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Friday, June 11, 2010

Chair

The Honourable Hedy Fry

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● (0935)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.)): Good morning, everyone. I'm going to call this meeting to order.

Thank you so much for coming. I don't know if you know exactly what this committee is doing, but according to something known as Standing Order 108(2), we are looking at a study of violence against aboriginal women.

We're looking at violence against aboriginal women from a broad perspective. We're looking at the root causes of that violence and how it has lasted for such a long time. We're looking at the extent of it and what sorts of violence we are talking about—is it simply one sort of violence? We don't want to talk about domestic violence only; we want to talk about all the violence—psychological, physical, and sexual—and discrimination, if there is any, which is a form of violence. We want to discuss the whole broad scope of violence as you see it.

Secondly, we wanted to look at ways in which we can remedy it. Now, understanding that government cannot remedy anything with regard to aboriginal people—there is a long history—what are the things we can put in place that would assist aboriginal women especially, as well as men and families, to be able to achieve some sort of life free from this abnormal level of violence? We understand that this abnormal level of violence is three times the level of violence against non-aboriginal women in Canada even though aboriginals make up only 3% of the population.

We have four groups. Normally each group has about 10 minutes, give or take, whatever you feel comfortable with, to just tell us about what you think under those headings. Then we will have some questions and answers and have an interaction. If you hear a question and you believe you have something to say, you can jump in and answer.

Even though it is a formal meeting, we're trying to make it as informal as possible to make everyone feel comfortable with being very open and frank about what they want to discuss.

From the Assembly of the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador, we have with us Grand Chief Anne Archambault.

Will you begin, please? You have with you Monsieur Savard, who is your *conseiller en prévention*. Both of you can decide how you want to present. I'll give you a two-minute warning if you are going for very long.

Grand Chief Anne Archambault (Assembly of the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador): Thank you, *madame la présidente*.

Good morning, everybody.

[*Translation*]

Ladies and gentlemen, good morning.

On behalf of the Assembly of First Nations of Quebec and Labrador, I would first like to thank the Standing Committee on the Status of Women for inviting us to make a presentation during these hearings on violence against Aboriginal women.

It is our hope that your government will consider the realities of First Nations and that the points I will be making can become the basis for a real partnership—one where Canadian government officials treat First Nations' political leaders as equals, with a view to developing policies and implementing the appropriate measures.

I would like to quickly present a demographic profile of the First Nations in Quebec and Labrador. Although the population of Quebec is aging, the reality among First Nations is completely different, as they are experiencing strong demographic growth and have the youngest population compared to Canada's overall population, the average age in the Aboriginal population being 24.7 years of age, compared to 37.7 for Quebec. The First Nations represent approximately 1% of Quebec's population, with 70,946 members living in more than 40 communities and distributed among 10 distinctive nations. The population and its geographic location vary considerably from one nation to the next and from one community to the next. They are scattered across regions to which access is limited, as well as in remote, rural and urban areas.

I would like to provide you with a brief overview of the current situation. The socio-economic status of the Aboriginal people, and particularly Aboriginal women, is one of the consequences of colonization. Prior to the arrival of the Europeans, the Aboriginal nations were sovereign and independent. At the time, they already had their own customs, languages, systems of law and government, as well as their culture. Women were held in high esteem because they gave life and passed on the traditions. Following contact with the Europeans and the colonization process, the traditional systems underlying Aboriginal society were compromised. Legislation, and particularly the Indian Act, caused them to lose their independence, as that statute set the rules to be followed from then on with respect to almost every aspect of their lives. That legislation has had grave consequences for Aboriginal women, considerably weakening their traditional role within society, within their own society.

In order to have a better appreciation of violence against Aboriginal women, it is also necessary to look at the socio-economic context in which they are evolving, something that has a direct impact on that issue. I will not take time to provide the statistics.

Mr. Rodolfo Stavenhagen, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people, mentions in his report, following a visit to Canada, that he would put Canada in 63rd place among the nations of the world as regards the social conditions of Aboriginal people in this country. Their socio-economic conditions, major changes to their traditional way of life, the effect of Indian residential schools and the use of alcohol and other harmful substances are the main factors behind the violence directed at Aboriginal women.

Let's talk about that violence. Aboriginal women who are victims of violence are often living in poverty, are often younger and have less education. A number of statistics show that Aboriginal women are more affected by violence than non-Aboriginal women.

