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Chair

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi

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● (1530)

[*English*]

The Chair (Ms. Yasmin Ratansi (Don Valley East, Lib.)): Committee members, we are ready to begin.

We have before us Melanie Omeniho of the Métis National Council, and Jennifer Dickson and Ulrike Komaksiutiksak of the Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada.

Each witness has 10 minutes to present, and after that we will go into a Q and A, with committee members being given an opportunity to ask questions.

If you have provided us with briefs, then enhance your brief. If you haven't provided us with a brief and your 10 minutes are up, take the opportunity under the Q and A to enhance your presentation.

I would like to start with Melanie.

Ms. Melanie Omeniho (National Board Member, Women of the Métis Nation, Métis National Council): Good day, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for inviting us here. My name is Melanie Omeniho, and I'm one of the national representatives of Women of the Métis Nation. I would also like to bring greetings from our spokesperson, Rosemarie McPherson, who was unable to be here today, and from the rest of our national board.

We appreciate the opportunity we have to make this presentation to you today. We believe it's important that we are given these opportunities so we can make recommendations and help be part of the solutions for improving the lives of Métis women in Canada.

Through the empowerment of Métis women, we believe our nation is stronger, and the mosaic of Canada itself is also strengthened.

First, it is important that we give you brief details about who we are. The Women of the Métis Nation is a Métis women's collective body representing Métis women from the governing members of the Métis Nation and it's officially mandated by the government of the Métis Nation to speak and represent Métis women's agendas and perspective nationally.

The Women of the Métis Nation serves as an advisory body with the Métis Nation governance structures and within the Métis homeland. The Women of the Métis Nation retain a seat on our board of governors and within our cabinet at the Métis Nation. They are the only recognized representative body that meets and addresses the needs of Métis women specifically.

Women of the Métis Nation partners and works with the provincial Métis women's organizations in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario, which makes up our Métis homeland, and through these relationships we believe we're able to maintain the capacity and ability to identify the priorities that have been established by Métis women from across that homeland.

Women of the Métis Nation has worked to strengthen our capacity by building from the community level. We address issues by working through consensus. We have developed a set of principles and protocols that guide us when addressing the issues faced by Métis women, and we believe our strength lies in working as a collective by using our cultural and traditional values to effect change that is important to Métis women and to the Métis Nation as a whole.

Historically, Métis communities were matriarchal in nature and women were equal partners in the development of their communities—politically, socially, and economically. As women of the fur trade era prior to colonization, they worked beside the men in building the buffalo pounds and scouting during the hunts, interpreting and teaching, hauling and skinning meat, and in addition they prepared the hides, made products, raised their children, and provided economically and socially for their families in communities.

Métis women played key roles in relationship building and survival of the community through many challenging times. Through oral history passed on by our grandmothers, we were taught a sense of pride, accomplishment, and stubbornness that assisted us in forging forward in spite of the environmental and economic situations we sometimes faced.

We were taught that Métis women are the inspiration and the heart of our nation, allowing our Métis leaders to move forward. The reality is, in today's economy, Métis women live multi-barriered lives that affect our economic security and advancement. Several issues must be considered in the development of economic security for us.

Métis women face issues related to employment and underemployment. Factors affecting Métis women that we can readily identify in addition to employment are racism, health care, child care, marginalization of our priorities, child and family services, housing, poverty, education and training, safety, access to entrepreneurial business ventures, and our lack of political empowerment to change the policies that relate to our overall well-being.

Women of the Métis Nation is committed to creating awareness of the issues our women face and to encouraging and supporting their participation in the social, cultural, and economic development of the communities—regionally, provincially, and nationally.

We understand that our economic security will rely on our ability to identify the barriers, recognize our strengths, and find solutions to overcome our challenges. Some of the priorities we are currently addressing relate to family violence, education, retention of our Métis cultural and traditional knowledge, and Métis women's health and wellness.

We know the majority of Métis women live in large urban settings, with 69% of our women living in cities and towns. Of these, 42% of the Métis women who have children are lone parents. We should note that Métis women are often the working poor and are challenged to provide their families with housing by inflation and the costs that are added to the family units by fees and levies.

In 2001, 56% of Métis women 15 and over reported that they were in paid employment; however, 30% of Métis women have incomes below the low-income cut-off. The Canadian public lives under the misconception that we have free education, free health care, and free housing, but there is no free anything.

Métis people pay taxes, and for education and housing, just like all other Canadian citizens. For Métis women to identify and develop economic security, we need to address the lack of social mechanisms that affect the working poor. Our women often work in areas where their contributions are undervalued.

● (1540)

Métis women in the contemporary world have not always been engaged in creating solutions to change our life circumstances or conditions in which we live because we were marginalized. As a result, there is a gap in statistical data on issues facing Métis women.

The research that has been conducted has focused on the barriers facing first nations women. Métis women's oppression is not just due to a lack of resources from government but often can be identified as the lack of statistical information that is available.

In order that we address the many issues facing Métis women, we need to work in partnership with the government to address the area of data collection for Métis women. It is a priority for women of the Métis nation to seek the resources that we require to build on statistical information that exists so that we can stop being the forgotten segment of society and our issues will be better understood.

Métis people are a part of the proud, independent culture where we seek to find solutions to better our way of life by building on our strengths. As Métis women, we recognize that a part of our economic security will be accomplished by attempting to create mechanisms to empower Métis women by taking back our traditional role within society. One of our priorities is bringing together our older Métis women and young Métis women and creating a system of passing on their traditional knowledge.

These types of strategies will once again strengthen the role of our women for generations to come. As part of this work, we have recently undertaken small initiatives to assist our women in networking through the teaching of our traditional crafts. It is the cultural exchange that brings the older women together with the younger women, so that they are able to share their stories and teachings. In addition, we are able to assist young Métis women in developing their skills in traditional trades and build on the opportunities to engage in entrepreneurial programming so they can be self-sufficient.

It is our belief that through our work in traditional knowledge, our young women will be active leaders in the future. We will have them working beside the leaders of today so that they are stronger leaders for tomorrow.

In closing, I'd like to thank the committee for giving women of the Métis Nation the opportunity to have our voices heard, and I want to leave you with a Cheyenne proverb: “A nation is not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground. Then it is done, no matter how brave its warriors and how strong its weapons.”

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now go on to Ulrike. Are you sharing your presentation?

Ms. Jennifer Dickson (Executive Director, Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada): No, I'll give it.

The Chair: Okay, fair enough.

Jennifer.

Ms. Jennifer Dickson: I have printed some copies of this with some nice pictures on it, if people want it. Unfortunately, it's English and Inuktitut, not English and French, and I don't know what the process is, but would you like to have it?

The Chair: Committee members, would you like it distributed?

Pas de problème, madame? You don't want it. Fair enough.

It's normal for us to have English and French, but if anybody else wants to pick it up themselves, that's their prerogative.

Ms. Jennifer Dickson: Thank you, Committee Chair Yasmin Ratansi, for including the voice of Canada's Inuit women in the Standing Committee on Status of Women deliberations today. We're pleased to be with you.

Your agenda discussing the economic security of Canada's women is dear to the hearts of Inuit women and their families and communities. It is timely and relevant to everyone in the north, and particularly to the people Pauktuutit represents, the Inuit women of Canada.

The message I wish to stress today, the message I want you to take away from this presentation, is that the success of Canada's businesses, environmental activities, and investments in the north rests upon the social and economic well-being of the inhabitants of Canada's northern communities. The full participation of Inuit women in the northern economy is crucial, and this participation both depends on and results in healthy and viable communities. Commitment to engagement of and with Inuit women in all business and policy strategies is the strongest possible assurance of success in Canada's north.

Pauktuutit is committed to and engaged in Inuit women's economic development on several fronts. This afternoon I'll touch on traditional knowledge and intellectual property rights and our work to improve Inuit women's economic self-sufficiency, two initiatives that demonstrate the link between social cohesion and economic success in Canada's north.

