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Chair

The Honourable Hedy Fry

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● (0915)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.)): Good morning.

I want to thank all the witnesses for coming.

We are here as the House of Commons committee pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) to look at the issue of violence against aboriginal women.

When we speak to the issue of violence, we're looking at the scope of violence. We mean every kind of violence, not simply physical violence or sexual violence, but emotional violence, systemic violence. We're looking at the causes of it. What are the root causes that make aboriginal women the victims of such a high level of violence? So those are the things we're looking at, and, with you, we're looking at trying to find solutions, of course within the federal jurisdiction, that are practical and that will actually make a difference.

This is an issue people have been dealing with for as long as I can remember, for as long as I have been a member of Parliament, and yet we have been able to do very little about it. I know that, necessarily, government and Parliament cannot do anything about it, but there may be things we can facilitate, legislation we can pass, policies we can make, or whatever is within our jurisdiction to begin to look at making a difference. We're hoping that we will do that with your assistance, with your input, so that we do the most effective things for change that we can do. So thank you for coming.

Normally we give everyone ten minutes to present. I notice there are four groups in the first bit. I think if we allow for a ten-minute presentation from everyone, we will not have any opportunity to interact. What I wanted to do, even though this is a quasi-formal meeting, is to have something that is recorded but not as formal. So I'd like each of you to introduce yourself—I'm going to give you about three minutes—and to give a quick synopsis of what it is you think, what you feel based on what we talked about earlier on, and what I said was the mandate. Then we can open it up to a more interactive kind of discussion, where we may ask questions, you can ask us questions, so that we can sort of get a dialogue going, as opposed to having some sort of formal hearing.

How do you feel about that? Does that sounds good? Okay.

So why don't we start with the Fredericton Native Friendship Centre, with Tamara Polchies, and then we will go in order so that we can move through. Then when you finish, I think all of us around the table will be given a minute—not three—to introduce ourselves and to say where we're from, so that you know who we are.

Mrs. Tamara Polchies (Executive Director, Fredericton Native Friendship Centre): Thank you. Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to appear today.

My name is Tamara Polchies. I'm a Mi'kmaq from Eel Ground First Nation and I now live in the Maliseet community of Kingsclear First Nation near Fredericton. I have been the executive director of the Fredericton Native Friendship Centre for the past five years, and during this time I have worked in partnership with Gignoo Transition House on the development of the Healing Journey Toolkit and have been an active member of the provincial advisory committee ending violence against aboriginal women in New Brunswick since its conception. I'm also an active member of the City of Fredericton cultural diversity advisory committee and was involved in the development of training for the city police on intimate partner violence.

I have also been chosen to attend a national forum on violence against aboriginal women in Ottawa and the National Aboriginal Women's Summit in Yellowknife. I'm trained by the Fredericton Sexual Assault Crisis Centre and am a member of its collective. I take calls from women throughout New Brunswick and when needed will accompany a woman to the hospital or help her leave an unsafe environment, 24 hours a day.

My background began in Ottawa with the Assembly of First Nations in the gender equity department, learning from very powerful aboriginal women. I also had an opportunity to work with the National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence, which has helped me build a foundation of knowledge regarding transition houses and issues women face in violent situations.

Every day, my friendship centre has aboriginal women coming through its doors looking for help and support. We offer such services as a food bank, clothing bank, employment services, Internet access, phone and fax machine, a traditional craft workshop, and lunches, and we provide outreach.

The history of the friendship centre involvement with specific programming for aboriginal women started with the young women's group called Little Sisters. This program was started by me and my summer student staff. We noticed our young women were dealing with adult situations and lifestyles. I was noticing the young girls and women in our community growing up faster and not having an opportunity to enjoy their childhood. We wanted young women and girls to have a chance to feel their own age and work together as peers to support one another in the community. We started with one first nations community in an urban group. We consulted each group, starting with providing a safe space where they could meet, trustworthy leaders, and healthy food. We offered information on Internet safety, predator identification, health education, self-esteem, and empowerment, and we helped them learn to respect one another. We made our own rules for each group with the girls, and we worked together to become a trustworthy group where the girls could feel comfortable talking and asking questions.

Healthy food was an important factor in getting them through the door, due to the economic standing of most families. The girls and young women requested fruits and vegetables and dairy products before asking for pop, chips, or processed foods. So we found that interesting, that they would prefer to have something healthy as opposed to something unhealthy. That brought more kids in when we were doing that.

We had guest speakers, sleepovers, and discussion groups, and we developed many meaningful relationships that are still ongoing today.

For the past few years, we have partnered with Quebec Native Women Inc. and accessed funding for New Brunswick native women here in Fredericton. We first provided two employment placements within our organization, and we also helped women who were looking for education funding for training. We offered computer upgrading training, skills enhancement, and self-esteem and empowerment workshops. The training and workshops provided women with a new outlook on re-entering the workforce after raising their children or leaving violent situations. Finding new goals and learning how to overcome barriers led the women to employment and jobs now. So they are furthering their education and becoming positive role models for their own children and families in their communities.

My colleagues and I have discussed the many factors involved in why aboriginal women are abused and how society helps non-aboriginal women differently than aboriginal women. We spoke of racism, the definition of violence, and gender issues and how many of our women are missing or murdered. A common understanding among all of us is that we repeatedly have the same studies and research done on issues against aboriginal women. So we understand the definitions. We understand a lot of the help we have now. But we're wasting time, money, and spirit, and we're enabling abusers to keep abusing aboriginal women.

● (0920)

Right now, when we're sitting here having meetings, meeting with other groups, and continuing to do this across the country, we're giving time for people to get hurt every day. We are not stopping or preventing violence; we're normalizing it in the community. Crimes against aboriginal women have been unsolved for years, but if a group of non-aboriginal women went missing these crimes would have been solved already. We wonder why.

Most of the aboriginal women I've spoken to or helped have the same conclusion about why we all know women who have been affected by violence once in their lifetimes. Every woman I have spoken to knows there are many women in their communities—many other women or children they know who are affected daily. It's time for us to work together to reduce, prevent, and protect our aboriginal women from violence.

Thank you.

● (0925)

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Next is Tanna Pirie-Wilson, with the Public Service Alliance of Canada.

Ms. Tanna Pirie-Wilson (Female Aboriginal representative, National Aboriginal People's Circle, Public Service Alliance of Canada): Good morning, ladies.

Good morning, Mr. Clarke.

Tan Kahk, nil toliwes Tanna Pirie-Wilson. I sit before you firstly as a proud Maliseet first nation youth from Tobique First Nation, two hours north of here. I also sit here as the female representative of the Public Service Alliance of Canada's national aboriginal peoples circle. I am here to speak to you today about the negative impacts of systemic violence against aboriginal women.

Women in our communities were once highly regarded citizens. We held high-ranking positions within our governing bodies. We were the keepers of our communities, our culture, and our languages. We were the givers of life, and our men respected and even supported us in those roles. It was through the influence of early European colonization that our men and our women were taught suppression and oppression. They had a different view to teach us.

Okay, I'm told it's a three-minute introduction.

The Chair: Tanna, just say what you need to say.

Ms. Tanna Pirie-Wilson: No. I'm not doing my speech.

That's why, within the Public Service Alliance national aboriginal peoples circle, we're determined to take the societal condition to the forefront. We're determined to make a difference to the societal condition of aboriginal people through political action. That's where I fit in.

The national aboriginal peoples circle of the Public Service Alliance has embarked on numerous lobbying efforts. We recently went to Ottawa and made a lobby day effort last fall, which was very successful. We hosted a number of letter-writing campaigns in support of the Native Women's Association Sisters In Spirit campaign and initiative. We also embarked on a post-card campaign, which some of you may have seen. It was a direct response to the apology, that sometimes sorry is not enough. We focused that on the Sharon McIvor case and the inaction toward the Kelowna accord.

So through these community and national campaigns we were able to draw people's attention to aboriginal poverty and the crisis of our drinking water; and provide a unified voice from a diverse community—our Public Service Alliance first nation, Inuit, and Métis members. We come together so we can increase our involvement at all levels within our community to empower each other and advance our basic human right to live a life without violence against aboriginal women.

I'll end it there, because I'll go into more depth. My role is to bring light to issues such as violence against aboriginal women.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Tanna. That was very efficient.

Now we're going to go to Gail Nicholas, who is from the New Brunswick Aboriginal Women's Council.

Ms. Gail Nicholas (Vice-President, New Brunswick Aboriginal Women's Council Inc.): Good morning. My name is Gail Nicholas. I'm Maliseet from Tobique First Nation, a proud elder from Tobique First Nation. I'm the vice-president of the New Brunswick Aboriginal Women's Council. I'm also the director of the Wabanaki Women's Council, and we have Wabanaki women's gatherings twice a year to help empower women in our Wabanaki population.

I've been a child protection service worker and adoption specialist for the State of Nebraska for approximately 15 years. I also specialized in the Indian Child Welfare Act. That's the piece of legislation that protects native children in the United States when they are in state custody. Also, as part of the New Brunswick Aboriginal Women's Council, last September we introduced a resolution on Indian child welfare to the Native Women's Association of Canada, to have them look at that type of legislation for our children here in Canada so they'll be placed in aboriginal homes first, and also to train native foster families to take in their own children or children from other first nations.

When I left Nebraska I moved to Bangor and I was the clinician with the Wabanaki Mental Health Association for three years. I worked with native adults with mental health issues, and that was very rewarding. Then I decided to move closer to home and had to stop in Holt. Then I was the language director there for about a year until the funding ran out. Then I went back home to Tobique to be with my family.

Then I taught for a couple of years. I was a native studies teacher and a Maliseet language teacher. Then after that I saw a position as a program coordinator for the Mi'kmaq-Maliseet Healing Network Centre, working with residential school survivors. Previously, when I worked as a clinician, I came up on weekends when the survivors were gathering. They asked me to help them out, so I did that on a voluntary basis.

Now I'm coordinating the Wabanaki teaching lodge and working on projects to reintroduce culture and language to our community and other first nations people. Also, I'm with the New Brunswick Aboriginal Women's Council, where we've been busy trying to work on new strategic planning to find where there are needs in our province. So that's what we've been busy with—with Sarah; I'll include Sarah.

Thank you.

● (0930)

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll go to Gignoo Transition House. Sarah Rose, you are with both of those. You're going to speak to the—

Ms. Sarah Rose (Representative, New Brunswick Aboriginal Women's Council Inc.): I'm with both organizations.

The Chair: You're with both. Yes, I was wondering.

Ms. Sarah Rose: Yes, I'm the board president. I'll introduce myself.

The Chair: Then you're going to speak a bit. Go ahead.

Ms. Sarah Rose: Good morning. My name is Sarah Rose. I'm from the St. Mary's First Nation, which is just across the river from here. I hope you have a chance to visit it before you leave. Welcome to Maliseet territory.

I'm a mother of three; I have a nine-year-old, a three-year-old, and a two-year-old daughter. I have grown up off-reserve, but I've always been involved in the community, so I never recognized that on- and off-reserve boundary. I currently work for the Union of New Brunswick Indians. I work in the health department and I work with all 15 bands. Even though the union only represents 12, I work with all 15. I represent the communities at a local, regional, and national level on health issues.