Economic conditions are one of the early signs of violence. In a situation where there is violence, there is often isolation as well. I would like to read you a quote: “The psychological after-effects of violence are many: disruption, frustration, confusion, anger, sadness, a sense of helplessness and loss of self-esteem.” That is taken from a summary by Karen Myers published in 1995.

● (0940)

According to Health Canada, Aboriginal women are five times more likely to require medical care following acts of violence. The lack of resources available to victims is such that they must leave the community and settle in urban areas to receive the care and support they need in order to heal. Furthermore, Aboriginal women who are victims of violence also face other obstacles, such as racism, discrimination, isolation, and linguistic, cultural and geographic barriers.

At this point, I would like to address the causes and disastrous consequences associated with violence and sexual abuse in the communities. The immediate environment is a huge risk factor that must not be overlooked. There is the overcrowding in our communities, to which can be added problems of poverty and inadequate educational attainment, and when combined with alcohol and drug use, you have an explosive mix that can result in violence of all kinds against women in our communities. When I say “violence of all kinds”, I am referring to psychological violence, verbal violence, physical violence and sexual violence.

There are no services available in our communities and no resources are specifically dedicated to dealing with the problem of violence and sexual abuse. Furthermore, communities are remote and travel is difficult. The fact that communities are not equipped at the local level has consequences in terms of the number of complaints. The lack of awareness of local services, combined with the problems of violence and sexual abuse, all contribute to fewer complaints from women who are victims of violence and sexual abuse.

The complexities of the legal system and language problems, taken together with the concept of confidentiality in the communities, also have disastrous repercussions. The lack of response protocols and adequate training programs on how to deal with violence and sexual abuse are also factors in preventing women from using community services.

It is also important to consider that someone who has grown up in a violent environment and has witnessed violence may consider it to be normal and inevitable, and that person will have a strong tendency to reproduce that behaviour throughout his life—hence the need to pay particular attention to our children and provide them with the necessary protection.

In closing, as you can see, the phenomenon of violence against Aboriginal women must not be taken lightly. The paucity of human resources in the communities, combined with a trivialization of this issue, mean that women often end up coping with the violence and sexual abuse on their own.

What is needed is a package of coordinated programs and measures providing for continuity of services, in order to counter and reduce violence and sexual abuse against women in the communities. The program on violence has never met the communities' expectations. Monies invested in prevention are still inadequate, considering the huge need in the communities. A violence prevention program alone cannot satisfy the communities' need for assistance.

Finally, the Assembly of First Nations of Quebec and Labrador recommends the following: develop specialized resources to deal with sexual violence; invest in a specific anti-violence training program, in order to equip the communities with the needed specialized resources; invest additional money in order to ensure, not only prevention, but the development of a continuum of services to cope with violence against women; foster partnerships with provincial authorities as regards the justice system, resources geared to the communities and memoranda of understanding; and, finally, develop a program aimed at preventing violence against young children.

Thank you for your kind attention.

● (0945)

[*English*]

The Chair: *Merci, madame*.

Now we will hear from Ms. Renée Brassard, professor of social work at the University of Laval.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Renée Brassard (Assistant professor, School of Social Work, Université Laval, As an Individual): Good morning, my name is Renée Brassard. I teach at the School of Social Work, but I am a criminologist by training.

Today my comments will be quite brief, because some of the points I intended to address have already been made by the Assembly of First Nations of Quebec and Labrador. I have jotted down a few comments and will limit myself to those. I have also tabled a summary of recommendations with the committee and you will see what I had in mind in so doing.

It is a well-known fact that violence against Aboriginal women in both Canada and Quebec is one of the direct consequences of colonialism and a history punctuated by government policies that have resulted in cultural erosion, the ongoing breakdown of family and other relationships, and poverty and underdevelopment which persists to this day.

I would like to draw the attention of committee members to the fact that, over the last two decades, several Canadian commissions of inquiry, expert reports and studies have all reiterated the fact that Aboriginal women constitute the segment of the population most affected by violence in Canada. It is also acknowledged that violence against Aboriginal women is an endemic problem. So, this is not something that is receding. Quite the contrary, it is a persistent problem which is growing worse.

That violence can take several different forms, as you so aptly pointed out, Madam Chair. The forms of violence faced by Aboriginal women are many: physical, sexual, psychological, systemic, institutional, legislative—as we see at present with the discussions on Bill C-3—communal, and also spiritual. By "communal" violence, I mean abuse of authority against Aboriginal women in communities all across Canada, whereas spiritual violence refers to the loss of traditional values and the destruction of individual cultural or religious beliefs.