First, though, in case this is your first introduction to Pauktuutit, let me tell you a little bit about our work. Inuit women are the vessels of culture, health, language, traditions, teaching, caregiving, and child rearing, factors of the basis of the Inuit culture. As such, Inuit women play an integral role in the economic life of northern communities and society.

Pauktuutit is the national voice for Inuit women in Canada, guided by a highly motivated board of directors of Inuit women elected from 10 clusters of communities across Canada's Arctic, as well as youth and urban representatives. Pauktuutit fosters awareness of Inuit women, works for equity and social improvements, and encourages their participation in the national life of Canada.

Pauktuutit leads and supports Canadian Inuit women in policy development in community projects in all areas of interest to them. Our mandate...you'll see more of that in this document, too, but I'm going to go fast because I'm told I'm going to be cut off at 10 minutes.

What have social conditions to do with economic success? Well, everything. Here's one example. For over 20 years Pauktuutit has been a leader in breaking the silence on the difficult topics of family violence and child sexual abuse in Inuit communities. There's a slide in this presentation from a recent report by Statistics Canada showing some disturbing figures.

In Nunavut, women are 10 times more likely to need to go to a shelter as a result of abuse than women anywhere else in Canada. Sexual offences are equally high, and domestic violence is at least twice the rate in Nunavut than elsewhere. It dramatically illustrates the extent of the violence a lot of Inuit women face today.

Violence contributes to the high rates of homelessness in Inuit communities. There are few safe shelters and little in the way of alternate housing. Inuit women who flee violence must often depend upon relatives and friends for short-term shelter. As such, homelessness is largely hidden in the north. It is found in the severely overcrowded homes where couch surfers sleep in shifts.

A substantial proportion of Inuit households contain more than one family. Although we do not have reliable current estimates on the number of homeless in the north, we do know that a large proportion of these are women and children. We urgently need more homeless shelters and more and better supported Inuit community social workers and mental health workers.

This overcrowding is a major problem in the north. We are often told that commitments and investments to build new and affordable homes will keep pace with growth, but the Inuit population is young and growing rapidly, and this is putting increasing pressure on the current stock of houses.

In 2001—that's almost eight years ago—close to 70% of houses in northern Quebec and about 55% of houses in Nunavut were considered extremely overcrowded. About one-quarter of all Inuit are living in dwellings that are in need of major repair as well.

With regard to education, income, and employment, we have both discouraging and encouraging numbers. For example, the 2001 census showed that almost 58% of adult Inuit had not completed high school compared with 31% of all adult Canadians. Currently, it's estimated that for every 100 students entering kindergarten in Nunavut, only 25 will graduate from grade 12.

I could go on and on. Unemployment rates are high, and the cost of living can be unbearable. For example, in Nunavik, the Inuit region in northern Quebec, food and basic retail items can cost between 44% and 100% more than in Montreal. This last winter in Pond Inlet, Nunavut, one litre of orange juice sold for $22, and Ocean Spray cranberry cocktail was selling for $42.

● (1545)

Quality food can be very expensive. Junk food is cheaper because it is often lighter and less expensive to ship. The shelf life for manufactured processed food is longer. In one small community in the western Arctic, food prices have been calculated to be 470% higher than in Ottawa.

Costs like these contribute to a poor diet, which in turn contributes to heart disease, diabetes, and tooth decay. Inuit women and children often bear the brunt of the impact of poverty and the concomitant health and social problems that occur. Pauktuutit firmly believes that encouraging Inuit women to become self-employed will improve not only their lives but the lives of their families and communities as well.

Where and how can economic development contribute? How can government and business provide leadership that can truly improve the social fabric and therefore the economic stability so important to their business interests in the north?

Inuit women have the ideas, creativity, commitment, and tenacity to succeed in business for themselves. What they may lack are business skills, technical information, and marketing contacts. Networking, mentoring, business partners, and access to funding opportunities would help in all these areas.

Intellectual property rights are a potential barrier to the economic self-sufficiency of Inuit women. In the fall of 1999, these concerns became pressing when the New York City fashion designer, Donna Karan, sent a buyer to the western Arctic to collect older, traditional Inuit clothing for inspection for her new fashion line. Pauktuutit was concerned that the amauti.... Do people know what an amauti is? It's a parka you pull on over your head with a great big hood in the back for your baby. You see Inuit women with their very special amauti. All the women across the north make them their own way, so when you see an Inuit woman wearing an amauti, you can tell where she's from, and it's a treasured garment. Come over to our office on Sparks Street and we'll show you some.

Pauktuutit was concerned that the amauti was destined to be another element of Inuit cultural heritage to be misappropriated. Without legal protection, the small-scale economic activities of Inuit seamstresses in remote communities would be undermined by mass production in the south. The amauti could go the way of the kayak, the parka, and the kamik.

Protecting the intellectual property of indigenous peoples is problematic. The current legal regimes are geared for commercial or economic rights over privately owned economic property. So if you own something, you can protect it, but if your community owns something, it's almost impossible.

Pauktuutit is keenly aware of the challenges of starting a business in remote Arctic communities, particularly for Inuit women. High costs of transportation, small markets, and high business operating costs all have an impact on northern business. Inuit women face additional challenges, because many of the programs and services available do not reflect our needs and priorities.

In partnership with INAC, Pauktuutit has developed a handbook and a three-day workshop that helps walk Inuit women through the business planning process. I would go on and on and tell you a little bit more about that, but I want to skip to the key thing.

The huge economic potential of the north can only be realized in the context of the social and economic strengths of the Inuit inhabitants. From resource extraction to mega-development pipeline construction projects, the success of northern industrial development will be judged by how it contributes to the social and economic well-being of the Inuit communities in its path.

Together, I know we can be creative and seek novel solutions to the issues I've outlined here today.

For small entrepreneurs in isolated communities, practical access to banking services and financial credit can be a barrier. Microcredit is a tool particularly well suited to tiny, one-person enterprises, especially those initiated by women. We're seeing that all across the world right now. The only place it isn't is in Canada. It is gaining attention worldwide and is worthy of assessment in a northern context. Cooperative banking is another alternative to be explored.

I'm so glad to see someone from Justice here today too. Intellectual property rights beg a solution. As I mentioned earlier, for Pauktuutit, this is an important matter. But all our work on this issue is pro bono at the moment. We lack the resources to pursue it to the degree that is warranted at the national and international levels. We have consulted on its status at WIPO, which is the World Intellectual Property Organization, which meets in Geneva three times a year and invites us all the time, but we either can't go or they send us a ticket at the last minute and we can't go prepared. It's ridiculous.

To date, with two or three notable exceptions, support for our work has come on a project-by-project basis from several Government of Canada departments. We applaud these funders and thank them. However, the urgency of the crises facing Inuit in remote northern communities cannot and will not be solved by relying solely on these partnerships. Support must extend beyond government sources. It is time for the private sector to step up as well.

● (1550)

Inuit women are the primary agents of change in Canada's north. Pauktuutit is engaged in a wide range of vital activities and projects that focus on community well-being. Pauktuutit plays an important role in knowledge translation, transforming technical, clinical, and scientific knowledge into information that can be acted upon at the community level.

Pauktuutit, however, is a small organization with limited capacity. Amazing achievements have been accomplished on remarkably small budgets, yet all too often we must turn down opportunities because we lack core capacity to support the initiative.

Given the many challenges that need to be overcome, it is vital that Canada's national government and private industry become much more involved in the health and well-being of Inuit communities.

As I close, I would like to offer Pauktuutit as a partner for government and business and remind us all that private sector interests are best served by ensuring social and economic stability in local communities.