I'm also the president of Gignoo Transition House. I am the president of Under One Sky, which is an aboriginal off-reserve headstart that is located here in Fredericton. I sit on the executive for the New Brunswick Aboriginal Women's Council. I was also part of the youth council for NWAC.

In my own community we have a St. Mary's youth leadership enrichment program through which we mentor young girls and boys to fulfill that leadership role, because we need to recognize the positive within our own children. I'm a mentor in that program, in addition to working and being a full-time mom. That's me in a nutshell, and we'll talk later.

I have had the opportunity to represent my people at an international level as well. I've had the opportunity to go to Colombia and talk about our culture and history, and we're dealing with these kinds of issues as well. Later on this summer, I'll be going to Ireland to do the same thing at the university.

That's who I am. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Ms. McBride.

Ms. Natalie McBride (Executive Director, Gignoo Transition House Inc.): Gignoo Transition House is the only aboriginal transition house in the province of New Brunswick. We service all 15 first nations. We are in Maliseet territory. I am a Maliseet woman from the Woodstock First Nation, which is one hour away. I travel every day to Fredericton. However, our transition house is located off-reserve. It services both the Mi'kmaq and the Maliseet women, so there's no fighting over who has ownership because we have our board of directors.

I am also the treasurer for the National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence. Gignoo is also a founding board member. Four of us were instrumental in starting the National Aboriginal Circle Against Family Violence. That's something that I've been a part of since its inception.

I am also the co-chair, with Norma Dubé from the Province of New Brunswick women's issues branch, of the advisory committee on violence against aboriginal women. Sarah handed out our strategic framework, which would take more than eight minutes to talk about. We brought it so that you could read it at your leisure.

I'm also traveling around Canada to present our healing journey tool kit, which I omitted to bring. It is a New Brunswick initiative that helps service providers working in the field of family violence to help women who come to them. We're very rural and located in Fredericton; it was a tool to help others and went from being a New Brunswick initiative to a national initiative. It is clear across Canada now, and I've been busy going into the provinces with INAC-funded shelters to present on that initiative.

I'm happy to be here. Thank you for allowing me to come. We'll talk more when it's my turn.

Thank you.

● (0935)

The Chair: Thank you.

Before we go further—I'll go in this order so that everyone can introduce themselves—I want to thank the Maliseet nations for allowing us to be in their territory and work here. Thank you.

Go ahead, Kelly.

Mrs. Kelly Block (Saskatoon—Rosetown—Biggar, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

My name is Kelly Block and I'm a member of Parliament from Saskatoon. My riding is Saskatoon—Rosetown—Biggar. I don't typically sit on the status of women committee—I serve on two other parliamentary committees, the access to information, privacy, and ethics committee and the finance committee—but I feel very privileged to be here today and to have participated in this study all week. It's been very enlightening and I've learned a lot this week.

To put my riding and our province in context, our city is divided into four quadrants. My riding would probably have the largest first nations and Métis population in it, in the urban part of our city. We have many organizations that I have been building relationships with in terms of the issues facing first nations and Métis in an urban setting. We have 74 first nations in Saskatchewan, so we have a lot of opportunities to work with our first nations and develop relationships.

I'm very pleased to hear from you and I'm looking forward to the rest of our discussion this morning.

The Chair: Sandra.

Ms. Sandra Gruescu (Committee Researcher): My name is Sandra Gruescu. I'm an analyst for the parliamentary library.

Ms. Julie Cool (Committee Researcher): I'm Julie Cool. I am also an analyst serving this committee.

The Chair: Actually, what they do is write the report at the end of the day. They are really very important people around here.

I'm Hedy Fry, and I'm the chair. I'm the member of Parliament for Vancouver Centre. I was the status of women minister for over six years in the Chrétien government and also for multiculturalism and have been really interested in aboriginal issues for the longest time, especially in Santiago, where, as the head of the delegation for Canada, we brought forward the concept that aboriginal people were peoples in their own right and were not merely population demographics, and got that accepted at the Regional Conference of the Americas and took that ahead. That was the impetus for a lot of the work that was done on the United Nations convention on the rights of aboriginal peoples, which is a Canadian-led and -driven initiative with a lot of Canadian indigenous scholars, like Willie Littlechild, who helped to formulate the rights of indigenous peoples around the world.

Then we have the clerk. Go ahead.

Ms. Angela Crandall (Procedural Clerk): I'm Angela Crandall.

The Chair: She keeps us in line.

Mr. Rob Clarke (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, CPC): My name is Rob Clarke. I'm from one of the first nations. I believe I met some of you on the aboriginal affairs committee, actually, which I sit on, or maybe you came to my office to meet with me.

I'm not usually sitting on this committee, but I'm very honoured to be actually coming in and listening to some of the issues here about aboriginal women.

My home reserve is in Muskeg Lake, right in the middle of Saskatchewan. One of the interesting parts of my constituency is the great portion of northern Saskatchewan that's in my riding, two-thirds of the province, and about 72% are aboriginal. That's where my background comes into play. Being a former RCMP member of 18 years, almost all my service was dealing with the non-aboriginal population, the Métis, and the first nations in northern and remote Saskatchewan. I've seen the best in people, and I've seen the worst in people. I know what people are capable of doing to each other and to the aboriginal women and the aboriginal men, and it's a cycle. Somehow we have to address the cycle to stop it from all angles.

Coming through here and to your communities—and many of you have travelled a great deal on your own time and probably on your own money from your pockets just to come here to testify—I'm very thankful that you came to relay your stories to us so the regular committee members can take that back and put it in the report to bring it before the House of Commons.

Again, thank you very much.

● (0940)

Ms. Nicole Demers (Laval, BQ): I'm Nicole Demers. I'm the member of Parliament for Laval, Quebec. I never knew anything about the aboriginal people except what they told us in school about cowboys and Indians—I'm from an urban setting—until I met Ellen Gabriel. I've been working very closely for the last six years with Ellen, ever since I met her, and she taught me and I am awed by all the work that you do. I am awed by all the generosity that you share. I am awed by everything you are able to do with so little, and I am very humble coming here today to meet. We are here to learn. We don't want to do things for you, but we want you to tell us what we can do with you.

To me it is very important that we change the way things have been done for so long and that we stop being paternalistic toward aboriginal people and start seeing this as sharing together. We're sharing territory. We're sharing the riches of those territories as well, which we should do. We should share in everything.

I am very pleased to be here and very happy to meet you.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Nicole.

Some of you have introduced yourselves only knowing that we wanted to look at the root causes, knowing that we wanted to look at the depth and the extent of the situation and we wanted to look at ways in which you believe we can do things to help or whereby we can try to find ways to alleviate the problem in whatever ways we can, as the federal government.

I'd like to do is ask you, starting with Natalie, what you think about the issues, the problem, and how you think we can help you to resolve it.

Ms. Natalie McBride: Okay. I haven't made any notes, but I do have five key issues. Sarah may step in and help me if I bungle this.

The first thing I would like to see is affordable housing. The current situation for a woman coming to Transition House, especially when they have to leave their community and come to an urban area—most of the women live in rural communities—is that they have to go back to their same situation, to their same community, because there's no affordable housing for them. The only aboriginal housing unit we have here in Fredericton is Skigin-Elnoog, where there is never enough space.

That leads into why we need second-stage housing here in the area. We are putting our women who want to get out of the situation they're in, who want help, back into a unit where there's no one who's able to work with them and continue to work with them. We find that when we put our women in with non-native second-stage, it doesn't work. They are not fitting in, because people don't understand the life of a first nation woman living on-reserve. We definitely need to look into affordable housing and a second-stage unit for New Brunswick.

This leads me to having our own outreach worker. I'm not sure if you're aware, but the Province of New Brunswick, in the past year and a half, out of their blueprint, has hired outreach workers who are all non-native. They do not work with aboriginal women. I think if we could have a partnership with both the federal and provincial governments and the chiefs and council on where changes need to be made, maybe there could be a cost-share for our own aboriginal outreach worker in each of the 15 first nations here in New Brunswick. They should not rely on Transition House staff to be the ones who are instrumental in helping women cope. I think if we had our own outreach worker who understood aboriginal issues, perhaps part of the health and wellness centre on first nations, or child and family—just someone who was trained and able to help us do the family violence prevention work—that might help us with the teen dating violence that's happening, with the aboriginal women who are going missing. Right now they do not have anybody working, and they rely on us to do it. I think New Brunswick is too rural to have one person in charge of that.

This brings me to partnerships. I think our biggest problem here in New Brunswick is the jurisdiction issue. Everybody always says that's the feds, or that's the province, or that's your chief and council. I think it's time—we're in 2010—to sit down at the table and work at these issues. We shouldn't lay blame on which government officials are responsible. I think we should have partnerships that are woman-centred, because that's where we need the help; we're ultimately helping the woman in aboriginal family violence situations. It shouldn't be the responsibility of the feds or the province or the chiefs and council: it should be woman-centred, it should be focused on her, and we should all sit down and work together, not in silos.

That is why it's important that you look at our *Strategic Framework to End Violence against Wabanaki Women in New Brunswick* document. Some of the people sitting in this room sit at that committee, which I co-chair with the province. It's the first step in a process to address violence against Wabanaki women in New Brunswick. There are 49 recommendations spanning various areas to address violence against Wabanaki women.

The Advisory Committee on Violence Against Aboriginal Women identified three areas for action—capacity building, prevention and education, and service delivery. Right now at the table we do have the province; we do have community members sitting there from across New Brunswick; we do have chiefs who are for this, who are going to stand behind us; but we're missing the federal government. I think it's time we come together as a unit to help our women, because it is time. There should not be jurisdictional issues. We have to think about the women, because that's why we're all here. And that's why our statistics are so high—because we're all working against one another instead of with one another.

● (0945)

Thank you very much.

The Chair: That was very well done, without a piece of paper in your hand. You obviously have a very logical mind.

Thanks, Natalie.

Sarah.

Ms. Sarah Rose: Could I just add one thing to what Natalie was saying?

In reference to the second-stage housing, Gignoo did get three units this year for the first time. So we do have three second-stage units, but they are new. There were federal-provincial dollars to build these units, but there was no money attached to the maintenance of these units and to operational funds. So we were not able to do that alone. We had to partner with Skigin-Elnoog Housing Corporation, an off-reserve aboriginal housing organization. They built the units and were given the funds to build the units. They manage the units on the operational side, but we fill the units with our tenants.

Now we're having issues because we don't specialize in that tenant-landlord relationship. We're trying to get the women into the second-stage housing and are preparing them for the next steps, but we don't have workers for that. So we're having some issues on that side.

In relation to affordable housing, we're relying on Skigin-Elnoog Housing, but they have no new units and don't have money for new units. The majority of their units were purchased in the seventies, so they're aging. Instead of repairing them, they're removing them from the program—but no new units are going in.

The affordable housing is limited. We can ask for it, but we're sent here. We're a priority for the Skigin-Elnoog Housing, but we're not priority for the provincial affordable housing.

So there's that point in relation to our housing.

