government energy going into changing this situation.

The Chair: Thank you.

Cheryl.

Ms. Cheryl Hotchkiss: It's extremely important, the comments that have been made about domestic policy. I think that is critical, and this committee has a strong responsibility to take what you're hearing today forward to the rest of the government. But I think there's also a role for Canada internationally.

Our economic policies, our trade policies, and so on have a dramatic impact on women's lives in other countries. They have a dramatic impact on why women are trafficked into Canada. They also ensure that women can come to Canada to find safety, to find what they need for their families. But we have a problem, in that our immigration system is also under attack. The safe third country agreement is a good example of how women are going to have a hard time coming here to find some safety from countries where there is severe violence.

So I think there's a role for Canada internationally. We do great at the UN and say lots of great things, but our economic policies abroad, our foreign policy, our trade policy, and the trade agreements we enter into must have women's rights at the heart of them.

• (1245)

The Chair: Thank you.

Tina.

Ms. Tina Schoen: I think we need to consider why feminism has become a dirty word, and value the history of the feminist movement that has brought us to this room today. It scares me when I hear organizations like mine—which goes back 20 years—talking about needing to change our name from Cowichan Women Against Violence to something more generic, in order to access funding.

I would like to know that this committee will stand firm in its resolve to support women's programs and the grassroots women's programs that have historically made such a difference in our communities.

The Chair: Gina, a brief reply.

Ms. Gasongi (Gina) Simon: We didn't get into all the different levels of violence, there are so many, but one of the factors that's glaring in the face of the Canadian government right now is the escalation in HIV/AIDS. Among aboriginal women it's gone over the cliff. When it comes to drugs, it's so bad now in the aboriginal communities that the Assembly of First Nations is meeting right now at the Crown Plaza, and they've passed a resolution to make a joint effort to stop the drugs from infiltrating the reserves.

When you talk about drugs, addictions, and stuff, the first thing they're going to is the spirit. We're saying the spirit of our people is in such disarray. Then you get to the physical. What you're seeing is the physical, but no one has yet seen the spirit being wounded.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Crowder, it's your turn next.

Ms. Torsney, did you want a quick comment?

Hon. Paddy Torsney: Yes.

I apologize if I somehow misspoke and it came out wrong. I was actually thinking of people, it could be women specifically, living with someone or in the same household as someone who is a substance user. They are very much more at risk. That could be in the toniest neighbourhoods or the poorest neighbourhoods, aboriginal neighbourhoods, immigrant neighbourhoods, and every other household. It has no bearing on anything.

I just wanted to clarify that. That's where I was thinking of women being more at risk.

Ms. Jean Crowder: I'm going to invite you to leave us with some firm concluding comments.

Tina is from my community, and I've been saddened over the last couple of years to watch Cowichan Women Against Violence struggle with their funding and have to do all kinds of fundraising activities that are taking away from their mandate of serving the women, children, and families in our community.

One of the big issues that comes up is ongoing sustainability. Many women's organizations have done brilliant work, yet after the funding runs out, there's no implementation. It's just wrong to put all of that life energy into these services and products that the women's organizations are working on, yet they're not funded on an ongoing basis.

I wonder if you would leave us with some parting remarks to carry us forward in this work.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Ms. Lee Lakeman: I just want to pick up one point that I failed to make over the course of the presentations.

I think I would draw your attention to drugs and prostitution, in that they are now indications of a huge informal, if not illegal, economy that's being generated because of the lack of access to welfare and guaranteed liveable incomes. Those are not separable things. One causes the other.

We're clearly facing large numbers of the young, in particular, and certainly women, moving beyond access to social programs. They are now living under informal rule, not under government control. It's a hideous reality that is different from what it was 30 years ago and that we have to take into account in any of this planning. So I'd point that out to you. For me that means, for instance, that the question of prostitution is enormously more difficult than it was 30 years ago.

I definitely want to reinforce your point about core funding. If you don't achieve anything and you achieve a significant bundle that is made available to front-line, anti-violence groups on the basis of their attachment to a fight for women's equality, not services—it's not separable from services....