Pauktuutit has 23 years in direct, democratic community representation and courageous engagement in sensitive issues. Pauktuutit has well-established relationships with key representatives of governments, agencies, academics, community leaders, and the private sector.

I could just go on and on talking about Pauktuutit, so I will just say *qujannamiik*.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will go to our first round of questions, the Q and A, which is seven minutes.

We'll start off with Mr. Pearson.

Mr. Glen Pearson (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to thank the three of you for coming. Your voices are authentic, and it means a lot to us that you've come in here and spoken to us on these issues.

The question I have is primarily for Ms. Dickson.

I direct a food bank in London, Ontario, but I'm also on the board of the Canadian Association of Food Banks. What we've been trying to do is get Canadian businesses and others in the food industry to look to transporting more food to regions such as those you're talking about.

I've done some exploring on those issues, and one of the things that I've found—and it would help me to just clarify—is there seems to be a real problem for senior women within your communities. I'm just trying to seek clarification. It seems to me that what we've found is that they have become the main caregivers.

Ms. Jennifer Dickson: Who?

Mr. Glen Pearson: Senior women—widows and others who are on pension.

They're the grandmothers, and they end up absorbing an inordinate amount of the care and responsibility, as opposed to what often happens in other parts of Canada.

I've done a bit of travelling to Africa, and we've seen the same kind of phenomenon, where the grandmothers end up with this. The problem is the grandmother is on a limited pension. I think in your communities it's the same. I also think members of the family tend to take advantage of that, because there's a steady supply of income that's coming in there, however big or small.

Before we go any further, I would like to find out if that is valid, if that is happening within your communities, and how serious you see it being. If it is serious, then I would like to ask some more questions.

Ms. Jennifer Dickson: It's a very valid observation. Yes, elders, Inuit women, are highly respected by their families and their communities, and yes, I think we'd all agree that there is a certain amount of taking advantage happening there.

However, they also carry a lot of the ancient traditional wisdom and are what we call the keepers of the light. They keep the carved stove, the *qulliq*, lit. Without them, it wouldn't be lit.

So it's a high-wire act. It's a balance, for sure. But yes, it is a problem.

● (1555)

Mr. Glen Pearson: Thank you.

In Sudan, for instance, it has actually become a form of abuse from family members. In many cases the women in Sudan, for instance, or probably even within your own communities, seek to do things like arts and crafts to try to start their own businesses. So we try, whenever we can, to help them start these micro-enterprises. But no sooner do they start becoming successful than families start becoming more dependent on that income.

Regarding your view about more private interest coming into these regions, if that does happen, how do you see that impacting people like senior Inuit women, especially the ones who are widows and are having to absorb so much of the care of their family? I'm interested in how you'd see it. As you say, just having government support isn't necessary. I think we would all agree with that. There needs to be more. We try to do the same in Africa all the time, but the particular cultural things we face make it very difficult.

Can I ask how you see the private sector actually weighing in on these particular issues, especially around women?

Ms. Jennifer Dickson: That's a huge question. I don't have any personal experience of their weighing in on it at all, on a direct level, but there are some private sector enterprises that do care about the community in which they are working and that do want stability in the communities.

One of the problems in the north, as everybody knows, is that most of the communities are fly-in only, and they're very remote and very isolated, so if there is a problem with one or two of the seniors.... First of all, the average age of the Inuit is 20, so you can imagine a community of 300 people of whom 150 are under 20. It's a very unusual dynamic to see. So having an outside company come in and say it is going to get involved with watching or monitoring or ensuring that anything happens...it is a very difficult, disruptive way of doing it. I don't mean disruptive necessarily in a negative connotation; it's just that it changes everything in that community.

I hear what you're saying, though. You don't want to put resources in the hands of somebody who then becomes a target for it.

Mr. Glen Pearson: Yes. That's a real issue.

Ms. Jennifer Dickson: It is a real issue. It's an issue in downtown Toronto too.

Mr. Glen Pearson: Yes, that's true.

Ms. Jennifer Dickson: It's an issue, and we all have to be aware of it and watch it and make sure that we protect people whose lives we are changing.

Mr. Glen Pearson: Do you two have anything to add to that from your own community?

Ms. Melanie Omeniho: Traditionally in our community, as Métis, the elderly people stayed home and took care of the children while the working-aged people went to work. As social dynamics have changed, more and more responsibility is put on our elders. I would tell you that, in some instances, it is elder abuse. Many of these grandmothers and grandfathers have fixed incomes, and they're trying to provide and care for their grandchildren and, in some instances, great grandchildren. It is really quite challenging.

I also want to tell you that they won't let you change it. They want to take care of their own children, and they will fight to take care of their own children, so in many ways we've tried to do some work at a regional level to help change policies and things so that when the family structure breaks down at that level, there are resources that come to those grandparents to help feed and take care of those grandchildren. We've lobbied really hard in some areas and have worked with the Métis children and family services organizations in our province to help change that so that there are supports coming to some of those families.

It's not all the way across the board, but we are working to do things to help provide those kinds of supports to our elderly people.

Mr. Glen Pearson: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Pearson, your time is up. I know you were on a roll.

We'll now go to Madam Demers.

● (1600)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nicole Demers (Laval, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ladies, thank you very much for joining us this afternoon.

Ms. Omeniho, you stated that you were lacking data on Métis women, and that you were trying to address the problem. That said, have you requested help from Status of Women Canada through its Women's Program?

[*English*]

Ms. Melanie Omeniho: Status of Women has not been all that receptive or open to Métis women, only because there has been a program through the Department of Canadian Heritage that just this coming year is going over to the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development—the aboriginal women's program. Status of Women, with their limited budget, would sometimes help us on a project-by-project basis, maybe at a regional level on one particular thing or another, but they have not been receptive or open to assisting us with things like data gathering or data collection up until this point.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nicole Demers: You stated that spousal assault was a serious problem and that there were many abuse victims in the community. Shelters for battered women have been set up on First Nation reserves. Do Métis women also have access to these kinds of shelters and, if so, does the system work the same way for them as it does for First Nation women? Do you live in the community at large?

[*English*]

Ms. Melanie Omeniho: It's different. Métis women often live in the large urban centres or towns. They have to use resources, especially in the area of family violence.

First off, I want to tell you that I think the definition of family violence in our community often needs to be broadened. Aboriginal women, including Métis women, suffer violence from all sorts of places. It isn't always initiated at a family unit level, to start with. When they have to go to shelters, they often go to the mainstream shelters. I've been an advocate for 20-some years for aboriginal women and Métis women in my community, and I want to tell you that when they go to the shelters at a mainstream level, it actually has two effects.

First, the mainstream women often assess their abuse based on the abuse these aboriginal women have suffered, which is often far more traumatic and aggressive. So many of the mainstream women will minimize the level of abuse they've suffered as a result of witnessing what Métis women have suffered. In that instance, I don't think it's always healthy.

But the other effect is that our women are often judged. Racism exists whether people want to admit it or not. Within those institutions, many of the workers will sit in judgment of our Métis women who go into those shelters. They are always watching them and judging them more harshly. If they need child care supports, they're not often given them, because they're afraid these women will abandon their children there, or they're afraid that alcoholism is prevalent in our community. If anybody goes out and comes back to the shelter that evening, they'll literally try to smell them and so on.

For some of our women, that's detrimental. If they're diabetic and have issues related to diabetes and are not eating properly—and often when you're in a crisis you don't—they can have odours that would be mistaken as a drinking issue. They haven't been drinking but in fact actually need support and medical attention to deal with their diabetes. Those women will be judged more harshly than a mainstream woman will be because it's based on the racism and biases people have towards aboriginal women.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nicole Demers: Thank you.

My question is directed to either Ms. Komaksiutiksak or Ms. Dickson.