● (0950)

The Chair: I will stop there and ask if anyone wants to interact with questions and suggestions, before we go to Gail and Tamara and Tanna.

Is there anything that was said that anyone wants to clarify or follow up on?

Rob.

Mr. Rob Clarke: Tamara, you were mentioning the national friendship centres. I'm curious from a regional standpoint about the working relationship that might transpire between the regional and the federal friendship centres, and how the funding mechanism works.

I've always heard about it, but I just don't quite understand it. I think a couple of months ago there was a funding problem from the national friendship centres to the regional ones. I'm curious how that affected you. Did your organization or friendship centre have to go through a layoff process?

Mrs. Tamara Polchies: The National Association of Friendship Centres is funded through Heritage Canada's aboriginal friendship centre program. That trickles down to the national association. The national association has provincial and territorial associations across Canada.

New Brunswick does not have a provincial or a territorial association. The Fredericton Native Friendship Centre is the only one in the province. So when you go east, you go to Halifax, but in St. John's and Happy Valley, they also don't have provincial or territorial associations. So that has blocked us even longer from receiving our funding.

When they were in negotiations to try to get more funding and we wanted to upgrade our funding allocations—which have not been upgraded since 1996, meaning that I've had the same funding at my centre for that long—we had to cut back and tie up any strings we could and change anything we could within the centre to get our operating costs lower when we were waiting for that funding. We did not have to lay off anybody, but we did have to cut back on what we were offering for about three months. This was because there were negotiations, and agreements were not signed and amendments were going back and forth. So it just tied us up really, really badly.

We're very grateful and lucky to have a positive working relationship with our bank, so they were able to extend us a bit to help us to at least leave our doors open.

Mr. Rob Clarke: Okay, thanks.

The Chair: Thank you.

Nicole, you wanted time.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nicole Demers: Thank you, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

Natalie, you were talking about a healing toolkit. Would it be possible for you to forward one to us so that we could learn about it and see what it is?

Ms. Natalie McBride: Sure. I have it in both official languages, too. Actually, I could probably get someone to bring it down, because my office is just up on Hanwell Road. So I'll bring some down.

Ms. Nicole Demers: Gail, you were talking about the child welfare act. I know in Quebec we've had problems lately. They are taking the children outside of the community, and sometimes it's very far from the community, so the mother cannot keep contact with the child. Are there any such problems here?

Ms. Gail Nicholas: Yes, definitely. There are the same problems here also. I think community members who are in those child welfare positions try as much as they can to have the families on reserve. But there don't seem to be any programs that invite native people to become foster parents. I'd like to see that as a measure, to try to do some training in that area.

Ms. Nicole Demers: Since that's provincial jurisdiction, it must be very difficult to do something about it. As you said, there's always this fight between federal and provincial jurisdictions.

Ms. Gail Nicholas: It's frustrating for me to see that. In the United States, it's a federal law that you have to follow the Indian Child Welfare Act in the placements. We don't have that in Canada.

● (0955)

Ms. Nicole Demers: Would it be something that should be looked at?

Ms. Gail Nicholas: Yes. As I said, we did pass the resolution, which I have a copy of, with NWAC, the national Native Women's Association, to put forth that resolution. We did that last September, and they are working on the study on that. One of the things that came out of that study was that right now there are more native American children in foster care than there ever were with residential school survivors. So they are still out of our communities. Our children are still out of our communities.

Ms. Nicole Demers: Thank you so much.

Being an elder, and being a teacher of traditional culture as well, it must be very difficult to see that. What can empower a child is knowing about his culture, his ancestors. You can't do it if you're outside of the community. You can't give them that.

Tamara, you said something that really hurt. You said we're wasting time, money, and spirit by doing all those reunions. I think you're right, but we have to do it.

What do you propose to do? What works best, and what do you need to do it?

Mrs. Tamara Polchies: Money, programs. Especially in New Brunswick, we have an issue with funding for off reserve, on reserve...trying to access workers. Now these programs are trying to work with a union...or with me, for our organization to work with the communities. Our organization gets the people who leave the reserves, who come to the city to work, and then all of a sudden we're not acknowledged for helping the off-reserve people. That's why we're trying to find more dollars, to have more people to help the women and children who need help right now.

I know it is hurtful to say we are hurting spirits. That's exactly what we're doing. We're allowing abusers to keep abusing.

Of course we need research. The way everything goes, we have enough information now to know what needs to be done. We're reinventing the wheel every time there's another paper, more research, or another book done. We have shelves filled with the definitions of what violence is and what needs to be done. Now we need to move forward to take those recommendations, those studies, and to actually put government money toward the people who are going to make a difference.

Ms. Nicole Demers: To implement those recommendations?

Mrs. Tamara Polchies: Yes. I think we've worked almost six years on getting our framework finished for our province. With the work we've put into that and the women we brought into our committee...the government changes when there are new elections and we have to start all over again to go through our training with new people. Then we have more standing committees. Then we have more lobbying.

There's only so much we can do before we end up getting so frustrated. We keep going in circles again. Then we're allowing the circle of violence to keep going. We're not stopping to put money toward programs and toward workers to help the children.

Ms. Nicole Demers: Have you done any work on how much money would be needed to do what has to be done?

Mrs. Tamara Polchies: I think Natalie can help you more with that question. We haven't said we need $8 million to complete our framework. We are trying to figure out what needs to be done. I say $8 million, and it would be nice if they gave us $8 million. It probably won't happen. We are looking forward. We don't have an exact amount.

Ms. Nicole Demers: It's an issue, and not knowing what something costs is very frustrating. Having a framework of knowing what is expected I think is good. It is easier to defend money when you know where it's going. If we don't know, someone will know best.

● (1000)

Mrs. Tamara Polchies: Right now, we can take back to our committee how much all this will cost, what exactly we're looking for, and what our needs are to match our priorities to some type of budget we can try to get. I think you're bringing up a positive question. We're not really saying specifically what we're looking for. We're looking for whatever we can get. That's probably where we're at right now, because that's what we're used to. They'll tell us to take the $12 million for housing and do this across Canada, split it up this way, but now we'll need more.

So it is an excellent idea for us to attach budget to what we're doing.

Ms. Natalie McBride: We realize money's tight, no matter what government's saying. We've worked on this strategic framework for probably six years, because it changed, and then in September we're having another election here in New Brunswick. I think the important part about this strategic framework is the fact that we have to have partners. It's not just one provincial government to help us out. Everything costs money, but because we identified 49 recommendations that need to be done to help aboriginal women in family violence situations, that is our priority. We need to sit down as not only feds and province but chief in council, to get everyone to buy into these recommendations. This comes from community. This is what we're working on. This is what we identified in New Brunswick, and this is what we need to do.

I don't think we're at the point of how much it's going to cost because 49 recommendations are probably going to cost a lot. I think if we work in small steps and we sit in partnership, the two governments together along with us, then identify which ones are priorities, we can go from there. Right now, we can't give a dollar figure because that would be impossible.

Ms. Sarah Rose: At the same time, when you read through the recommendations, some of them don't have a dollar attached to them. I'm 34 years old. After high school and university, I settled down and realized I was having a family and I wanted to work for my people. So I've been doing this for the last four years.

There is some money attached to it. We have very poor relations in this province between the provincial government and the aboriginal people, whether it's on reserve or off reserve. We have little to no relationship. I must say it is changing. We have taken some very small steps, but the problem is we do not have a working relationship with our province. We are slowly getting there. So with some of them, it's just opening the door and working with our people. There are no dollars attached to that. It is working with us, being open to the opportunity to working with our people, and stop drawing that distinction of whose jurisdiction it is. That's what we've been asking for for a very long time. We are very grateful, but more needs to occur.

Ms. Nicole Demers: Thank you.

One last question, Madam Chair?

The Chair: Yes, and then Kelly.

Ms. Nicole Demers: I'm so glad we don't have a time set.

The Chair: You have a few minutes.

Ms. Nicole Demers: Tanna, how many aboriginal women are in the alliance, in the union?

Ms. Tanna Pirie-Wilson: Right now, we are going through the mapping. Our circle has been asked by the Public Service Alliance to do that mapping. One of the studies that just came out was the public service employment equity study. The numbers show that aboriginal women are at 4.3%, I think, in the federal public service. Don't quote me on that number, but it's very low. In terms of those attached to the alliance, we were mandated in our circle to map out where those women are located, what their jobs are, and what positions they held.

We're in the middle of that mapping and we're finding out that most aboriginal women in the federal public service are at CR-4, at a very low level of government right now. That's why we've been mandated to map that, so that we have the exact figures to bring to government, to the employers, to our communities, to garner support for more action on that.

● (1005)

Ms. Nicole Demers: But you do have full support from the union.

Ms. Tanna Pirie-Wilson: Yes, we do.

Ms. Nicole Demers: My last question is about Sharon McIvor's case. What do you think we should do? It's very difficult, because it's also a money issue. If we act with our heart, it's one thing, but with our heads, it's something else.

Ms. Tanna Pirie-Wilson: One of the things I told another colleague is that we need to start to look into our communities. The Sharon McIvor case really looks at ending gender discrimination within the Indian Act. In terms of how to move forward from that, even our national aboriginal organizations have stepped back from taking a stance, because there is division even amongst our people as to which way we now need to go.

I think what we need to do and what I've asked my people to do is go back to the communities, look at our children, look at our people both on and off reserve, and think about the next seven generations. We have to think about the next 70 years ahead of us, because the last 70 years didn't think about us.

Honestly, I will not answer what direction we should go in. It's a neutral position that I personally have, because on one end I'm grateful for what the bill will do; however, it's not exactly what Mrs. McIvor wanted. I'm sure you have read your white-binder briefing notes on that. She actually did send out a letter recently to MPs declaring her stance. So I won't speak to Sharon McIvor's case, but personally I am neutral in terms of a position on that. I do ask that our communities look towards our future generations, the next 70 years ahead.

The Chair: Kelly.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Thank you very much.

The struggle of going last is that you hear things that you want to pick up on, but you have other things going on in your mind. So I'm going to try to get back to some of the questions I first thought of.

We were in Iqaluit on Tuesday. We were in Labrador City on Wednesday. From my experience in my own province, we have very similar issues when we're dealing with remote, rural communities and trying to provide services to individuals that typically happen in an urban setting.

Can you tell me what is the population of New Brunswick, and what is the percentage of aboriginal people living in New Brunswick?

Ms. Sarah Rose: There are 22,000, if you're asking about status Indians, not including non-status. I don't know what the population of New Brunswick is.

Mrs. Kelly Block: You mentioned that there is only one aboriginal transition house in New Brunswick that provides service to all aboriginal individuals on reserve and off reserve. How many first nations are there?

Ms. Natalie McBride: Fifteen.

Mrs. Kelly Block: There are 15 first nations in New Brunswick.

I appreciated what my colleague Nicole said about wanting to come alongside and to empower, to figure out how we can work together as a federal government, provincial government, all the organizations that have been formed in a province, and then the first nations. Certainly as a member of the federal government, I am aware of the jurisdictional issues; I recognize that. We all play different roles and I think my perspective is to come at addressing the issues and finding the solutions. I want to respect the jurisdictions of the organizations of the province.