The current state of knowledge regarding violence against Aboriginal women in Canada is such that we now know that different factors that are still in play conspire to keep Aboriginal women in Canada in these sad circumstances and allow the violence that afflicts them to be perpetuated. What I wanted to specifically address are the main factors which encourage or allow the violent situations facing Aboriginal women in Canada to occur and recur. Of these factors, I would like to mention these in particular: a lack of political will at the federal, provincial and local levels; the lack of autonomy of Aboriginal communities in terms of directing their own development; a system of economic and legislative dependency which keeps the Aboriginal communities in a state of underdevelopment and gives rise to social inequality and multiple forms of discrimination; limited access to power by Aboriginal women; the presence—obviously—of a vicious cycle of violence because of the relational proximity within the communities, complete silence on this issue and an attitude of resignation in relation to the violence; and, finally, inadequate social responses, which have been recognized over and over again in a variety of reports as being ineffective and culturally inappropriate.

When I refer to social responses to violence against Aboriginal women, I am obviously referring to piecemeal interventions, a lack of resources for Aboriginal men—we tend to prefer incarcerating Aboriginal men, rather than helping them to heal and be rehabilitated—and, Madam Chair, the criminalization and overrepresentation of Aboriginals in our prison institutions. I'm sure you also know that Canada is one of the countries that jails more Aboriginal people than any other country in the world, compared to societies such as Australia, New Zealand and the United States.

If we want to stop violence against Aboriginal women in Canada, it is necessary to acknowledge the valuable potential solutions and recommendations that can be found in the major studies carried out in Canada in the last two decades, and which are underused even now. The report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, which does suggest potential solutions, should also be revisited.

● (0950)

Furthermore, I think it is important to point out that this work, which was often carried out under the auspices of several Aboriginal organizations in Canada, has the merit of having given a voice to many Aboriginal women, as well as many different Aboriginal groups in Canada with respect to violence against women, children, men and a whole people. As a means of guiding the committee's work, I have gathered together here a number of recommendations which warrant your attention.

In closing, in light of these facts, we urge the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women to take full advantage of whatever flexibility it has to ensure that these recommendations are actually implemented, in order to foster the well-being of women, men and all Aboriginal communities in Canada.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: *Merci, madame*.

From Quebec Native Women Incorporated, we have with us Mélanie Denis-Damée. Can you begin, please? This also says "Council for Young Women", and I am pleased to see a young woman here.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Mélanie Denis-Damée (Provincial Representative Substitute Representative, Council for young women, Quebec Native Women Inc.): My name is Mélanie Denis-Damée and I am the alternate provincial representative. I took some notes as the previous witnesses were speaking. In my community, violence against young mothers and suicides connected to the violence are very prevalent issues.

I am a little nervous.

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasing, NDP): Even if some of these things may already have been said, it's a good idea to say them again.

Ms. Mélanie Denis-Damée: I have seen for myself that violence against young mothers, suicide and domestic violence are very prevalent problems in the communities. Women who have experienced domestic violence are often afraid to make a complaint against their assailant. They have no choice but to return to the family home, because there is a lack of housing in the community. That is also the case in urban environments. Women feel powerless to deal with the justice system. It means making a complaint against the individuals who have abused you, but women are afraid to testify against them, because of a lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem. As for the children, they are also abused following an episode of domestic violence.

I agree with the comments made by the two previous witnesses. It is a very good idea for women to denounce violence and testify before a court of law. However, often they are illiterate and do not speak French as well as their own language. I know some people who do not understand French very well. Women need to have access to an interpreter who could help them understand what is being said and assist them throughout the process of lodging a complaint before the court.

Furthermore, there is a need to continue to raise awareness with respect to suicide and to support the children following an episode of domestic violence. I know that it isn't easy. I know that because I went through it myself. So, I can speak based on my own experience. My children witnessed this, and it was traumatic for them. The scars remain, even today.

Thank you.

● (0955)

[*English*]

The Chair: *Merci, Mélanie*.

Now we have, from the Council of the Huron-Wendat Nation, Ann Desnoyers and Mr. Guy Duchesneau, who are both social workers.