You have published a guide entitled Journey to Success — Aboriginal Women's Business Planning Guide. Do you offer any other services to women who are interested in starting up a business? Do you have the capacity to offer such services? If not, have you taken advantage of the expanded and amended Women's Program at Status of Women Canada to apply for funding so that you can offer women the services they need to live independently?

● (1605)

[*English*]

Ms. Jennifer Dickson: Thank you.

We have a very small program, Journey to Success, which we help. It's a three-day program. We've developed all the materials, and it's all in Inuktitut. We do it in whatever communities we can afford to do it in. We help women become entrepreneurs. It's working, and it's very exciting. I could tell you stories, and they're wonderful.

The funding for it comes from INAC. None of it comes from Status of Women. Status of Women has been very supportive of us, though, I want to say. Through Heritage Canada we get $220,000 a year for core funding, which doesn't sound like much money, but it keeps a roof over our heads and allows us to buy the occasional computer. Status of Women also contributes a little bit to some of our abuse work. But the economic development work comes through INAC.

We have about 22 different projects. Almost all of our work takes place in the north. I'll bet you we have 15 different funders, two private sector foundations and several departments of the Canadian government.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nicole Demers: On the health front, like First Nations, are you also grappling with the problem of fetal alcohol syndrome?

You also mentioned micro-credit. How much money would you need initially to help women?

[*English*]

The Chair: Madame Demers, your time is finished.

Ms. Jennifer Dickson: I love that question. An initial amount that we would need? I don't know, but $10 million would be just fine.

The situation in Canada's high north is at crisis level. I'm not surprised at all that your colleague raised the Sudan. Anybody who studies Canadian demographics knows that what's happening with the Inuit community is at crisis level.

The Inuit women are truly the agents of change in the north. It would be wonderful if we were serious about microcredit and about establishing something within the current banking system. It wouldn't necessarily be Pauktuutit that needs to make this happen; we aren't the economists. But we would certainly love to facilitate it; we would certainly love to help.

There's isn't a small town I know of in the north that doesn't have 20 or 25 women who, with just a little bit of help—I'm talking about microcredit and even about training—could help support their community. We all know what happens. When women get their feet under them, they don't just support themselves and buy a new car. They support the children, they support the schools, and they support the health system.

So I'm a big fan of it. I wasn't being facetious about the $10 million, but I don't know what it would take. It wouldn't take a lot. People are doing it in third world countries.

There are fewer than 60,000 Inuit in Canada. There are ridings in downtown Toronto that have more people than that in them. It's a solvable problem, and it would be just so wonderful if the government took it on and said let's make this happen.

The Chair: Thank you. I have to move to the other person to ask a question, I'm sorry.

Ms. Jennifer Dickson: I just wanted to say concerning the FASD question that we're very involved in it. It's one of our key files.

The Chair: Okay.

Ms. Smith, for seven minutes.

Mrs. Joy Smith (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Thank you so much. It's wonderful to see you here today. Some of your comments are very insightful and very helpful to us as a committee on the status of women. Your enthusiasm and your creativity come forward as you're speaking, and you can see your dedication to what you're doing. Thank you for taking the time to come today.

I would like to ask Ulrike Komaksiutiksak a question. You haven't had a chance to speak. I wondered whether you could take a few minutes to tell this committee what is in your heart and what you wanted to say to the committee today.

Ms. Ulrike Komaksiutiksak (Director of Programs, Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada): I wanted to follow up on some of the discussion that has been happening.

I think we have to look at a multi-faceted approach. It's not just starting up businesses; we have to take a look at everything, from early childhood development to speaking for Inuit communities on the high rate of teenage pregnancy and sometimes the parenting that's involved in supporting a young teenage mom, which may fall to the grandmother or to the elder. There are real reasons why some of these factors are happening. So it's a multi-faceted approach.

Our Inuit Women in Business initiative at Pauktuutit takes a look at business development programs that are already out there. Inuit women aren't accessing them at the community level, and we address those gaps. Day one of the workshop is taking a look at whether you want to be an entrepreneur or not and what that entails. Some people will finish the workshop and go on to start their business. Other people will not want to do it, as it takes five years to get a successful business going, but they may want to go back to school.

We have to take a look at the housing crisis and infrastructure, or if women want to be involved in the economy but the day care shuts down because the building doesn't meet safety standards. These are the kinds of things we have to look at. Or if the day care wants to serve country food, and many of our people depend on country food, but it might not be allowed in the day care because it has to be flown to Toronto to get safety inspected, depending on which Inuit community it is. I would say to the committee that we need to address it with a multi-faceted approach.

When we speak in terms of the Status of Women, right now Pauktuutit is working on culturally relevant models to address abuse in the way that communities see it to reduce the incidents of violence in our communities and the tolerance of it.

● (1610)

Mrs. Joy Smith: I have another question. I only have seven minutes, but I'm glad I asked you. I can tell you were just waiting to tell us, and this is very good.

We're very proud of the fact that Status of Women right now is trying to get women in all sectors of society to have full participation. There's been a lot of money put into programming. You can get an application through the government to initiate funding for programs.

What strikes me is that a lot of your programs are grassroots and very helpful to women on the ground. For instance, when you said there's a lot of young pregnancies and young women needing to find out how to parent, about nutrition, and things like that, have you applied for the funding in this area? This would be ideal for you.

Ms. Jennifer Dickson: We're in very close conversation with our colleagues at the Status of Women, and we do discuss potentials and they do tell us. I don't know if this committee knows this, but I mentioned earlier that we get our core funding from Heritage Canada, which is the other part, but that's all changing. They're losing that, and it's going to INAC now. I'm told that we will have less access to Status of Women.

Mrs. Joy Smith: Who told you that?

Ms. Jennifer Dickson: The Status of Women people.

Mrs. Joy Smith: Who are those Status of Women people? I'm on the committee and I've never been told that. How would you have less access?

Ms. Jennifer Dickson: The public servants who we work with are saying, "We had a fund last year to look at this, that, and the other, but we don't have that fund this year, so don't bother."

Mrs. Joy Smith: Did they tell you about the new funding?

Ms. Jennifer Dickson: No. I don't know about any new funding with the Status of Women.

● (1615)

Mrs. Joy Smith: I'm telling you today that there is funding for women who start on-the-ground programs. What we're trying to do is make sure that there are pockets of money that you can apply for. It's more than pockets of money; it's millions of dollars, actually. The program funding that was there is still there, and then we added $5 million on top of that.

We want to see if people do apply for it. Certainly, we would encourage you to do that. I'm hearing from all across Canada from different associations that are saying, "Thank you. We've never been funded before." They just have this little program working with parents to teach them how to properly feed their children. A lot of volunteer stuff has been done for years. Someone said something about having that little bit of money was a great asset because people use that money very effectively. I would encourage you, because I'm here.

Ms. Jennifer Dickson: I will, before this day is out.

Mrs. Joy Smith: Please, you should take a look at it at Status of Women. There's no guarantee you will get all the things you want, but apply for it.

Ms. Jennifer Dickson: It's on the website?

Mrs. Joy Smith: The application form is on the website.

The other thing I wanted to ask about was your very interesting presentation, Melanie, on Métis women identifying the barriers, recognizing your strengths, and finding solutions. You said that one of the goals was to bring down barriers. Then you started to cite some of the barriers. I would agree with you, racism is there, alive and well.

What are some of the things you're doing right now to make people aware this is happening and that it is unacceptable? How do you teach the victims of racism to realize who they are and that they don't have the problem but the other person does? Are there any programs or anything else for this?

Ms. Melanie Omeniho: There are things that we do to work on issues like that. Actually, I have to tell you, from a national level, that most of these things happen at the regional or provincial levels. For instance, I come from Alberta, so I can speak about the things there that I really know well. We sit on the chief of police's hate crimes committee, which helps develop awareness so that we can let our people know how they can access the things they need when a hate crime is perpetuated against them. Most of the time our community is desensitized; they believe racism is part of their everyday life, so they don't respond to it. So we're trying to change these things.