So you mentioned there was very little relationship between the first nations, your organizations, and the provincial government. Is that correct?

Ms. Sarah Rose: Yes. If they make changes to policies, we are not consulted, and if we are consulted, we are consulted after the fact.

If you look at the health blueprint that was done by the Province of New Brunswick, you will see that the aboriginal people were excluded from that process altogether. It wasn't until after the fact when it was about to be released that we spoke up and told the province there were 15 first nations and it did not consult us. Then we spent a summer, eight weeks, running around and doing a consultation, so we had an appendix to the provincial health blueprint. How do you exclude us? We're here.

If you look at the health conditions we are living with and dealing with, you will see that diabetes is an epidemic in our community. There is no other word to describe the rates we have. So how could you have a blueprint looking at the next five years for your province and not include first nations people?

● (1010)

Mrs. Kelly Block: I just have another question coming out of that. We have the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations in our province, which brings all our first nations together in order to have a more collective voice when working with our provincial government. Can you tell me if you have an organization like that representing the aboriginal people or first nations in your province?

Ms. Sarah Rose: We have an Atlantic organization. We do not have a provincial one because the fifteen bands have broken up into twelve and three. So we have UNBI, the Union of New Brunswick Indians, and then we have the Mawiw Tribal Council. So when they meet, they meet with UNBI and then they meet with Mawiw. They do not meet with all fifteen groups at the same time. So again, it's like a divide and conquer.

We do have an organization at an Atlantic level, but the thing about that is that Nova Scotia seems to get more than New Brunswick. Again, it's an Atlantic perspective, so it's not a New Brunswick perspective, and that's what we're arguing to get now, a New Brunswick perspective on it.

Mrs. Kelly Block: Okay.

Mrs. Tamara Polchies: I also think you need to include the off-reserve. There is a huge number of people who don't fill out the census form and there's a huge number of people who leave their communities to go to work and school; their permanent address may be at home, but they are accessing services off reserve. Or there may be confidentiality issues within their own communities, so they access services off reserve. So you have to factor in and not forget about the off-reserve as well when you talk about organizations that are representing aboriginal people. You need to include the off-reserve as well.

The Chair: I'm going to have to remember that we only have about another 15 minutes to go on this group, although we could go a little over.

I wanted to say something, but I just wanted to let everyone know that I was just very kindly given some statistics. In New Brunswick, Sarah said there are about 22,000 first nations people, and the total population of New Brunswick is 751,904. So that's a pretty big percentage.

Mr. Clarke.

Mr. Rob Clarke: Sorry, I had to leave quickly there for a second.

I sit on the aboriginal affairs committee, and we had Sharon McIvor come in and testify before us, so I'm quite familiar with the issues there with the McIvor decision. I understand that for B.C. it was 45,000 additional people added to the registry. Then all of a sudden with the amendments and all that, they went outside the scope of the study. We're hoping to get that back on track and study it further at the aboriginal affairs committee.

One thing I do have is in the friendship centres I don't think they get enough credit. I'm going right back to you, Tamara. Forgive me if I'm wrong, but just in visiting the friendship centres in my riding in northern Saskatchewan, I heard one common complaint regarding funding, at the end of the year. Some of the friendship centres that do have money left over have to give that money back to Canadian Heritage or back to the government. Am I wrong? Is that correct?

Mrs. Tamara Polchies: I don't know of any centre that has money left at the end of the year to give back for anything.

With the new amendments to our contract with Heritage Canada and the National Association of Friendship Centres, the way we get our money has changed. There are centres with different agreements that aren't receiving their money all at once. We now have to report back before we're able to get money. If your staff isn't properly trained or you don't have a director who can put that stuff together and report it, you're going to be lacking in that area.

The way the new situation is now, you receive 50% of your funding in April, or whenever the agreements were signed—which this year was two or three weeks ago—and then you receive 45% before Christmas or in the fall, and then with the end report, you receive 5%. There are new requirements for the stats that are due in September, so they can negotiate more funding from the federal government and our friendship centres can have more money.

So it varies, but I don't know of any centre that sends money back, because every penny is used and stretched for anything, and we work on air basically. We do need more money.

● (1015)

The Chair: Do you have anything else to ask here quickly?

Mr. Rob Clarke: No, but in north Saskatchewan there were a couple of friendship centres that had some funds left at the end of the year.

Mrs. Tamara Polchies: Yes, there are some centres in difficulty.

Mr. Rob Clarke: They are rare.

Ms. Tamara Polchies: In Saskatchewan, actually, there are centres that are considered in difficulty, which means either that they're shut down or they didn't provide an audit or meet certain financial requirements in reporting. It's very rare that happens.

Right now there are 125 friendship centres across Canada. Saskatchewan has, I think, two that had to shut down. It's up to the provincial association to decide where the allocations of those centres can be split. If they did have to send money back, it would be up to the Saskatchewan association to decide which centre deserves a part of that money. But it won't go back up to the feds; it won't go back that way.

The Chair: Thank you, Rob.

I have a couple of questions. As friendship centres, do you not get multi-year funding any more?

Ms. Tamara Polchies: No, it's negotiated every year.

The Chair: That's hard to deal with.

Mrs. Tamara Polchies: It is.

The Chair: You can't plan, right?

Multi-year funding makes a lot of sense.

Mrs. Tamara Polchies: To a national association, it does.

Ms. Natalie McBride: It affects transition houses, too.

The Chair: They've been year by year?

Ms. Natalie McBride: Yes, year by year. We've been fighting with the Department of Indian Affairs to try to get things changed, because the same thing happens. If we have money left at year-end, which sometimes we do—because we don't know when we're getting it, so we have to have enough to pay for that—we have to send it back. So you have to be creative, right?

So the funding portion is our problem too. We never get increases. We never even get the 2% or 2.5% cost of living increase. We never get it. There's no negotiation with Indian Affairs for transition house funding.

The Chair: I understand that you only have three units in the second stage in the whole of New Brunswick.

Ms. Natalie McBride: That's the problem we're having right now. Who controls it? Right now the lease agreements are signed by the client with Skigin Elnoog Housing. So technically, they are not even second stage units, because if a tenant has to be kicked out for some reason, I have no control over that. My second stage units should be for two years for the next steps in healthy living. Right now we're on pins and needles, because there's a complaint against one client for noise. He says there will be no more warnings, that she is going to be kicked out the next time. I have no control over it. She's supposed to be in a second stage unit. So we're working with the province and him to try to settle it, so that Gignoo Transition House will sign the lease with him. Then we will work with the province to put our women into those units. But it's not working. That's all I can say without being political. We only started in January, so we're new.

The Chair: Do you have any shelters? How many?

Ms. Natalie McBride: We have one aboriginal transition house, and we have a women's centre for the non-aboriginal homeless, which is open. We also have a men's shelter, and that's it.

The Chair: Either of you can jump in here, but can you tell me what the difference is between the urban, off-reserve aboriginal women who come to live in the cities, and...? I want to know if you have the same phenomenon we have in the west, where enormous numbers of aboriginal people—almost 50%—live in the cities with absolutely nobody claiming jurisdiction for them at all. But the City of Vancouver has to deal with the impact of it all. So there was this in-between situation where people were lost. Then, of course, there are the on-reserve women.

Do you have a difference like that here? Do you have large numbers of urban aboriginal women in New Brunswick? If so, who takes care of them and provides services for them, if anybody?

Ms. Natalie McBride: As you say, they're kind of lost in the middle. If they come to the transition house because of an abuse issue, we ultimately have to set them up with the province for housing. We try to find housing for them, because there isn't priority. We try to set them up with social income. That is sometimes also hard, because then we have to go back to their first nation. They need to have a letter saying they have not received help from their first nation. Sometimes women can't get that because it's hard and they don't know who to contact, and stuff. So it's kind of like they're in limbo. They don't know where to go. They may go to the friendship centre. They end up being homeless.

● (1020)

Mrs. Tamara Polchies: I deal more on the front lines with emergencies and more drastic situations, where they have nowhere to go and haven't eaten for two days. We're the sort of last stop before sleeping outside, eating at the soup kitchen, or trying to feel comfortable taking a shower. We offer those kinds of things—to make yourself a bowl of soup or lunch or something, or provide clean clothes for your children.

In Fredericton we see people from all the reserves throughout the province or all different rural areas, whether they're from Moncton, Big Cove, Woodstock, or wherever. But again—it's the complaint of our national group—the province doesn't really acknowledge what we do and how we help people, whether they go back to their communities or not. So we help the homeless, those at risk of being homeless, and the youth. We're seeing a lot more transient men now, so we have a big men's program happening.

But we're working on air and trying to provide.... I do 20 different programs and have a limited number of staff. We're burning the candle at both ends. We don't know where to turn now. We need more money. We have a lot of homeless people, and there is no acknowledgement what the friendship centre does for people living in Fredericton. We don't have that.

The Chair: Tanna, do you want to add something to that?

Ms. Tanna Pirie-Wilson: I come from a rural first nation community. Our nearest transition house is a non-native transition house in Woodstock, which is an hour away from my community. The next one is in Edmundston, which is two hours north. They basically deliver to the francophone community in northern New Brunswick. So there is a big issue with access to a transition house, even for our rural sisters.

Gignoo does awesome work, but we have to travel two hours outside of our community to access the wonderful work they do with those women. I came here to give a rural perspective, because we have less than adequate access to these services. We even have less than adequate knowledge of services available in our communities. Gail does wonderful work in our communities, but a lot of people don't know about the work being done there. So there is an awareness issue, and we as communities are working on it with our people.

But there's a lack of resources and funding. Just by sitting here today we're garnering the support we need to move forward. As Natalie said, we want to walk hand-in-hand. We want to be treated as equals now. A lot of times, when governments hand out money, it's almost like, “Do we have to choose between rural or urban?” We're still given a very little amount to address the issue, but then we still have to pick and choose who we can help because of the limited resources. Tamara does a great job working with air.

Some of those best practices need to be shared. I hope that when the study you're doing comes back we'll be able to share on a national level, if not international, the issues of our rural communities—pitting them against our urban aboriginal sisters.

The Chair: Sarah wants to say something, but before we do that I wanted to note that the Supreme Court of Canada had very clearly said that whether an aboriginal person lives on reserve or if they go out of reserve, they're still aboriginal people and still entitled to the support of the federal government, which has a fiduciary responsibility for aboriginal people across this country—at least still.

I know that the Kelowna accord was going to hand over certain health, housing, and education responsibilities into the hands of aboriginal people. Would that have helped you in any way? Is that a mechanism that would work, or is it another terrible mechanism that's just going to put forward a fourth level of somebody doing diddly squat?

To me it sounds like we're caught between a lack of a mechanism and a lack of some kind of process in which aboriginal people can have access to the things they need. The role of the federal government, as far as I'm concerned, is that the federal government has a fiduciary responsibility for aboriginal people. So to have to dump aboriginal people in cities, right in the middle, and look at the province and say you are supposed to look after that and you are supposed to look after that, I don't get that.

Nunavut was a totally different issue because they had responsibility for themselves, but in Labrador City we heard that there was this jurisdictional thing getting out of hand. The only people falling between the cracks at this point in time are the aboriginal people, and their needs.