You will decide how you divide up your speaking, but I will give you a two-minute sign when I think you're getting close to your time limit.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Guy Duchesneau (Social Services Coordinator, Health, Leisure and Social Services Department, Huron-Wendat First Nation Council): Thank you, Madam Chair. On behalf of the Huron-Wendat First National Council, I would like to express our thanks for this opportunity to present our views. I would like to describe the context. Our community is located approximately 15 kilometres from Quebec City. The Huron Nation has a population of about 3,000. Of that number, 1,300 live on the reserve and 1,700 live off-reserve.

The Health and Social Services Branch manages a health centre which provides services comparable to those available at CLSCs or CSSSs in the area. Our centre is located in the area that falls within the jurisdiction of the Health and Social Services Agency in the National Capital, and specifically the North-Quebec CSSS.

Since its inception in 1989, the health centre has maintained close ties with all agencies in the area and participates in the work of a variety of issue tables dealing with violence against women and elder abuse.

I would like to ask Ms. Desnoyers to continue the presentation and talk about our field work. We do a great deal of it. Without disagreeing with what has been said previously, I think there are different realities in each of our communities, including in our own. We do a lot of work on the ground.

Earlier, it was mentioned, with respect to the budgets we receive through the Department of Indian Affairs, that they are relatively small and have not been adjusted over the years. I believe the budget for family violence has not changed in 10 years, which means that we cannot increase our own resources. We have one resource person two days a week, at the most, who is able to provide services. And that does not include the prevention work and direct responses that are needed within the community to combat violence against women and violence in general.

I would now like to ask my colleague, Ms. Desnoyers, to talk about our work in the field.

● (1000)

Mrs. Ann Desnoyers (Social Worker, Health, Leisure and Social Services Department, Huron-Wendat First Nation Council): Good morning, everyone. As Mr. Duchesneau mentioned, I will be focusing on more practical matters because, as psychosocial workers, much of what we do is done in the field.

In terms of statistics for our community, I was able to speak to the acting director of the police department, who confirmed that there are currently 20 police files dealing with complaints regarding incidents of violence, assault and domestic violence that occurred in 2009. Of that number, 15 files have now been forwarded to the Crown prosecutor. As far as the acting director knew, given the fact that all the numbers have not yet been compiled, there are at least three cases where the individual was convicted. Of all the files dealing with violence, we currently have two cases of sexual assault that have been referred to the court for prosecution.

Of course, we are aware that many victims do not dare bring a complaint because of the rigidity of the criminal system and because they are afraid of reprisals from community members. This is a subject which is still taboo in our community, and in many Aboriginal communities across Quebec.

At present, the same forms of violence we are all familiar with are present in our community of Wendake. However, over the years, psychosocial workers have tended to focus more on psychological violence, which we believe to be far more subtle, even though it has the same impact as physical violence.

When working with people in the communities and in the workplace, we have focused on negligence, manipulation and denigration. Those are all aspects of this form of violence. In our practice, we have observed that violence often occurs in emotional and important relationships. That is the case for relationships involving couples, young people or between parents and children, but also where there are emotional dependencies in the relationship or when one of the two spouses has certain personality traits. For example, we talk about “perverse narcissism” when there is a need to control and dominate the other person. That is something we observe most often in our social services practice.

In order to remedy that, we have developed our own response strategies. It's always nice to be able to talk about what works in our community. On the basis of our observations, we updated the domestic violence response protocol in 2009. This is a partnership between the Wendake police service and ourselves, as psychosocial workers. I have appended the protocol to the documents you were provided. When there are complaints to police, officers attend at the individual's premises. After responding, they will ask the victim to sign a consent form so that we can be given the information and provide follow-up and support. These are services that are currently provided at our health centre. And we are talking about all the victims here—both men and women. We do not neglect the men in this process.

Unfortunately, all victims do not agree to sign that consent form. So, we developed an information kit for victims that police have with them. The kit contains a list of addresses relating to specific resources that are part of the Quebec system and with whom we deal, including community safe houses. We also have a number of brochures and all the necessary material to ensure that the victim is not left without resources.

We have provided and continue to provide training to police officers, particularly with respect to the victim's needs. The attitude of our police officers is not always appropriate. So, we offer to provide training which deals, in particularly, with responding to the situations based on the cultural context. We present the appropriate approach for responding to incidents of domestic violence, and address both the legal process and especially the question of confidentiality. In order to keep the lines of communication open with our victims and our people, there is a need to put a lot of focus on confidentiality.

The goal is obviously to foster greater understanding among police officers of the needs of victims, and especially, the appropriate attitude to take. We also looked at the entire police trajectory when domestic violence complaints are lodged, with a view to ensuring well-coordinated interventions between ourselves and the police.