We are involved and proactive in the area of human rights, and we have tried to bring awareness about human rights and the violations of some of those rights that have gone on. But the biggest challenge we have—and it remains so today—is that a lot of the racism is actually done in systemic ways, where policies and things we're not involved in developing are actually developed based on racist values and insights. So it's a matter of us being able to identify and put our finger on those things to help work towards changing them. I mean, when we see obvious things, such as when they used the face of an aboriginal woman for target practice in Saskatoon, we were able to bring public attention to that and help change that. It wasn't a picture of an aboriginal woman, but it was somebody dressed to appear as an aboriginal woman, which they used for target practice in the police gun ranges in Saskatchewan.

So there are things like that, which we continually work to change, but it's hard to work inside those institutions to find exactly where those policies are that need to be changed. Often we meet with some resistance to changing them, because the one thing I've learned about Canada is that nobody wants to admit to racism. As long as nobody says there is racism, it can exist. So it's really challenging to go and do that later.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Dickson, I just want to clarify if you said you used to receive funding from Heritage Canada and that the funding has gone to INAC.

Okay, because I think Ms. Smith was telling you that Status of Women would have funding on its website and also how to figure out how to access that funding.

Correct, Ms. Smith?

Ms. Jennifer Dickson: Thank you for that clarification. I appreciate that.

The Chair: Thank you.

We now go to Ms. Mathyssen for seven minutes.

Mrs. Irene Mathyssen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you very much for the information. It's so wonderful to have you here and to be able to have this dialogue.

I hope, Ms. Dickson, that you'll follow up with the committee. I'd be very interested to find out how successful you were in regard to that funding. I think that would be an important thing for the committee to know.

I'm very interested in the things that have been presented, and I wanted to ask Melanie a question. You talked about the need for statistical information, when Ms. Demers asked you about that. What statistical information would be most useful in achieving the goal of addressing the issues facing Métis women?

● (1620)

Ms. Melanie Omeniho: We actually have been working with Stats Canada to try to pull out whatever stats they have from their available sources. But one of the issues that happens with Métis people—an issue that we like to call the "Métis identifier", because of a lack of a proper term for it—is that we don't know what health services are missing or what health services aren't being resourced, because nobody will ask if you're Métis. I can give you several examples. If you're a first nations person, they immediately ask you or make the request, because there are resources allocated for first nations people to pay for health care services, but if you're Métis, they don't ask that question. They tell us it's racist to ask us if we're Métis. Then those stats aren't collected and we don't know.... From a community level, we know that children don't have the same access to health care services. Sometimes it's because people don't know where the health care services are, or women won't access them, or the services are not affordable. There are many things. We're only assuming why those things are actually in existence.

Even in the work we've done on homelessness, for instance, which has been a big issue, people won't ask if you're aboriginal when they do the homeless count in our communities. They won't ask if you're Métis, they won't ask if you're first nation, because it's racist. So they have volunteers who go around on homeless-count days to ask if you have somewhere to sleep at night. Then there's a little ticky box saying whether or not you're aboriginal. If that volunteer thinks a person is aboriginal because they physically look aboriginal, they'll mark the ticky box. If the person doesn't visually look like they're aboriginal, they won't mark it, because they won't ask, as they say it's racist.

I want to tell you, as a Métis person, I'm very proud of who I am. If anybody asks me what my nationality is, I have no problem ever telling them, nor am I ever offended when somebody asks me what my culture is. In fact, I'm always happy to share my identity, and I'm very proud of that. My grandmother was proud of that, my great-grandmother was proud of who we were, and I've raised my children to be proud of who they are. So nobody is ever going to feel like you're committing racism against me if you ask me who I am and where I come from.

Mrs. Irene Mathyssen: Thank you.

I noted in the data that only 5% of Métis women, and I say only 5%, were able to converse in their aboriginal language.

I wonder if everyone could answer this. How important is language to enhancing the quality of life of Métis people and Inuit people? What is the effect of the loss of the language funding? We've seen that disappear. Does it impact negatively?

● (1625)

Ms. Melanie Omeniho: For us and Métis, Michif is our national language. It is one of the languages that is being lost and could possibly become extinct, because there are fewer and fewer Michif speakers all the time.

Our language is a part of our culture; that's what makes us who we are. Our language is a living language; it's a language made up of verbs. If somebody were to tell you a story in our language, you will see a bunch of people sitting in a room who understood the language just roar with laughter at the story. If they were to translate it into English, it wouldn't sound funny any more. So it really is a living language and a part of who we are, a part of our culture. It is being lost, as we have fewer and fewer Michif speakers who can share and translate it.

In fact, in our Métis communities in my generation, my grandmother only spoke Cree and my great grandmother never spoke any English at all, only a Cree-French mix, which is Michif. We understood everything she said, but we were not allowed to speak it, because it would identify us and target us for the racism that came to be. And it was because they had been in the residential schools and had the experience that their languages were bad, so they would only talk in their language amongst themselves and family. For my generation, often the words we learned were from the dirty jokes that were told, in words we weren't supposed to say, but they were the words we would pick up.

So it's really important now that we develop programming, and we are trying to do that, so that our young people will be able to take that part of our culture and grow with it. Without our language, we lose a piece of our culture and our heritage.

Ms. Jennifer Dickson: I agree.

For the Inuit, to go back to what you were asking about a few minutes ago, the data are abysmal, as everybody knows. When people travel to the Far East, to China and Japan, and say that the people there are all the same people, it's that offensive when people lump together all of Canada's aboriginals, including first nations and Inuit. I won't speak for the Métis, but I do know that the Inuit feel very offended never to be disaggregated from first nations. So that's my response on the data.

The language is critical. Inuktitut is a very difficult language to learn. They say it's slightly easier to learn than Mandarin Chinese, but not by much. I've been working on it every single day, all day, for four years, and I'm hopeless. I can say *quyanamiik* and several things. Again, it doesn't translate; it transliterates. So the humour is lost, or the meaning of a story is lost, or the tradition is lost, when you try to translate it. I don't want to get into who is funding what, but I think it's a huge loss for the world to lose this language, if it is lost. There are so many spiritual truths that are carried on by it.

Pauktuutit did manage to scrape up $50,000 last year and reproduced a book called *The Inuit Way*, which I think all of you have, as we sent it to every single member of Parliament in the fall. So read it, as it's about the Inuit culture.

The Chair: We now go to the second round, for five minutes.

Madam Jennings.

Hon. Marlene Jennings (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair. *Merci beaucoup*.

Thank you so much for sharing your wisdom and experiences, and all of the facts.

I want to get to one of the points that has been raised by both you, on behalf of Inuit, and you, on behalf of Métis, and that is the fact that there is a serious lack of statistical tracking. The reason I am interested is because up until recently my own community was significantly underreported by the Stats Canada census.

In the mid-nineties I actually participated as a sort of honourary chair of a task force headed by a professor from McGill, Jim Torczyner. He was able to get money from the federal government to actually conduct a census using...and to redefine "black" in order to ensure that all people of African origin were captured there.

To give you an example, in Canada there are people who define themselves as Brazilian, but they are black. There was a 40% underreporting of them. That then meant the government resources—whether municipal, provincial, or federal—health services, educational services to African-descendant communities in Canada were underfunded. It also meant that the organizations in the communities themselves did not have a scientifically proven statistical basis to show the case for more moneys for certain services, etc. I think this is a major point for all of our first nations, whether they are first nations aboriginals, Inuit, or Métis. That's the first thing. This is something this committee may wish to explore a bit more and actually make some recommendations on.

The other point where I wanted to get more information from each of you is on the issue of racism. Racism is alive and well and thriving in Canada. Discrimination is as well. I think if we don't recognize it, then we are not on the road to finding solutions to it. I understand that people have an auto-defence mechanism. When we talk about it, a lot of people start to tense up because they think they're being accused.