So give me a mechanism here that we can sink our teeth into.

● (1025)

Ms. Gail Nicholas: The federal government now has taken child welfare issues and dumped them onto the province, which they can't support either.

Ms. Tanna Pirie-Wilson: There were several reports that were actually done in conjunction through the Native Women's Association with Amnesty International. There were actually five key recommendations that do address developing a mechanism to address this kind of discrimination, or address that issue of responsibility. Instead of pitting provincial or federal dollars against each other, restoration of funding to fulfill the commitments of the Kelowna accord would end the inequalities in our health, housing, education, and other services for our people. There are those five recommendations that are key.

Also, there was another report I believe from the UN—they call them CEDAW, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. They reviewed the compliance of Canada with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

So there have been recommendations put forward. I'm not sure where they end up, but they don't end up trickling back down. That's one of the things I've always been vocal about. There's been policy paper after policy paper.

We've shown mechanisms, maybe minus the budgetary point, because maybe we're not quite there yet, but we have been speaking our voice. I know that there are a lot of national aboriginal organizations, national, provincial, and even community level organizations, that have forwarded mechanisms, recommendations, up to the government. But when we're doing budget cuts to such an important program as the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, which was doing such wonderful work with our survivors and attacking that cycle of violence at the root, when we're removing those funding sources and removing access to those projects for our community members, we lose out at the local level, we lose out at the community level.

The recommendations have gone up. I believe there are mechanisms that are out there that have been successful. I hope through your study that you're going to be able to pick up on those recommendations that are already out there that have actually been proven to work in our communities. Maybe sometimes they're not published as much as we need them to be published. That's another issue we might want to take a look at, publishing the good. For too long we've always focused on what colonialism did to us.

As Tamara said, we already know the definition of violence. We already know what it looks like in our communities. I think that is what this committee is asking: how do we move forward together as sisters, as mothers, as wives, as daughters, as friends? How do we move forward as brothers? We know what violence is. Taking it back to our traditional teaching, we've forgotten our traditional wisdom, we've forgotten our traditional ways. So even in our own traditional teachings and those wisdoms is a root of the mechanism that you probably seek. With discussion with beautiful sisters like this, I think you will find your answers.

● (1030)

Ms. Natalie McBride: Just from my reporting stats for the transition house, I know we have to report on-reserve, off-reserve, status, non-status. As an aboriginal person, I wonder why we have to differentiate. I think if we get rid of that old-school thinking, we might be further ahead.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We have another group coming to speak to us. I think we're going to have to end this. This is the kind of stuff we can send to you to talk about forever.

I think, Tanna, you make the point on what we're talking about. Remember the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples? Funding was attached there. So we're really talking about political will, and political will sometimes hides behind jurisdictions and says don't at look at me, it's not my business. But I think at the end of the day, if we're going to do something about it, we have to discuss political will.

I want to thank you all for coming and for sharing with us.

Ms. Gail Nicholas: Will you have a chance to read our presentation, since we didn't have an opportunity to do that?

The Chair: To read your presentations? We don't have time now, because we have—

Ms. Natalie McBride: She asks if she could leave it with you.

The Chair: Yes, absolutely. Oh yes, for us to read it. I thought for you to read it.

Ms. Sarah Rose: I just want to ensure that when you're having people leave their communities because of violence, you need to understand that when they come to an urban setting, they're losing culture, and culture is important.

I work with young families who are living in an urban setting, and they're off reserve, and they're looking for culture for their children. So we do have an organization here, but we only have one, and it's aboriginal head start. We provide culture to those children aged two to five. Then we also provide a community setting for the parents, where we teach the parents culture as well, where we're teaching the language, we're teaching basketry, we're teaching our beadwork. We're teaching them how to cook traditional food, because they have been removed from that. So you need to understand, we need to bring their culture back too.

We're losing our culture, and no one seems to be fighting to bring that culture back. It is imperative. You want to end violence, educate the population about who we are, and bring us our culture back, and we won't have to discuss violence, because there's an understanding of who aboriginal people are, and what we bring to the society of this country.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Sarah.

I'd like to suspend, and if you could leave with the clerk all the data you brought with you, we'll be able to distribute it.

● (1030)

(Pause)

● (1035)

The Chair: Good morning, and thank you for coming.

We really appreciate your being able to tell us some of the things we're seeking to find out. This is a committee that's looking at violence against aboriginal women. While we know all of these things, I think we're finding that with the reiteration of how all the issues are impacting on the real lives of people in a practical sense, it's getting worse.

We're looking at the nature, scope, and extent of violence against aboriginal women in Canada. We're going to every region to see how it differs. We're also looking at the root causes. Many of us have been told that we know the root causes, but the problems that we face in getting some kind of shift in what seems to be an increasing amount of violence against aboriginal women in this country are what we're hoping to get to grips with here. We're looking for what you can tell us to make a practical difference, how you see our looking at this from a national or a local scope, and what the things are that you think need to be done.

Normally in a meeting like this we'd give you ten minutes to present, and then everyone would have a short timeframe in which they could ask you questions. However, we've found that as we go into communities, it's been working better to have a discussion that allows everyone an opportunity to talk to each other. What I would like to do, then, is ask each of you to present a three- or four-minute synopsis of what you want to bring to the table, and then we can open it up to be interactive. What do you think about that?

A voice: That sounds good.

The Chair: Okay, that sounds good. All right.

We're going to start with Melissa Cooke from Lennox Island First Nation.

● (1040)

Ms. Melissa Cooke (Women's Shelter Coordinator, Lennox Island First Nation): Good morning, Chair and committee members.

I work at the women's shelter at Lennox Island. The name of the shelter is Chief Mary Bernard Memorial Women's Shelter. We have five rooms and approximately 12 beds.

Basically, we help women do budgeting skills and life skills so that they can move forward on their own. Aboriginal women can apply to stay for up to a year; if they want to work on parenting skills and things like that, that gives them the time, and it also gives them time to look at housing.

One of the initiatives—I know it's a continuation—is to look at education. Some of the women who come into the shelter might not know the effects of harm in terms of emotional and verbal abuse. They often say, “Well, he doesn't hit me”, so education is an ongoing thing.

People from the community talk about some of the root causes as alcoholism, financial strain, and seeing violence as normal—the abuser as a victim of violence.

I spoke to an elder, and her words were around going back to the grassroots and having more healing for people. If I can quote her a little bit, she said:

> We need to educate our families on healthy living and have the supports for all the community to see a safe community. Aboriginal women help each other, and we're the life-givers and nurturers. We understand each other. Right now the need is there, but we are so limited in programs, services, and funding that we cannot get our women to the next step of life, and they fall back.

Hearing the women's voices and seeing what they need means that one of the things in the community is having the solutions come from the community, and then members can hold one another accountable.

I know from working at the shelter that one of the services that could probably be enhanced on Lennox Island is counselling. There's one psychologist who comes in once a week, and there could be a lot more services and support for women.

In a nutshell, that's what I have to say.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll go to Ms. Roseanne Sark, director of the health program for the Mi'kmaq Confederacy of Prince Edward Island.

Ms. Roseanne Sark (Director of Health Program, Mi'kmaq Confederacy of Prince Edward Island): Thank you for the invitation to speak today. I have prepared a brief summary of some of the points I want to bring up today. I would like to speak a little about the work I do and the involvement I have with the Aboriginal Women's Association.

I am an active member of the Aboriginal Women's Association of P.E.I. I have presented workshops on family violence to the women in the community on a number of occasions.

My background is in family violence prevention. I worked in the program in Lennox Island First Nation, more so about prevention and basically promoting zero tolerance for family violence.

I worked closely with the community in implementing different activities that help to promote prevention. It was back in the early 1990s, when we didn't talk about it within the community. It was my role to bring light to the issue of family violence and to help people feel more comfortable in speaking about it.

Some of the things we implemented were activities that promoted culture and healthy families, as well as some parenting courses.

I've been working in the health program for about five years now, and it has been a lot of work in terms of developing the program, but we've always been working in all aspects of health. One of those areas is empowering women and working on different programs, and also partnering.

For me, partnering with the Aboriginal Women's Association is important, because they've come a long way. They were at a point at one time where the association wasn't as active and as proactive as they are today. Today they're doing some great things in the community that need to be recognized not just by governments but by the community itself. There's a lot of participation happening in the communities, which is a great thing, because that way the women and young girls can see the progress, even being together and standing together, especially with the Sisters in Spirit campaign. That's a positive thing they can unite on. That's where it stands; it's the unity of women who can stand up for their rights, who can stand up for who they are as women—aboriginal women, at that. That's a great thing.

Being an aboriginal woman myself, I'm proud to say that I am a Mi'kmaq woman from P.E.I. Those are some of the things that we need to encourage other women to be proud of, of who they are as an aboriginal woman. It speaks to our identity, and our identity is being aboriginal in this country.

It's great to see good things happening, and if I can help the Aboriginal Women's Association in my role as the director of health, I will do so, and I have been.

Another point I would like to make is about the work we are doing right now in our program with respect to the impacts of the residential school survivor settlements. It's great that they're going to be getting settlements, but there are going to be a number of impacts once those settlements start coming in. With the common experience payments that went out, some of the impacts were not so good. The stories are not even worth commenting on.

● (1045)

I like to be a positive person in the work that I do and I try not to dwell on the negative, but they are our realities today. Those are the things we have to take a look at in terms of ensuring that the survivors are safeguarded. They all have different needs, and so do women in their lives. So addressing the needs of a woman, where she's at in life, is something I would like to see happening, because everyone has different needs.

We all have different needs here. Some may need help in getting a job, some may need help in getting out of a violent situation, some may want to improve themselves in terms of their career, and some might just want to find out who they are as aboriginal women. I think that's important for us to take a look at. What is it that we can do in a practical sense?

Those practical differences are not just based on funding but based on the will to work together, the will to make a difference in working together.

I really am proud to say that I'm from Lennox Island, which has been proactive in working towards the betterment of women. The women's shelter that is in place there now is a great thing. It's great, and it's not just servicing aboriginal women; it's servicing other women as well, and I am proud of that.

With that, I'll let some other person speak.

● (1050)

The Chair: Thank you.

Now, from the Newfoundland Aboriginal Women's Network, we have Sheila Robinson, president. Sheila, would you begin?

Ms. Sheila Robinson (President, Newfoundland Aboriginal Women's Network): First of all, I thank you as well for the opportunity to speak here today. I'm here to tell you about the good work the Newfoundland Aboriginal Women's Network has been doing on our violence prevention initiative over the past few years.

We are a relatively young organization; we were incorporated in 2005. The majority of our membership is non-status aboriginal women. We also have status on-reserve and status off-reserve aboriginal women in our membership. Our work in violence prevention began in 2007, when we went out into our communities and held talking circles because we wanted to ask the women about the issues in the communities. They told us they felt isolated and that they wanted to be part of issues that were impacting their lives and they needed to participate in cultural teachings. Many women are afraid of reporting abuse. There is abuse and racism going on in our communities on a regular basis. They feel the need to educate both women and men that violence is never the answer.