A positive result of the adoption of this new protocol in November of 2009 is that two victims came to us for help, and we were able to provide psychosocial support. That is beneficial from our standpoint and we are proud to be able to rely on this new protocol.

● (1005)

Every year, we also draw attention to the Week Without Violence. We develop tools year after year. As I said earlier, we focus much more on more subtle types of violence, such as psychological violence. This year, we produced a poster that I have and could provide you with later. The theme was “Let's remember that all violence, even when there are no scars, leaves a mark”. We also had pencils produced which we distributed to homes in our community, to raise people's awareness.

Psychosocial workers also sit on several different issue tables, including one entitled: “Elder abuse, negligence and violence”. These are people who live in the area served by the Jacques-Cartier CLSC. There are 10 partners, including police officers and a variety of stakeholders. They work together to organize prevention-related activities, particularly aimed at seniors, and training as well.

As I said earlier, we have signed a number of cooperation agreements, including with safe houses. In the Jacques-Cartier area in the Quebec-Nord district, there are also specific resources for men, including Autonhommie and G.A.P.I., which offer individual or group sessions to men with violent or aggressive behaviour. We don't leave them in a corner by themselves. We provide service.

However, when it comes to eliminating violence, the role of the federal government, as we see it, should be to focus more on prevention and support prevention-related activities. That is a key concern for organizations. These initiatives must be supported. There must also be recurring funding. We know that, where domestic violence is concerned, connections are very important. If staff turnover results in ongoing imbalance, we ourselves and our organization lose credibility. That is why it is important to provide recurring funding.

There is also a need to dedicate resources to promotion, including the promotion of healthy communication and healthy relationships, in order to put an end to emotional dependency. Another issue is management of certain personality traits which can be connected to violent or manipulative behaviours.

Those are the comments we wanted to make this morning. Thank you very much.

[*English*]

The Chair: *Merci, madame Desnoyers*.

I'm now going to ask the committee members, starting with Madame Hughes, to introduce themselves and tell you a little bit about where they come from and who they are. Then we can get into questions and answers—or into discussion more than questions and answers.

Carol, please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Carol Hughes: Good morning.

I am the member of Parliament for Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasing, in Northern Ontario. There are 17 Aboriginal communities in my region. I was a union representative with the Canadian Labour Congress, but I have been on leave since being elected. When I was employed by that organization, I focused a great deal on certain issues. Before that, I worked for Probation and Parole Services. For a while, I also worked with young offenders. I held those jobs for approximately 13 years. Your comments are a very good fit with the questions I would like to ask.

[*English*]

Ms. Lois Brown (Newmarket—Aurora, CPC): Good morning. Thank you very much for being here.

My name is Lois Brown. I am the member of Parliament for Newmarket—Aurora, which is a riding about 30 kilometres north of Toronto, and I'm a Conservative member of Parliament.

Ms. Laura Munn-Rivard (Committee Researcher): I am Laura Munn-Rivard. I'm a research assistant.

Ms. Julie Cool (Committee Researcher): I'm Julie Cool. I'm the analyst on the Standing Committee on the Status of Women.

The Chair: I'm Hedy Fry. I'm the member of Parliament for Vancouver Centre and I was the secretary of state for status of women and multiculturalism for about six years under the Chrétien government, so I am a Liberal, obviously.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Isabelle Dumas (Procedural Clerk): My name is Isabelle Dumas and I am the clerk of the committee.

Ms. Nicole Demers (Laval, BQ): My name is Nicole Demers, I am the member of Parliament for Laval, and I am here to learn.

● (1010)

Mr. Roger Pomerleau (Drummond, BQ): My name is Roger Pomerleau, and I am the member of Parliament for the riding of Drummond. There is no Aboriginal community in my riding, except for some Abenakis who are not far away—the Odanak and Wolinak communities. We see them occasionally, as we participate in many of the same activities.

However, I have witnessed violence, at least some forms of it. I often go to Montreal because my mother lives there. And there are more and more Inuit who feel completely isolated there. I often see that and I think it's tragic. They can hardly speak French or English. They have no resources and are reduced to begging. They can't express themselves or express what they're feeling. That's what I find most afflicting about this situation.

[*English*]

The Chair: Now, who would like to start with a question?

Lois.