● (1630)

The Chair: Madam Jennings, you'd better pose the question.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: How much time do I have? Seven minutes?

The Chair: You have one minute and 30 seconds left.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Sorry. I didn't realize I had such a short time. I thought it was seven minutes.

My question is, are you able to find any kind of government support in order to deal with that as an issue, whether it's in transitional housing, in education, or in your advocacy? Are you able to find any kind of support, financial or otherwise, from government?

The Chair: You have one minute to answer. Go ahead.

Ms. Jennifer Dickson: We have not found any government support to talk about racism at all. But I must confess that we have so many crises in the north that this isn't one of the priorities at the moment. We haven't looked hard for it, but we would love to see it, if there is any.

I couldn't agree more...and this is an offer to help, if you're interested in getting the right stats out there. Everything you said about that absolutely resonates with us.

I'll just give you one example: teenage suicide. People say aboriginal teenage suicide is seven times higher than regular Canadian suicides. Well, if you disaggregate for Inuit, it's 18 times higher. I don't know a single Inuit family that hasn't had a teenage suicide. Just imagine that in your own life. That is one example; I could give you all kinds of them.

The situation in the north is at a crisis level, and Canadians don't know it. The reason Canadians don't know it is because of stats.

The Chair: Would you like to add something, Ms. Omeniho?

Ms. Melanie Omeniho: I would say that there has been no government funding or support. We do work with the Northern Alberta Alliance on Race Relations to try to create awareness around racism. We work with young people to try to change the attitudes when they're young, so they don't always perceive us as the drunken guy in the gutter.

The Chair: Thank you.

We go now to Mr. Stanton, for five minutes.

Mr. Bruce Stanton (Simcoe North, CPC): I'm with you, Madam Chair.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: You're benefiting from my lack of knowledge.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Before I start, I would like one clarification. You briefly talked about the expanded funding programs under Status of Women Canada. I think you'd be interested to know that one of the key priorities under that program is in fact for aboriginal women. There were three different areas: visible minorities; aboriginal; immigrant and senior women. In fact, there were four distinct areas that take a priority in those areas. It's a larger pool of funds, so I think it's worth checking out.

Back to Melanie, if I may. In your presentation, you made a statement and I wonder if you could expand on it a bit for us. This is in the section where you're talking about the go-forward economic security issue. You said:

> As Métis women we recognize that a part of our economic security will be accomplished by empowering Métis women and taking back our traditional role within our own society.

Could you talk about taking back a traditional role, what that means, and connect the dots as to how that would expand economic conditions and circumstances for Métis women?

Ms. Melanie Omeniho: First off, traditionally and historically, Métis women were always workers in the home. They were always a provider of an economic source in their home for many, many generations. That's a reality of who we were. We were a very matriarchal society. Very often, the men would leave our communities for months, and sometimes years, and the women would take care of all the necessary things that would provide for their well-being and their existence in that community.

Part of when we say we need to empower women and take back our traditional role—and I'm not blaming anything or anybody—but the reality was that once there was more European contact with our communities, with the churches getting involved in our communities, the attitude started to change amongst our men. It went to more of a patriarchal kind of role. Many of our men...and statistically I can't prove this, but I believe that's part of where the violence and aggression in our communities comes from. Some of the traditional ways and cultural things that we were taught have shifted, and now we need to shift back to where we were.

Often, women were the mainstay of the family and they provided the majority of the income and economy that it took for that family to exist. They were the ones who saved the pockets of money so there was money when they got older. That was the role they had within our community.

If we can bring some of those cultures, traditions, and values, and also find a place in our communities where our men could be comfortable with the empowering roles that women play, I think we will be a healthier community for it.

● (1635)

The Chair: Mr. Stanton.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Do I have any time left, Madam Chair?

The Chair: You still have one and a half minutes.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Okay.

I'll defer to Madam Davidson then, if I can.

Mrs. Patricia Davidson (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Thank you.

I have a very brief question, and Melanie, it's for you as well.

In your brief, you referred to 42% of Métis women who have children and are lone parents. I think that's an extremely high number. I have a couple of questions around that.

Do you know what the national standard would be on non-Métis or non-aboriginals? I don't know that number and I don't know if you do or not. I'm assuming it would be much lower than that.

Ms. Melanie Omeniho: I don't have that here. I'm sorry.

Mrs. Patricia Davidson: All right.

Getting back then to the purpose of the study, which is economic security, can you think of anything that would specifically address that specific group of Métis women that would be of benefit to address their economic security? Maybe it would be different for Métis women as a whole.

Ms. Melanie Omeniho: Actually, all I know is that the only way we're going to develop economic security for Métis women is to start, even when they're young women, and work with them to help them understand the ways of how to live. They should be able to collect and gather in their way so that they can save for economic security when they have children.

The reality is that we're talking about these things, like the 42% lone families, and we say that we are underemployed. When you take into consideration...and I can use myself as an example. I have three daughters and all but one is of post-secondary age. How does one then afford to pay for all the tuition and things that are needed to go to university so that our daughters will have economic security? Those are things we are going to have to work toward. We know there's no quick answer for any of those things. It's going to be one step at a time for us.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Deschamps.

Ms. Johanne Deschamps (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

First of all, I'd like to thank you for accepting our invitation to come here and talk to us about the rather bleak situation in your communities. Your account was most touching. The women in your community experience serious hardship, particularly on the economic front. You mentioned that assault is a common problem, and you alluded to cases of incest.

You also said that the suicide rate was 18% or even higher. Which age group is most affected? Are young people more vulnerable? Are they the ones who opt for this unfortunate course of action? Are they driven to suicide because they have few dreams or ambitions? To what can we attribute such a high suicide rate?

● (1640)

[*English*]

Ms. Jennifer Dickson: Thank you.

The suicide rate I was referring to is for teenage suicide. And I didn't say 18% or 17%; I said 17 times higher than the regular Canadian numbers. It's just outrageous.

There are all sorts of theories. Most of them are boys. Hunting is changing in the north due to diminished resources, and also due to climate change, due to laws changing, and due to the expansion in the number of human beings.

We are now in the third generation after people were sent away to residential schools, and the problems the residential schools caused are multiplying because of that. We're very involved in the residential school problem, in what we call ongoing service to the people. That's rather than just writing them a cheque. And that's a big thing. It's third generation now, and it is a problem.

By the way, it's not just Canada. There are a whole lot of third world places right now where teenage suicide is off the scale. So it is a serious problem globally. The point I was making was that Canada is not immune from it, and the Inuit youth are very stressed out.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: Ms. Meniho, is the suicide rate higher in your community?

[*English*]

Ms. Melanie Omeniho: I wouldn't be able to give you that statistically. That is one of those things they have never tracked for us. I don't think many of the statistics we compare to the first nations.... I believe there's a higher rate of lower education, suicide, FASD, and those issues. We work on those issues, but we don't actually have stats.

I want to tell you one little thing about the stats and why they're important to us. It's not just so we can say to government or to somebody that these are the stats, so this is a problem. Through the analysis of those stats, sometimes we can assess the root cause of a problem. Then, rather than trying to fix it with a band-aid, we as a community can develop a solution based on the root cause.

The Chair: You have half a minute, so ask a quick one.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: You spoke of what was most basic for a society, any society, namely the importance of defending and preserving its traditions. It's a matter of never forgetting where you come from. This sense of belonging is a core community value. I come from Quebec and as a people, we also share this sense of belonging.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Deschamps.

[*English*]

We're going to go to Mrs. Mathyssen, for five minutes.

Mrs. Irene Mathyssen: Thank you, Madam Chair.

In the 2006 strategy proposal, Pauktuutit noted that the poor quality of housing and the overcrowded conditions had a devastating effect on health and social well-being. I wondered if you could talk about the impact of poor housing on the economic security of women. Do Métis women face the same difficulties? And finally, does Canada need a national housing program, something to address this?