So we took that very strong message and we implemented a three-phase project called “Aboriginal Women on the Verge of Rising: Breaking Barriers, Building Strong Minds”, and we sought to empower women in their own communities. We looked at a couple of toolkits and we purchased a toolkit from the Native Women's Association of Canada and we got, free of charge, a toolkit that was developed here in Fredericton, “The Healing Journey: Family Violence Prevention in Aboriginal Communities”.

We brought women together who were willing to participate in a train-the-trainer workshop. So for 14 months we had 53 women from 18 communities travel, sometimes in the winter—some of them were pregnant, and then they brought their infants—to take this train-the-trainer, violence, and violence prevention issues, things like sexual assault, date violence, bullying, emotional and psychological abuse, domestic violence, and teen suicide awareness and prevention. From there we sent the women back into their communities to give these workshops. We've had 36 workshops in violence prevention and 18 workshops in teen suicide take place to date, with more than 800 participants.

Because of the work we were doing, the women in a couple of the communities mentioned there was elder abuse taking place and they needed information on elder abuse. What we've done with those workshops is we've combined a cultural component and have traditional teachings with the classroom teachings. So in addition to the information on teen suicide or emotional and psychological abuse, the women learned about healing circles, sweat lodges, pipe ceremonies, smudge ceremonies. Because of Newfoundland's unique situation under the terms of union in 1949, Joey Smallwood with a stroke of the pen said there were no Indians on the island.

Then we dealt with the whole massacre myth, that the Mi'kmaq were brought in to kill the Beothuks, which was taught in our schools. We've had a tremendous loss of culture, language, and identity as aboriginal people. So the cultural component tied with the classroom teachings, for lack of a better word, has been very effective in our communities.

Then, as I said, some women asked for elder abuse to be included using the same type of cultural model we've been using. So then we got some more funding and implemented elder abuse workshops in our communities. We initially targeted 72 participants, and so far we've had 94 participants, with one workshop left to take place.

It has really evolved. We are going to continue this work in our communities over the next two years. We're going to continue to offer those workshops in our communities for the next year and we're also going to look at how to increase participation with the men. We've had some young men attend our workshops in our communities even though they were targeted toward women. Those young men have been very open about the abuse they've experienced and about the cultural healing that's taken place for them as a result of attending the workshops and reconnecting with their culture.

If I could sum up the work we're doing in one sentence, it would be that for this to be successful, to heal, and end the cycle of violence it has to be at the grassroots level in the communities, and both men and women have to be involved and the reclaiming of culture has to be a significant part of the healing.

Thank you.

● (1055)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I would like to very quickly have the committee tell you who they are and then we can start going back and forth in terms of discussing this issue.

Kelly, would you start, please?

Mrs. Kelly Block: Yes.

Good morning, I'm Kelly Block. I'm a member of the Conservative government, representing Saskatoon—Rosetown—Biggar.

It's a real privilege to be here with you this morning. I don't typically sit on this committee, but I have appreciated all I've been able to learn. Thank you.

Ms. Sandra Gruescu: Good morning. My name is Sandra Gruescu. I work for the Library of Parliament and am responsible for writing the final report and recommendations, and I serve this committee.

Ms. Julie Cool: I'm Julie Cool, and I'm also an analyst serving this committee.

The Chair: I'm Hedy Fry. I'm the chair of the committee. I'm a Liberal from Vancouver Centre, all the way from British Columbia, the other part of the country.

I was status of women minister for six and a half years with Mr. Chrétien's government. These issues seem to be recurring. Nothing seems to be changing. It all seems to be the same, in fact getting worse. So I have a deep sense of frustration.

I think you said it, that grassroots activism seems to be the only way to go and the best way to go, doing it in a culturally sensitive manner.

Ms. Angela Crandall: I'm Angela Crandall. I'm the clerk of the committee, and I provide it with procedural advice and administrative support.

Mr. Rob Clarke: My name is Rob Clarke. I'm from northern Saskatchewan, from the riding of Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River. I'm the only first nations member in the House of Commons. I would say that about 72% of my riding is aboriginal.

I also sit on the aboriginal affairs committee, and I think I've seen you at one of the committee meetings, possibly. I just can't recall which hearing we were having.

Kelly and I are both substituting for other MPs. What you're going to say here is probably going to help me on my committee as well, on aboriginal affairs. There seem to be a lot of issues bridging the committees, the same issues from committee to committee. I'm hoping some of the testimony you will provide us with today can be taken back to our regular committees as well.

Ms. Nicole Demers: Hi. I'm Nicole Demers, member of Parliament for Laval, Quebec. I'm Bloc Québécois, and I'm very happy to be here. Thank you.

The Chair: Does anyone want to start asking questions? Is there any discussion to begin? Does anyone want to kickstart it?

Mrs. Kelly Block: Sure.

As I said, I'm not typically a member of this committee, but I've had an opportunity this past week to travel with the committee on this study. We were in Iqaluit and Labrador City earlier this week.

A lot of similar issues were identified, regardless of the region we were in. We have similar issues in Saskatchewan: a large geographic area and a number of first nations in our communities. Rob didn't mention that his riding of Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River covers two-thirds our province. Most of our aboriginal population live in that riding. However, I have a large population of aboriginal people living in the urban part of my riding.

I've heard an awful lot this week about the need to address the issue of jurisdiction and whose responsibility it is to provide services and ensure there is adequate funding in place to address the issues you and others have identified this week.

I truly believe it is our role at the federal level to articulate a vision for all Canadians on the health, welfare, well-being, and quality of life we experience in our country, recognizing that we have a very diverse population and that nations within our nation have values and cultures that need to be respected.

I also believe we need to work with the provinces and territories to establish some guiding principles that will help us in determining the partnership we will have in responding to the issues and needs that have been identified at the local level. That's where organizations like yours come in. You're at the front line. You are dealing with our population and providing services. You're the boots on the ground, so to speak, seeing things on a daily basis. So we really rely on opportunities to hear from your organizations to help us, at what feels like a really high level sometimes, address these issues.

It was mentioned in our last panel that there is an Atlantic approach, to some degree, in addressing issues within the aboriginal communities. That might even be borne out here this morning, seeing that we have representatives from Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland here in New Brunswick.

Can you tell me how that plays itself out? In the work you're doing and the kinds of partnerships you have with organizations in other provinces, is there more of an Atlantic approach compared to a provincial approach?

● (1100)

Ms. Roseanne Sark: I always believe in working together with other groups, because the way I see it, in numbers there is more progress.

At one point in time, because I have a background in working on family violence prevention, I had the opportunity to work with the Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research. One of the ways I got involved in working with them was in attending a session that they were holding, a workshop. They were talking about the research they were doing on women living with violence in rural and isolated areas. They were doing research and I commented about aboriginal women and their approach, because they were looking at it from the perspective of a prism. It was a prism model they were going to use, different lenses of violence. You may be able to refer to it on their website.

One of the things I referred to was that aboriginal women have evolved from a culture of their own, from a society they knew so well. Through the evolution of colonization, things changed for the women and they were able to adapt easily, based on just their nature of accepting another society. So I talked a little bit about the perspective of aboriginal women, where they're coming from and how that has evolved, from that lens, which is living close to the land and living in sync with the seasons. Today, that is still within them and how they see.

Today's life and today's reality is in upheaval. Those things that used to come so nicely for them, their living in harmony, are not harmonious any more, because they've moved from a matriarchal society to a patriarchal society and they have to live with what we now have.

Well, they don't necessarily have to. They have a choice to embrace who they are as aboriginal women. They can embrace the identity they have. There are still some teachings happening today that allow that, and I think those kinds of cultural teachings still need to continue so they can seek that balance.

The balance is not just with their culture, it's about adapting. We've adapted to what we have today. That adaptation is about the things we can live with, those great things that are being offered to our communities, and based on the hard work that organizations are doing.

I was involved with that research and I was able to bring a perspective and speak to how we can evaluate from an aboriginal perspective the programs being offered within the community. If you look at the program being offered, is it meeting our needs? Is it meeting the needs of the aboriginal population? Whenever they're designed or whoever designs them, is it looking at it through that lens of the aboriginal community?

● (1105)

We're looking at many different aspects of safety for women and at the makeup of our communities. The makeup of our communities was your culture, your community, your school, all of your environments that make up a community. It was a really good project that I was involved with.

In terms of other Atlantic approaches, in terms of health, we take a look at all areas. I'm involved with the Mi'kmaq and Maliseet Atlantic Health Board, and that health board looks at all areas relating to health. Mental health is one of the priority areas. In terms of taking a look at that, we've done our environmental scans and they're Atlantic. A number of initiatives are Atlantic. But there are some challenges as well in terms of trying to reach everyone, because Newfoundland and Labrador sometimes get left out. I can also speak of P.E.I. as well in terms of how things that get developed on a national level don't always get the perspective of P.E.I. or Newfoundland. I think that needs to be looked at.

One of our health technicians—and this is an example—goes to the AFN, or other groups that talk about national frameworks, and they go representing P.E.I. But my concern is, does this person really know what's going on in P.E.I.? And who better yet to speak on behalf of P.E.I. than P.E.I.? I think that in itself should be looked at, because they're closer to the concerns and issues that are going on within the province.

So in respect to the Aboriginal Women's Association, we have it covered because we have the Aboriginal Women's Association of P.E.I., but then we're taking a look at other aspects relating to wellness. Health is a big piece of it. So health always gets talked about. Health is part of your balance. Health means a lot.

When I do my work, I always look at things in a holistic fashion, and I am a big advocate of the medicine wheel. The medicine wheel is about that, your well-being. You have your individual self's balance, you have your family's balance, you have your community's balance, and then you have your broader society, and how those communicate with each other is determined by how we work well together.

I think working well jointly is something that we really need to encourage within the provinces. I think it's great.

● (1110)

Mrs. Kelly Block: If I could just follow up on—

The Chair: We need to move along. Thank you.

Melissa and Sheila, do you have anything you want to add to what Roseanne just said?

Ms. Melissa Cooke: A little.

The Chair: Go for it.

Ms. Melissa Cooke: As far as an Atlantic approach is concerned, we're a fairly new shelter. We've been open for three years. In the very beginning, we visited shelters in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia to see what their policies and procedures were. Some of the things may not work in our community, but we'd have to assess that and make decisions.

Another thing is we have gotten a few referrals from New Brunswick and Nova Scotia for safety. Women have come to P.E.I. and worked on themselves and decided that they wanted to go back to their reserve. There are partnerships in place.

Ms. Sheila Robinson: It's interesting that you say “Atlantic approach”, because we've really been isolated in Newfoundland. I say Newfoundland as separate from Labrador. Part of the issue is that we're still not status, not considered status, and we're evolving to the point where women are understanding that you don't need to carry your birth certificate to know that you're alive. Nor do you need that status card to know you're aboriginal. That's a really new thing for us.

There is an organization, the Newfoundland Native Women's Association, which is linked to NWAC, but we were finding that it was not reaching out into the communities. I personally wrote two letters to that organization asking to join and didn't get a response. There are lots of stories like that. Without getting too political, we decided, well, let's form our own organization.