I'm aware that it sounds self-serving to fight for the funding of national women's groups, but I think it's significant that CASAC, for instance, has no national funding. I cannot fly to Ottawa on the basis of our group's decisions to come and lobby you. I'm not in a position to do that. I'm not in a position to conduct lobbying efforts against the federal government. Neither is anybody else who's doing mainstay work on violence against women. And if we can't do that, you are left to what information is supplied you by police services—who, believe me, are not saying the same thing we are—and by right-wing groups who are arguing for a law and order agenda rather than a women's equality agenda. You are left with that as your only source of information.

It has led us down a black hole. Huge amounts of money are being spent on this question, but it is not being spent effectively or wisely.

I'll leave it there.

• (1250)

The Chair: Thank you.

Gina, and then Tina.

Ms. Gasongi (Gina) Simon: I just wanted to say on behalf of the aboriginal women in this country that we are very strong. It's that strength and our conviction that has brought us to exist to this day. We're getting educated. We're learning your language; we're learning your walk and your talk. We're learning this so that we can converse and strategize with you as to what would be most effective for our people.

But I say that we don't need experts parachuted in. Our women are experts. Our women have that strength. What I say is allow for our voice, allow for our input, allow for our opportunity at the table to speak on our behalf.

The Chair: Thank you.

Tina.

Ms. Tina Schoen: Just to follow through on some of the comments that have been made around the table—and thank you, Jean, for acknowledging the struggles of our organization—I'd like you to recognize the reality of our funding limitations.

I work in a shelter where we can have up to 12 women and kids in crisis who are supported by one front-line staff. We're a 24-hour staff. There's one front-line staff on to support the needs of the women and children. It's huge. It's never-ending. We have three-month wait lists in our counselling programs. Women are having to wait three weeks to get into a detox bed, and as anyone knows, if you're not able to enter detox at the moment you need it, then you often don't go.

Adequate core funding is essential.

The Chair: Kim, briefly.

Mrs. Kim Pate: I'd like to reiterate Lee's point about the ability of women's groups to actually access many of you.

It's been a huge concern for many of our groups that the very bodies that have the state authority, that have the resources, are the ones spending the greatest amount of time seemingly influencing criminal justice and social justice policies. So when we see whole groups of sometimes three police officers for every member of Parliament being able to come and lobby you around how they get to exercise their state-sanctioned authority with state resources, it flies in the face of really wanting to examine women's equality in a meaningful way.

I just want to leave you with the fact that we're here; we're really concerned. Obviously, most of us would like not to have to exist as organizations, except to continue to politically organize.

What we're seeing increasingly as the default is that increasing numbers of people, particularly women and children, are literally being dumped into our streets, and unless some of these issues are worked on, the only place, the only system that so far can't say no to them, is our criminal justice system. The only beds that we can't say are full are jail beds. That's what we're increasingly seeing.

There's been some really progressive change around how to try to limit that with the Youth Criminal Justice Act. We encourage you to look at some of those measures as well when you're looking at justice issues. But fundamentally, even that act.... We all recognize, including the bureaucrats and many of you around this table, that if these national standards aren't put in place, if the resources aren't in place for independently organized groups that are interested in substantive equality, like the independent women's movement, to be at the table, then you won't see any of those progressive measures continue to succeed.

• (1255)

The Chair: Thank you.

Cheryl, very briefly please.

Ms. Cheryl Hotchkiss: I just wanted to say that we know thousands and thousands of Canadian people are concerned about this. They reply to Amnesty calls. They've sent thousands and thousands of letters to Anne McLellan about concerns related to "Stolen Sisters". So they care. We know they care.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm going to have to bring this to an end. I think we would probably like to continue for a while.

I have to reiterate to you, this committee is two months old. We are currently in the process of gathering information, trying to prioritize our work for when we come back from the parliamentary break. I know your contribution today will be essential to our discussion.

I do not believe this is the end of our discussions with you. I suspect some of us will carry on, either as a committee, at subcommittees, or as individuals. But I want to thank you again for coming, for taking the time, and particularly for coming on short notice. It's been a struggle both for our clerk and for some of the staff to put this together, because we are a new committee and don't have the lists and the contacts.

I really want to thank you. This has been an extraordinarily helpful session, and we look forward to talking again.

We're adjourned.

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