Ms. Jennifer Dickson: Yes, Canada needs a national housing....

I'll just describe housing in the high north a little bit. Sometime in the fifties, somebody designed a house that they thought might work up there, and everybody's putting them up there all over the place. I think they drive by in airplanes and just drop them. I don't know where they belong, but they don't belong in the north, because they're airtight, which means that if you have 17 people living in one and 11 of them smoke, then every single two-year-old in the house has an upper respiratory disease. If you look at the sick kids' hospitals across Canada, you'll see that 80% of the two-year-olds in all those sick kids' hospitals are from the north. That's just one thing. That's just health directly related to the tightness of the house.

In terms of numbers of houses, there aren't anywhere near enough. In terms of the design of the houses, they're not designed with the north in mind. If I've gone out and shot a seal, I bring it home and butcher it on my kitchen floor, which has no drain in it. You can just imagine that sort of.... And I'm not being dramatic; that's the way it is.

The houses are not designed with the Inuit culture in mind. Often you open the front door, you're in the living room, and it's minus 47 degrees outside, so there goes all your heat.

The housing is a huge problem. If you did one thing in the north, and it was housing, that would help. So, yes, let's get a national housing strategy. Absolutely.

● (1645)

Mrs. Irene Mathyssen: Okay.

Ms. Melanie Omeniho: In our Métis communities there are a few social housing programs. The waiting lists for most of them are five to six years long. And housing is a major issue for Métis, especially Métis women.

I come from Alberta. Housing is actually at a crisis level. You couldn't buy a house if you had $1 million in the bank on most good days in Alberta, and I'm not kidding. Most two-bedroom apartments are $1,700 or $1,800 a month to rent. So when you look at our women, who are making $7 to $8 an hour in jobs, often the only way they possibly can afford to live is by risking their safety and the safety of their children by living with people who may not always live the quality of life you would want your children exposed to. And many families live together in homes so they can survive. It's not the best situation.

The Chair: You have three and a half minutes.

Mrs. Irene Mathyssen: You were talking about the number of one-parent families and the problems that creates. Would a national child care system, something to provide support for these young moms, be something we should be aiming at as a federal government?

Ms. Jennifer Dickson: Yes, if it isn't pre-designed and one-size-fits-all. The needs for early childhood in the north—well, anywhere, but in the north is where we're talking about today—vary from town to town and from community to community. But, yes, if we looked after the...can we start at prenatal? If we looked after the early childhood, that would help a lot.

Ms. Ulrike Komaksiutiksak: I was going to say, too, that there are various ways of looking at early child care. For example, some people down south will put their children in day care, some will put them in home day care families, some will have grandparents who take care of their kids. Programs should not be one-size-fits-all, and they should be community driven. What are the needs of the community? How does the community see how it could address its early child care?

Ms. Melanie Omeniho: I want to tell you that as far as lone-parent families go, child care is a really important issue. In many of our communities, and I've heard this right across our homeland, it's advisable that if you're planning to have children, prior to even getting pregnant you should put your name into a day care so that you can have a day care spot when your child is 18 months old. So you're basically looking at a three-year wait to get your child into day care in several of our provinces.

So child care is important, but for lone-parent families, I also want to tell you that child care is only a small component of it, because we've always gone to work and stuff. There need to be other supports in place. I told you 69% of Métis people live in urban centres, and they've moved away from what our cultural communities were. So they lose their culture and their connectedness. Grandma doesn't live next door any more. We need to make sure that there are supports for lone parents.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go to Ms. Grewal for five minutes.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

And thank you for your very insightful comments.

I'd like to continue with the same question that Ms. Davidson was asking, about urban Métis women with children and that 42% are lone parents. Why are urban Métis women more likely to be lone parents than their rural counterparts?

● (1650)

Ms. Melanie Omeniho: First off, I'd have to answer by telling you this: I don't know that they're different from the rural. I'm not sure what the stats are for the rural, but I know that of the urban ones who were statistically studied, 42% were lone-parent families.

In our culture, there's a real value placed on life, on who we are, and...we have nothing to analyze statistically for this, but it is my belief, just being a part of my community for as long as I have been, that young women in our communities who may get pregnant at a very young age do not get rid of their babies. They won't give them up for adoption. They don't use abortion as a form of birth control. So they give birth to those babies because those are values we were taught.

As women in our communities, our whole premise of our worthiness is based on motherhood. We're taught from the time we're very young that being a mother is important. Even when we go to meetings now, if we sit and hear an elderly Métis woman tell us about her 13 kids and her 45 grandchildren and her 85 great-grandchildren, we sit in awe. We never say, gee, how hard was it to do that? It's something of admiration for the rest of us that this wonderful woman was able to achieve those things. Those values are perpetuated even in our young women today.

So what I believe is that many of them make choices that may not be made in other cultures. So they often have those children. Then we, of course, have problems with the child welfare system, where we're overrepresented in those systems and they're too young to take care of them and they don't have....

As I said, we used to live in small communities where auntie was next door and grandma was across the street and everybody was close to us. Well, now they're living in an urban centre where everybody is each man unto himself and may the strongest guy survive. So there are no supports in place to help those young girls raise those children.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: In your presentation you also indicated that the experiences of Métis women are often different from those of Indian women. Can you please elaborate on that statement?

Ms. Melanie Omeniho: I want to be really clear. It's not that one is better than the other or anything like that, but they are different.

Many of the first nations women, other than in maybe the past two decades, have come from reserve communities where there were structures in place and homes in place and things that were available to them that have never been available to the Métis women.

First nations women have access to health care resources, so they can get medicine for their children. They can get eye care or dental care. Those things have never existed for Métis women, so our experiences have been very different.

I'm only going to tell you this from a Métis perspective: I'm grateful that we were never put into the dependency of social mechanisms like many of our first nations people were. In our community we went to work. We were proud to work. We acquired things. We built our own houses. Sometimes it was a fight to get there, but those were things we could call accomplishments and achievements.

I think some of the first nations challenges now are based on the social dependencies that were created from a long time ago. Our community doesn't have those same social dependencies, so there are differences.

And there are differences in our cultures. We come from a mixed race of people, and our elders always tell us that we took the best of both worlds to make who we are today. We are of a mixed place, so we have cultural things that we've brought forward both from our European ancestors and from our first nations grandmothers. So we have to accept both of those things as part of who we are.

The Chair: Thank you.

I know it is a Thursday and I'll go to Ms. Neville, and then if you have extra questions, we'll give you a couple of minutes so we can wrap it up.

Ms. Neville.

Hon. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much.

I, too, want to say thank you to all of you for coming.

I have lots of questions, but I want to focus on the issue of economic security for women, particularly as it relates to education. The previous two questions, one about child care and one about motherhood or parenting, have some bearing on it.

I look at the statistics you provided us with, and the large numbers of young women in the Métis community, particularly the large numbers of single parents you've just spoken about. I know your community is not homogeneous and there is not a one-size-fits-all response to things, but in terms of education and training, what could we best recommend to enhance the ability of members of your community to go back to school, assuming they want that? I was struck by the comments you made that these young women earn $8 and $9 an hour. That's limiting in terms of life's expectations.

We know the labour market partnership agreements that would have addressed some of the skill development for Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Ontario were cancelled.

Can you tell me, in terms of your community, how would we best serve it in terms of allowing access to education and the necessary supports?

● (1655)

Ms. Melanie Omeniho: Labour market development. The aboriginal and human resource development agreements have been in our communities for a long time. I can't tell you about the other communities, but in the Métis community more women than men have accessed those resources, so they have provided a tremendous amount of support toward getting women some education.