We're looking to reach out as much as possible. I think what we're probably going to do is go into Labrador. Patty Pottle, the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, is very familiar with the work we're doing and has asked us personally if we could come. We're getting tremendous financial support from our provincial government. In the current budget, they gave us $100,000 in operating funds, which is unheard of, because that's not project funding; that's money we can operate with.

We are partnering within our own province with women's centres, the RCMP, family resource centres, and so on. We're partnering with Conne River, which is the only reserve on the island part of the province. That is working, but we still have a way to go before we connect with our sisters in the other provinces. We're very much looking forward to that.

The Acting Chair (Ms. Nicole Demers): Kelly, you had another question?

Mrs. Kelly Block: Yes.

Just as follow-up to what you have shared, I certainly think there was wisdom in determining to come out to Atlantic Canada to talk about the issues you're facing and the solutions, because it seems to me that with smaller populations there should be some strategies you find work really well. I'm glad you touched upon some of the partnerships you've been a part of, Sheila.

I'm wondering if you could highlight any success stories taking place here in Atlantic Canada, about individuals or groups we can learn from. Are there any successful models that we can use throughout the rest of Canada?

● (1115)

Ms. Sheila Robinson: I'll start.

I think the work that the Newfoundland Aboriginal Women's Network is doing in our violence prevention initiative using a train-the-trainer approach is a success story. We're hearing from the women that there's a lot of empowerment. Many of the women who came and agreed to become trainers didn't have formal education. They had never facilitated. Many of them were victims of violence themselves and have lived a lifetime of abuse. In 14 months, we saw these women grow as if we had planted them in fertile soil. They became stronger communicators, stronger leaders. They were willing to go back into their communities and share what they'd learned.

One of the individuals just went to a workshop in Nova Scotia on starting a business. Several of them have gone back to school and have successfully completed formal training and are now working full-time. They've found their voice.

As I slipped in earlier this morning, I heard that cultural revitalization was being alluded to as being very important. And it is very important. There are women who have never heard or held a drum, who have never participated in a sweetgrass ceremony, and suddenly they are gathering in circles. Because of the work we're doing, schools are calling and asking us to come out. Seniors centres are asking us to come out. Community groups are asking us to come and share. The culture is now something we can be proud of. We turn to it. We always ask what our culture tells us, what we should do. We go to our elders and ask, rather than trying to find solutions out of a dictionary or off a Google search. We go to our elders and ask how we can do it. We sit in circle. If there's an issue, we sit in a circle and talk it through, and it works.

I'm very proud to say that I think we have a model solution.

Ms. Melissa Cooke: One of the examples was very similar around our support group for women who experience violence. It was well attended, and I think it was because there was an elder in the group. The women were very involved in learning about the cultural component and having the teachings.

The Chair: Roseanne.

Ms. Roseanne Sark: One of the things that has been working well for me is relationship building in terms of the work we do with the residential school survivors program. We attended an Indian residential schools front-line workers conference. It was for front-line workers who are working with survivors. A number of us were there from P.E.I., so we decided what we can do in P.E.I.

What we came up with was that we can create a working group that can address many of the impacts that survivors will be faced with, knowing they have different needs. Some might have violence concerns, some might have financial concerns, different areas that needed to be looked at.

We do have the police involved—not just the RCMP, but the city police as well, because of the urban population. We have the Native Women's Association at the table, we have the Native Council at the table, and we're also at the table. Because we have a program, we administer the operations of the committee, so we often develop a work plan together, because we're all coming from different perspectives, right?

This is working. We're still in operation. We're making progress. We're developing a resource guide for front-line workers that they would use as a guide for any survivors who might come looking for assistance. And I think that concept can be used in other areas—violence against aboriginal women, it can fit anywhere. It's all about relationship building, taking a look at the gaps we're faced with. We can have a frank discussion with the RCMP and tell them what's happening in our community. What can you do for us, or what can we do together?

So we worked on some projects. We did cultural awareness training with the RCMP. We designed it so they could understand the impacts aboriginal people are facing within the community. We find it's working really well. It's sometimes slow progress, but we are getting some work done.

It's a proactive group, and it's being inclusive to different groups. I think that's one area of a successful model.

● (1120)

The Chair: Thank you.

Nicole.

Ms. Nicole Demers: Madam Chair, thank you.

Thank you so very much for being here.

I listened quite carefully to what you've all said and I retained three things: we must work together, men and women must work together, going back to the grassroots, and listening to the elders.

We've seen a trend of change, more out west though, of women being elected chiefs of their communities, and I was wondering if the same thing was happening in the eastern part of Canada. We've seen Madam Archambault in Rivière-du-Loup being elected chief of the Maliseet nation. Do you believe it would make a change if more elected chiefs were women?

Sheila, I was shocked when you said Mr. Smallwood said there were no Indians at all in Newfoundland in 1949 when they signed the Constitution. How many aboriginal people were living on the island at that time?

Ms. Sheila Robinson: I can't tell you how many were living there then, but I can tell you that the Federation of Newfoundland Indians is in the process of forming the Qalipu Mi'Kmaq First Nation Band and that it may take place this year. It looks like there will be upwards of 30,000 members when that new band is formed.

Ms. Nicole Demers: So 30,000. It's quite interesting to hear something like that and to know that someone just....

Ms. Sheila Robinson: At the stroke of a pen.

Ms. Nicole Demers: Could you also please comment on what I said about women chiefs and all of that?

Ms. Sheila Robinson: We don't have an official band yet to represent us, so we haven't had that election. Within the non-status bands, there are some women who are chiefs. Man, woman, child, elder, if their heart is pure and they have the best interests of the people in mind and they talk to the grassroots, then they will be a good leader. Being a woman or a man is just one of the categories, not necessarily the most important one. It's if they fit the other categories that matters. That's my personal belief.

Ms. Roseanne Sark: We do have a woman chief, and soon there's going to be an election and her contender is another woman. So I believe it is true that it doesn't matter if you're a male or female. But women have a sensitivity to the issue. They may even have encountered the issue of violence in their lifetime. Overcoming those issues is an example of leadership and showing that you can be empowered, that you can move ahead, and that you can stand up for your community. It shows great leadership and great mentorship. That's how I see it.

● (1125)

Ms. Nicole Demers: Okay.

You said you received $100,000 from Newfoundland and it's like a gift from heaven. What amount of money would be necessary from the federal government to do what you want to do within your community? Is it a big amount of money? Is it a small amount of money? Do we have to worry when you say that you need more services and all of that? How do we plead your cause with the government in order to make it understand the need and everything that can be done with such money?

Ms. Sheila Robinson: For the three-phase project that we undertook, “Aboriginal Women on the Verge of Rising”, we had $156,000 from Status of Women Canada, and partnership funding from Canadian Heritage and the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador of $122,800 for that project. Then when we were asked to do elder abuse workshops in our communities, we got an additional $25,000, I think it was.

Ms. Nicole Demers: Did you mean to say that was all it cost you for the first program, “Aboriginal Women on the Verge of Rising”, for the 43 women who participated for 14 months? Were you travelling back and forth and all of that?

Ms. Sheila Robinson: Yes.

Ms. Nicole Demers: You made do with that money? You stretched it?

Ms. Sheila Robinson: We stretched it and stretched it and stretched it. It meant that pregnant women had to travel five hours in the winter down the Northern Peninsula, but they were so committed to being there, they went.

When the women went into their communities to give workshops, there were very small honorariums attached: $75 for doing a half-day workshop, and $150 for facilitating a full-day workshop. Anecdotally, what we found after the fact was that those women then took their honorariums and donated them back to their local women's organizations.

Ms. Nicole Demers: Would you say that the success of this program could be transported to other communities to be able to do the same thing there?

Ms. Sheila Robinson: We think so. Labrador is interested, and we're interested in going to Labrador. It's a different culture, but you can apply the model. My understanding of the toolkit that we purchased from NWAC, the Native Women's Association of Canada, was that of all the people who were trained in using this toolkit, we probably took it the furthest and had the most application.

So there are some resources there.

Ms. Nicole Demers: Do you have a report on the success of that project?

Ms. Sheila Robinson: Yes.

Ms. Nicole Demers: Would it be possible to forward it to us?

Ms. Sheila Robinson: Yes, I have some copies of some things here today.

Operational funding is the other thing. You can get project funding, which means that you can do X, Y, and Z, but it means there is no money for a board meeting of the board of directors overseeing a project. There's no money for a phone call, and there's no money for an audit if you found out you had to do an audit. Where would that $800 come from?

So while we're fortunate with project funding, getting operational funding of $100,000 means we can actually keep the lights on in our office. It's core funding.

Ms. Nicole Demers: Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you all.

Mr. Clarke.

Mr. Rob Clarke: Thanks very much, Madam Chair.

Roseanne, you mentioned the RCMP. Ironically, my background before becoming a member of Parliament was with the RCMP. You indicated the meetings and consultations that you have, probably with the police management board or community policing board. I think you spoke a little bit about the mandate or what some of the community policing boards do in regard to domestic violence.

I also sit on the aboriginal affairs committee, and one of the things I'm curious about is that we are looking at domestic violence on reserve. What I've had to face in my past in going to domestic situations is that allegations that come forward, whether from the female or male, and the positioning of the family most affect the children a lot of times. I've had to do child apprehensions and all of that.

Having to remove the female from the home because that woman does not have ownership of the home really creates a lot of problems, because what we're having to do is to take the mother and the children out of the home while the father remains.

Now that I'm sitting on the aboriginal affairs committee, I'm just wondering what your position is on the matrimonial real property bill that's been reintroduced.

● (1130)

Ms. Roseanne Sark: That's an interesting topic to discuss, because matrimonial property rights should rightfully stay with the woman if she's a victim of violence within her home, because who is the violator if it's violence against her and her children? Then in terms of safety, though, there's a concern if the woman is to stay in the home. What measures are taken to secure her safety there? Is it the role of the police to stand by to ensure safety? Is there certainty that the woman and child will be safe?

There have been many discussions, even within our organization, and that's one thing that's been a concern. Why should she leave her home? So there have been lengthy discussions, and I think we really need to look more closely at the certainty of safety.

The Chair: Mr. Clarke, go ahead.

Mr. Rob Clarke: I realize it's a very awkward position. With my background, most of my service was in aboriginal communities. Having to deal with domestic violence was always a priority, going into the homes of the victims. I can understand that when the police have to go in, we have to look at the safety of the victims and take measures.

I mentioned before in a committee meeting that the RCMP, or even police officers, are peacekeepers. They have to keep the peace. We take all the steps necessary. There are peace bonds, where the female can lay out information to keep the offender away. If it gets down to domestic violence, physical abuse, aggravated assault, or any type of violence, it's then up to the police to undertake to make the offender stay away from that home. It's also up to the courts to impose sanctions so the offender can't go back.

But the difficulty I've seen and some of the problems coming forward now, with this act mentioning real property, is that there is a little bit of hesitation from first nations communities. For one, they don't know how to adjust their band council resolutions to meet this act. But from where I'm sitting and what I've seen, I think this is probably good legislation to protect women.

Ms. Roseanne Sark: It depends on the policing agreement the band council has with the RCMP—or if it's a tribal council. In P.E.I. they have RCMP police agreements. I think it's the responsibility of the powers that be to ensure that the RCMP are educated on this so they understand what “matrimonial property rights” means, if they are going to adhere to that legislation.