Ms. Lois Brown: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Prior to entering politics, I was vice-president of a company on disability management that I co-founded some years back. Most of the people we worked with were people who were injured on the job. Our job was to get them safely back into work. So we worked with the medical community, and we worked with ergonomists to assess the kind of job they might be able to undertake to successfully get them back into their place of employment.

The best strategy for injury management is no injury. Each of you has talked this morning in some way about prevention, and I think, Ms. Desnoyers, you specifically used the word “prevention”. I believe that's the best way to address the issue of violence against aboriginal women. I wonder if we can explore this a little bit and talk about how we find the prevention measures.

Ms. Archambault, you spoke specifically about leadership skills and developing leadership skills for women. I guess my question would be about what leadership skills we need to help aboriginal women develop. What are they looking to develop? Where do we see them using those skills? Because it doesn't matter what sector of society you come from, people are disadvantaged if they don't have the skills to assert themselves. That might be in a professional way, but it doesn't have to be in a profession as such; it might be just the competency that they need to develop in an area.

What are aboriginal women looking for? And how can we help them get there so that the leadership skills are evident and they develop the self-esteem? That's another phrase that was used by several of you.

Madame Denis-Damée, you spoke about having self-esteem. I wonder if we can explore that.

Ms. Archambault, could you start?

Grand Chief Anne Archambault: Sure, with pleasure.

[*Translation*]

If you don't mind, I would like to comment in French.

You raised an interesting question. In terms of prevention, we are seeking ways to ensure that First Nations people sustain fewer injuries and make less use of the health care system. That requires resources. Those resources are mentioned in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. According to the Declaration, we should be establishing our own institutions.

By developing our own institutions, we can prepare our people, educate and train them, so that they are ready when they move into the workplace. Personally, I support the CSSPNQL. Dental care is a good example. They told us that Indian people would be able to have their teeth fixed, but it's not being done and that is causing them problems. They have poor digestion and end up using the health care system. They use the Quebec health care system, when they can access it, of course. So, ultimately, what we need are our own institutions, so we can protect these people.

Does that answer your question?

● (1015)

[*English*]

Ms. Lois Brown: Well, it does, partly, and I asked this question yesterday of some of our witnesses. I asked them about education and how we keep young people in school in order to get the education they require, so that you do have people from the aboriginal community coming back to the aboriginal community to provide dental hygiene or to provide dental services.

When I look at budget 2010, I see that the government put in $285 million for health services and $200 million over two years to help develop leadership skills. Are we looking at developing young people from the aboriginal communities who are going to become the leaders in their own communities with these skills? Is that going to be helpful in the long run to reduce violence against aboriginal women in particular, because they are developing their self-esteem and they are taking responsibility in new areas of professionalism and new areas of contribution to their community?

Are there any other comments?

The Chair: Is there anyone else who wishes to comment?

Madame Brassard.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Renée Brassard: I would like to comment on the issue of skills development. I think this is a good example of a situation where caution is required. We are in an era of leadership skills development. Over the course of its history, Canada has often had a tendency to adopt cross-cutting policies without considering the special reality of Aboriginal nations and the Aboriginal peoples of Canada.

As regards leadership skills—we are obviously talking about empowerment and developing training programs that deal with domestic violence, for example—I don't think it's possible to apply the same strategy to all Aboriginal groups, because their socio-economic conditions vary considerably.

For example, you referred to monies made available under the strategy to address school dropout rates. But let's just close our eyes for a moment and imagine an Aboriginal child, or a very young teenager whose parents have alcohol and drug abuse problems and who has been living in a family where domestic violence has been a reality ever since he or she was a baby. Juxtapose that to repeated moves, changes of spouse, and victims of violence of all kinds. In terms of priorities, how can you expect a child to want to attend school regularly?

I know that comments like that are not popular. But combating poverty is complex. Combating the problem of underdeveloped structures in Aboriginal communities is complex. I believe that as long as their socio-economic circumstances are not enhanced, leadership and skills development will not really be possible. Of course, there are Aboriginal nations who have probably reached a stage in their development where they are able to produce leaders. There are some, and they are proud to be playing that role. We have to take inspiration from these leaders. At the same time, I think there is a need to be cautious in terms of applying this kind of strategy across the board.

In 2008, there are still people… I am thinking of a Quebec filmmaker, Richard Desjardins, who produced a film in Quebec in 2008—not in 1960, but in 2008—entitled *The Invisible People*. The film was intended to raise awareness among Quebeckers of the fact that there are Aboriginal people living in their province who still do not have electricity or clean drinking water. And we are now in 2010.