The problem with those agreements is this. It's a one-year intervention to help support them in getting employment. A one-year intervention doesn't really even get you a diploma in a post-secondary institution. It's a limited intervention to get them a limited job. Many of them might move from an $8-an-hour job to an $11-an-hour job, but in the marketplace and economics that exist today, $11 an hour still doesn't pay the rent. Our community is even experiencing kids at 30 who are not leaving home. They can't afford to leave home. They can't afford to grow up and move away, and that's because an $11-an-hour job will not get them where they need to be.

So if we're going to provide educational supports, I think we need to look at educational supports. I believe the reason women have accessed them more is that it marginalizes them, and they're accustomed to being marginalized. Most women get $800 a month in training dollars when they go to a post-secondary institution, and then they get a certain amount, about $200 per month per child, over and above that—but I could be wrong. For instance, an average person who might have two or three children will have to live on a training allowance of $1,200 to $1,500 a month. Many times that hardly pays the rent, never mind buy groceries or pay for day care. In the Métis communities, we don't get day care dollars over and above. Child care is not an increased amount of money.

It is very challenging, and we make it really difficult. If there were more supports put in place—and we need more than one-year interventions, because traditionally in women's work...and I know we don't encourage our women to go into traditional women's work, but they generally are prone to going into things like home care service or child care or social work. Even for our social workers, it's usually youth work because they can't afford to get a bachelor of social work degree, so they are limited in the kinds of jobs they can get. We need to provide more supports so they can get a degree education or an undergraduate education, so they can go out and earn a good income so they can survive. They have more than the intellectual ability to do it.

● (1700)

Hon. Anita Neville: There is no question.

Jennifer, could you comment in terms of access to education in the north?

Ms. Jennifer Dickson: It's very difficult because of the distances and the remoteness and the isolation. It's also difficult because there are all these gender problems right now too, and then the hunting I mentioned. What we really need to do is look at education across the high north and decide what would benefit the people there.

There is training for specific jobs for people laying pipelines and mining, and there is specific day job training that benefits. It turns out it is benefiting the girls more than the boys because the girls want an office job when they're finished and want to sit still all day and the boys don't want to anyway.

Education is a problem in the high north and should be looked at by the national government. I know that education is provincial, but it would be nice to have a national look at it.

Hon. Anita Neville: You spoke about the importance of language for the Métis community and, because of the Berger report on the north, the recommendations that have been put forward to preserve the Inuit language. What recommendations should this committee make in terms of language as an ingredient of economic development for women, or do you see a relationship between that?

Ms. Jennifer Dickson: Is there a relationship between language maintenance and economic development? That's a very interesting question. It depends upon what you mean by economic development. If what you're talking about is jobs right now—

Hon. Anita Neville: Economic security. Think about it.

The Chair: They can do it as a wrap-up comment.

Since the Conservative members have no questions, I'll give you three minutes, Madame Demers.

Mrs. Mathyssen, do you have any questions, or can we wrap it up with the last question here?

Mrs. Irene Mathyssen: I'd like to hear the story Ms. Dickson was talking about that she could tell with regard to the journey to success. I'd like to hear at least one. We should end on a positive note.

The Chair: Okay, I'll do that.

We will go to Madame Demers first. Then they can do that as a wrap-up.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nicole Demers: Thank you. I think it's a great idea.

Ms. Dickson, a study involving aboriginal women was carried out between 1996 and 2001. Innu women were found to have the highest fertility rate at 3.4 children per woman, but the lowest life expectancy, namely 71 years. Other women in fact do have a much longer life expectancy.

On average, Innu women have 3.4 children. However, if their situation doesn't change drastically, how many of these children can expect to grow into healthy adults, both physically and mentally?

[*English*]

Ms. Jennifer Dickson: What percentage? It is a very serious problem in the north. Who decides whether someone is in good mental and physical health? If you're a smoker and you have diabetes, you have no income and you have five children, are you in good mental and physical health? It's a mess. It is really seriously difficult. The numbers are much higher now actually than what you're thinking. When you look at the demographics in the north you see very few elders, a few more middle-aged people, and everybody is young. In terms of toddlers, we were in a town about six weeks ago and 75 women were pregnant, so within the next several months there are going to be 75 new babies in one tiny town that only has 400 people in it.

Things are changing, and we need to pay attention to them.

Does that answer your question at all?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nicole Demers: There's not enough time to answer the question, because there is so much to say. I'm really sorry.

[*English*]

The Chair: I'd like to give you each a minute or so to wrap up, but before we do that, I'd like to make a comment.

When we were doing the economic security of women, we were very careful that we took the whole envelope, and you are not the forgotten sisters. We have included the sisters of the north, and it was important for us to listen. At times you have seen our faces show, "Oh, my God." It's a challenging situation, but you have proven to us that you are able. You have tenacity. Your ability to rise above these challenges is there and therefore there is hope.

What we would like to hear from you is how can we, as we move forward with this report, give that hope and ensure that hope comes to the remote communities.

I used to be an auditor with INAC, and I know how difficult it was when we did the buildings and why social housing was becoming so expensive or whatever. There are challenges and there will be challenges, Canada is vast. How can we move forward? Women find solutions. They look at the problems and say there is a challenge and let's move forward.

On that note, could you each give us something that we could put in our report that would help enhance the economic security of our sisters in the north.

Who would like to start?

● (1705)

Ms. Melanie Omeniho: Actually, the one thing that would be a big help is developing real relationships and partnerships with the Métis community to help come up with solutions, because Métis people are a very proud people. They never like to be perceived as needing to be taken care of. In fact, you'll find that we're quite stubborn and arrogant about it. We don't want to be taken care of. We want to be a part of what we do, so I believe that part of how we're going to fix economic security for Métis women is by developing real partnerships and relationships.

I appreciate what's been said about the Status of Women. We will go back and do some investigation and access whatever resources are available. We want to do micro-business projects with our Métis women, much like the Inuit women talked about. That was where we came from and historically who we were, and we do want to put that forward, but we want real partnerships and relationships. It isn't about us wanting you to come and fix our problems for us. We want to work together and come up with solutions and get the data we need, so that we can analyze things and really know where our root problems are, so that we can resource out, and so that we don't have to be forgotten or even look like we're sitting here telling you how much worse off we are than the rest of you. We want to be just like all other Canadians.

Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Komaksiutiksak.

Ms. Ulrike Komaksiutiksak: Thank you for hearing us today. This is the first time I have spoken at something like this.

I would have to agree that it's the relationships and the partnerships. It's working with communities to find out what their solutions are and supporting communities to create their own solutions for economic security for women, for economic development. We all have to work together from the community or regional level to the provincial, territorial, and federal levels. We all have to work together, working with organizations such as Pauktuutit, which works with grassroots and brings the voice to the national level.

Again, I would have to say it's partnerships and relationships.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Dickson.

Ms. Jennifer Dickson: Pauktuutit just completed, by coincidence, a document called "Keepers of the Light", which I can get you. We really boiled a strategic plan down to four items, from the perspective of Inuit women. The very first one is about economic stability, but it goes to political issues too.

As everybody knows, there are six national aboriginal organizations in Canada. Five of them are recognized by the federal government; the sixth one, which is Pauktuutit, is not. That's for another whole meeting, but just know that when senior policy is developed, sometimes we're in the room because someone thinks we're doing good work and they want us there anyway and sometimes we're not. That has repercussions.

It's a Status of Women issue, because where are the women? The women comprise more than 50% of the Inuit, and where are they? So that's one of our four items. But I'd be happy to e-mail you the "Keepers of the Light". It's in English and Inuktitut, unfortunately, but I can send it to you. I'll be glad to do that.

The Chair: Thank you so much for coming from so far and giving us a real taste of what others face, while we sit here and try to make decisions for everyone.

We will share this report. Once it is ready it will be on the Internet. I have to adjourn the meeting because somebody wants to take a picture of you people sitting here.

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