● (1135)

The Chair: Thank you, Rob.

We seem to be talking a lot about domestic violence, which I think is a huge piece. We heard in Nunavut and in Labrador City that there are two areas in which domestic violence may play itself out in terms of the environment that are different.

On reserve, if there is domestic violence, a lot of women don't want to report it. A lot of women don't want the partner to be taken away from the home. There is a problem within the reserve itself of fingering the person who is violent to you, especially if the person is your spouse or your partner. So there is that problem. Where can anybody go for safety on reserve when you're in an isolated area? The woman cannot leave the home. Where does she go? The man, should he leave the home, where does he go? And then when the RCMP is called in and has to look at charges being laid, that creates another barrier, because the woman doesn't want the spouse or partner charged, she just doesn't want him to beat her any more. So that's the first piece.

In the urban areas, of course, that domestic violence is different, because the women are in a bigger community and they can go into a shelter. They can go into a transition house if those things exist, and then they can go into second-stage housing.

That's domestic violence, but I'm not hearing a lot about the systemic violence, which is what we're talking about as well: addiction, prostitution, the stigma of being an aboriginal woman, period; the fact that when aboriginal women are murdered and raped, there doesn't seem to be the same response from society as when a non-aboriginal woman is murdered, raped, or disappears. So we have that broader context that I would like to hear discussed.

Finally, there is the issue of systemic discrimination, period, that whole shame of being an aboriginal person, the double standard applied to aboriginal women versus other women. In other words, aboriginal women don't seem to matter as much or are always supposed to be prostitutes and are always supposed to be addicted, that it's the nature of aboriginal women.

There's that kind of discrimination that is going on with regard to attitudes. I would like to hear how we deal with those issues, because when you talk about domestic violence, finding a way to get shelter for a woman, finding a way to get her out of the community, finding a way to get her and her children out of that is one thing. That's one component. But what about the broader picture? We need to talk about the broader picture. How do we fix that? How do we change that?

Roseanne, you talked about educating police, city police and the RCMP, in terms of that kind of cultural education, about understanding aboriginal realities, etc. That's one piece. What do you do about the fact that society seems to have an attitude that is in itself violent towards aboriginal men and women?

I just want some response to these issues, because I haven't heard it here this morning.

We heard in Nunavut that men are angry. Aboriginal men are angry that they have been taken away from the traditional roles they have had in families. They used to be the hunter, the fisher, the guy who went out there and brought the food in, etc. Women had a role in which they kept the communities together and did all those things.

Because aboriginal men are now having to live within this non-aboriginal world in which they have to go out and find a job in a place where first and foremost they're discriminated against in terms of the jobs, they have a sense of hopelessness. They can't find work, they drop out of school, all these kinds of things that make them lose their identities and lose their sense of power, so that they have to take it out on somebody. They themselves have turned to drug addiction, and obviously violence as a response of lashing out against the powerlessness that they feel.

We heard those things, and those are such huge issues. What are the practical ways to deal with this?

Obviously one has to go back and look at aboriginal culture in itself, but we can't go back to the day when the man was the one who went out and shot and hunted to eat, because that world is gone. How does that transition take place, for an aboriginal man to be able to get a sense of worth and a sense of power within his family unit and within his community, and within the society at large, that he is seen as a worthwhile, productive, powerful, dignified human being?

Where do we go? This is like trying to swallow a horse, it's so big. How do we deal with it? I would really like to have some discussion on that, because it's a big chunk of what we're talking about, not simply domestic violence.

So who wants to go first? Roseanne?

● (1140)

Ms. Roseanne Sark: Yes, I can go first.

I agree with you in terms of how there is a difference between on reserve and off reserve. On reserve, aboriginal women may encounter violence against them, but they don't necessarily want to lose their husband, their family, all the things that matter to them.

The issue is that the woman is experiencing violence against her and she wants that to stop. The reason that a lot of women may be apprehensive about even calling the police is because they don't want to uproot their family unit. They don't want to lose all that—the community sense, for one, their family sense. All their family are in the community, and it might cause community uproar because of the husband's family. It really impacts the whole community, not just the family.

Yes, they are human beings. These are men who have a desire to have a family. They have a desire to be happy. One of the things they are having difficulty with is ensuring they have balance themselves.

Everybody needs to get their needs met. It just so happens that one of the ways a man, or anybody for that matter—it doesn't matter whether they are a man or woman—can achieve their balance is with power. When a woman feels empowerment, that's great, but how you achieve that empowerment is either negative or positive. You can achieve it on the negative side.

If a man goes home after a hard day's work and he has issues at work, he's frustrated. Dealing with anger may not be the same as going home and meditating. They go home and that's where they feel they can get their outlet, with the people they love the most. Their outlet happens to be their wife or their child. It's “get away from here”. Even though that man may love his family, that's what he's learned. Either he's learned it or he explodes...and maybe it's the one time; oftentimes it's every once in a while.

Maybe they don't have the job they want, or maybe it's not the career they're looking for. If all they're concerned about is putting food on the table—and putting food on the table may mean cleaning a ditch, making sure they do their job just to get a bit of money—where is the balance there? Is the empowerment of that man where it needs to be?

I think that's where it needs to be acknowledged that they're human beings. They don't want—

The Chair: What do you do about that? How do you deal with that? Does anyone have an answer, a suggestion? How do you help get back that empowerment, that sense of control?

Ms. Roseanne Sark: You don't separate the work we do with women; you include the men. The family unit is not based on the woman and the child. The family unit is based on the man, woman, and the child. Including programs and services for aboriginal men, or finding those avenues that can help direct them to get the support they need—

The Chair: Are there such services? Is there a need for them? Are there any such services for men? We don't even have enough services for women. Are there services for men, at all?

Sheila, do you have something you want to add to that? Melissa?

Ms. Sheila Robinson: I was just thinking about a couple of things. The work we intend to do next year is to empower the men to be part of the solution, to be role models, to go into their communities as advocates against violence.

I'm not sure if you're familiar with some TV commercials that are running in our province right now. They're very simplistic. Some have an aboriginal theme, and some are regular people, for lack of a better word. It's quite simple. You see a father and child, and it says, “You teach him to ride a bike, to tie his shoes. Teach him that all forms of violence against women are wrong.”

They're marvellous commercials. They're very simple and very powerful. They should be running across the country.

● (1145)

The Chair: That leads us back to the thing we talked about. What's the role of the federal government to be a coordinator, put best practices out there, and do that kind of stuff?

Could any of you talk about the issue of the systemic violence outside of the community and the discrimination—the way society treats aboriginal people and systemic violence against aboriginal women as something that you shouldn't care about because it's just aboriginal women; they're used to that; that's the nature of the beast, you know? That's something that's a huge piece we're hearing as well.

You seem to be doing a lot of good work, Sheila, in terms of that train-the-trainer thing, because you're doing small practical steps that take the women back and train and teach and try to give that empowerment to the women in the community. You say you're working on male empowerment too. Is there anything else, other than those very practical things that one can do to deal with the whole concept? I know discrimination against aboriginal people is rampant in our society and in all of the Americas. Are there any suggestions you have of what could be done?

I mean, prevention and education is a huge feat, so should there be an education program, do you think, for non-aboriginal people to learn and put aboriginal people into a different place, other than this stigma that's attached to being an aboriginal person, this throw-away idea of aboriginal women—the stigma that you don't need to worry about them, they're just not worthwhile?

Do you see the need for some kind of national...?

Ms. Sheila Robinson: Cultural sensitivity?

The Chair: Cultural sensitivity, education, the ads are one thing, but the ads are basically about male violence against women, per se. In Australia, when I visited there as minister, they had started that, because Australia is a very macho society that actually likes sport. Australian men are into sport—not aboriginal men necessarily, just men. So they have these ads, just as you say, with the big football stars and big rugby stars. All these guys are coming on the radio now and saying "I know you get mad, but don't go home and beat the woman" or whatever, the sheila. They're doing this kind of thing, which is just like this. You have to deal with your anger in a different way, other than beating up on women.

That's a generic thing. I'm talking about sensitivity towards the sense of who aboriginal people are. Earlier on, Nicole said that when she was young, in school, she got taught a history of aboriginal people that was based on the idea of aboriginal people being bad and that we had to kill them all to get where we wanted to go as colonials. There were cowboys and Indians. Indians were bad and cowboys were good—that kind of simplistic thing. I know we need to move beyond that. How do we do that? Is there something practical and tangible?

Sheila, you're the tangible lady here. Is there something practical and tangible you think we can do?

Ms. Sheila Robinson: I'm just thinking about an example. I'm aware that this is being recorded.

With the Olympics coming to Canada, there was an issue with the Conne River Choir, the Se't A'newey Choir. There was confusion as to whether they were invited or not invited to come and be part of the opening ceremony. It made the national news.

A lot of the feedback from people in the outside communities, the province, and in fact the country was that they didn't have it in writing. Well, as an aboriginal woman, I know that your word is far more powerful than a contract, so it made sense to me that they believed they were going. If there could be a tangible example of how cultural sensitivity is important, maybe that's one. If you understand the aboriginal perspective, you know that you take someone at their word, and that is far more valuable.

Although I'm loath to use that as an example, it is percolating in my head.

The Chair: Yes.

Melissa, do you have anything you wanted to add to this?

Ms. Melissa Cooke: Just a continuation of what came to mind was the Sisters in Spirit. We just had our first walk on P.E.I., so being included in national initiatives like that is important.

● (1150)

Ms. Roseanne Sark: To speak to the national initiative on Sisters in Spirit in October, one of my sisters was one of the coordinators of the event. She had written a song in honour of a woman who went missing and was murdered. She gave it to the family of Shirley Ann Duguay. She sang that song. Shirley Ann Duguay was non-aboriginal and went missing, later to be found. On the island here, we live with that memory.

I think the national appearance of us standing together as women can speak volumes to how we can promote the beauty of women within our society. The beauty of aboriginal women needs to come out, because we are women, but we are aboriginal women who have been discriminated against, mistreated, and looked at as lower members of society. Encouraging groups to be more inclusive of women will encourage the wider society to welcome and not discriminate, to not look at aboriginal women as lower society members.

We have beauty in our cultures, and there are some great things happening. Even with the Olympics, the aboriginal communities were in the grand entry at the opening, and that was a beautiful thing. That to me speaks loudly to the country.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Roseanne.

Ms. Roseanne Sark: There's another thing.

The Chair: We have to leave in a minute. We're running late.

Ms. Roseanne Sark: Okay.

On the Status of Women Canada, the presence of aboriginal women on the council will also contribute to bringing that awareness to other aboriginal women in the country.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I want to thank you for coming and taking the time to share with us. It is very helpful. As I said, we want to really be able to make a difference in this report, as opposed to it being just one more report to throw in a corner somewhere.

Thank you again very much.

We're going to suspend.

● (1150)

(Pause)

● (1520)

The Chair: The meeting is resumed.

Obviously our three o'clock witness has not arrived, and it is getting on. It is now 3:20, so I will entertain a motion to adjourn.

An hon. member: So moved.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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