[*English*]

The Chair: Monsieur Duchesneau.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Guy Duchesneau: You were saying that governments passed budgets of $285 million and $200 million for skills development. But when that money reaches the community, it is really a drop in the bucket compared to what is needed to provide services and focus more on prevention. Of course, we have to make do with those budgets in order to focus on prevention. And, in fact, we are lucky that the communities are very resilient and determined to help their own people and try to get by with the budgets they're given.

We are dependent on money from the government, because it is only with that money that we can continue to exist and provide services. But how can we retain staff when the environment… In Quebec, people's salaries are much higher. In our communities, experience is not taken into consideration and we hire people at a lower cost, because budgets are limited and do not allow us to pay a salary equivalent to what people are receiving in the neighbouring community. Once people are trained, we're all the same. In my opinion, the priority is to survive, to get along as best you can, be able to earn a living and live reasonably in the world we live in. Wealth gets a great deal of praise, but in the communities, there is a great deal of poverty, often connected to lower wages than what our peers in the governments of Quebec and Canada are generally earning. Compensation is lower.

Earlier someone was saying that because we don't pay taxes, we earn less money. In fact, that is an acquired right. It is a form of recognition we are given because our ancestors lived on this land. We are regularly told that. We are told that we are earning less because we don't pay tax on our income. But a pound of butter costs the same amount of money.

● (1020)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Demers.

Ms. Nicole Demers: Thank you very much for being here this morning. I really appreciate it.

Ms. Archambault, you said there are no services in the communities, that the Aboriginal peoples of Canada are ranked 63rd in the world by the United Nations. I have trouble understanding that, in a country as rich as Canada, Aboriginal nations would be ranked 63rd compared to other nations in the world.

But this is not something that people talk about in public, unless there is a major event or a disaster, such as the forest fires in recent weeks. Nobody speaks publicly about the problems in Aboriginal communities. Why this silence, in your opinion? What can we do to break that silence?

Grand Chief Anne Archambault: Would you like to start? Then I can add my own comments.

Mr. Stéphane Savard (Suicide and Family Violence Prevention Counsellor, First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Health and Social Services Commission, Assembly of First Nations of Quebec and Labrador): As you say, we mentioned that there are few or no resources available in the communities. I don't know whether you are aware of this, but the annual budget per community is about $18,000 to combat violence, specifically for violence prevention. It has been that way for a number of years now. I believe the representatives from the Wendake community were saying that $18,000 is enough to cover the work of one person, two days a week. That is the reality in the communities.

And again, that money is not necessarily being invested in prevention. That is another thing that should be looked at. When action plans are being developed, we should be looking at whether this is a priority for the community, because it may not be. It's important to realize that there has never been much money invested in prevention.

There are the front-line services developed in the communities across Quebec, which are prevention services provided to families to create safer environments for young people. We have not yet talked about youth protection, which is a troubling phenomenon, even worse than what happened in the residential schools. Their cultural connections, the few family-type resources available in the communities, and the fact that young people have to attend school outside, and so on, reflect a completely different reality.

There is the violence, and Ms. Denis-Damé mentioned as well that this requires a comprehensive approach because, whether we like it or not, everything is interconnected. Reference was made to drug addiction and violence; but people don't talk about suicide, which is the consequence of factors such as alcohol and drug use. Anything can lead to suicide; we don't talk about sexual abuse either, which has other consequences and can lead to suicide.

I will just give you some figures I was able to collect. In the last year, there were 13 suicides in Quebec communities by individuals between the ages of 13 and 22, including eight young girls. So, we should be taking a serious look at this.

You referred to prevention earlier, Ms. Brown.

● (1025)

Ms. Nicole Demers: I am sorry to interrupt you, but I don't have much time.

I have another important question for Ms. Brassard. Please accept my apologies, Mr. Savard. I would like to put a question to Ms. Brassard because she touched on this earlier.

In your opinion, how would a signature on the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples change things?

Ms. Renée Brassard: I'm inclined to let my colleague answer that question, because that falls outside my area of expertise. I think she has it with her, and she will be more convincing than I could be.

Grand Chief Anne Archambault: Thank your for your question, Ms. Demers.

You referred to the silence that prevails with respect to violence against women. But the Aboriginal Women's Association was created several years ago. Mary Two-Axe Early, who lobbied in favour of Bill C-31, did a lot of advocacy work towards combating violence against women and poverty quite a few years ago. Naturally, a lot of Quebec and Canadian media seize on these issues. But there are few Aboriginal journalists. For a number of years now, we have been denouncing violence and women's poverty. Mary Two-Axe Early and Evelyn O'Bomsawin, the two founders of the Quebec Aboriginal Women's Association were engaged in that work. In fact, they took me by the hand and showed me how to continue the struggle.

In public, people say that Indians drink and take drugs. We are speaking out against this in whatever way we can, but our demands seem to fall on death ears.

As regards the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, my view is that this document is written in simple terms and tells the truth about Aboriginal peoples, particularly the article dealing with women and children. From the very beginning, we have been victims of discrimination. We are also victimized by the poverty imposed on us. We are trying to extricate ourselves from this cycle of victimization, but we have neither the means nor the budget to do so. Using the little we have to work with, we are trying to make our voices heard.

Yesterday we met with parliamentarians, including one senator. We are at the point now where we are prepared to do anything and everything. Our quest is one that began a long time ago. Many women have been living through this for many years. There was Bill C-31, and then there was Bill C-3, some of which is discriminatory, and there are also a number of other articles in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Ms. Renée Brassard: Just to answer your question, this is something that was internationally recognized. A few minutes ago, we were talking about invisibility. Why are the Aboriginal people so invisible? The answer to that is because politicians have good reason to ensure that they remain invisible. As long as they don't bother anyone, they keep on drinking and are kept in systems of dependency, they are not about to become the third political force in Canada.

As Quebeckers, we make a lot of noise in Canada about negotiating our distinctiveness, our distinctive character, our cultural character and our right to institutional self-governance. But it must never be forgotten that politically, the Aboriginal people form the third founding group. So, there is a vested interest in ensuring that this third group… At the same time, it is paradoxical, because we are in an era where skills development is in the forefront, and yet we can't seem to recognize—first and foremost, at the international level—that there are people living here who have rights. It is somewhat paradoxical.

● (1030)

[*English*]

The Chair: *Merci.*

Madame Desnoyers.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Ann Desnoyers: This is the clinical practitioner in me speaking now. I would just like to come back to skills for women. I think it's important to develop women's skills. At the same time, we too often neglect resources for our men. Our men are engaged in violence, whether it's domestic violence or another form of violence, but the men are victims as well. So I think we need to stop always talking about “the women, the women”, and pay more attention to our men.

At present, this is what's happening in our communities: our women are taken out of their homes to be put in safe houses, but we leave our men there who are suffering. So, when the women come back, the men will be experiencing that suffering even more acutely. They will never have received any services and the cycle will begin all over again. So, we really have to focus on resources for our men.

[*English*]

The Chair: Madame Hughes.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Carol Hughes: There are a number of issues involved here. When I was a manager for the province and worked for Probation and Parole Services, even the employees there spoke of the importance of rehabilitation and the fact that programs needed to be set up to ensure that an offender receives all the help he needs to avoid re-offending. That is one of the things I am hearing here. These days, the government is ready to invest millions of dollars in prisons. We know who is in those prisons. We know the percentage of Aboriginal people who are in prison.

Should we really be investing in prisons or, as was pointed out earlier, I believe, should we be focusing on programs that can help offenders to put their lives back on track?

I had a cousin with an alcohol dependency. He told me he ended up in jail because he made a mistake after drinking. Because there is a long list of people waiting for access to prison programs, he was told that, in his case, he would not be able to take any of them until the end of his term, once he was ready to be released from prison. Does that make any sense? My cousin ended up committing suicide.

Education is very important. You are absolutely right when you say that you are not receiving as much funding as the rest of the population. That is causing a lot of problems. Are you really second-class citizens? I really think that education should begin when our children are small. We saw the difference this can make in terms of sexual abuse of children. We saw what happened in their families when they were educated starting in primary school. Now children are starting to tell us what goes on at home. So, it is important to educate them. At the primary level, we should be teaching them what is right and what is wrong in terms of what goes on at home. We need to give them the proper tools and hope that, later on, we will see a difference.

You have serious social problems. You talked quite a bit about what is going on in your communities, and the fact that people who don't live in a community are still having trouble finding affordable housing in the city. Where will people go when they leave prison? They won't have a choice: they will go back home.

These issues are completely ignored by governments, as is the lack of funding for First Nations. Funding is a must. I would be interested in hearing your comments on prisons. Then I will have another question. I do want to give others a chance to ask some questions.

● (1035)

Mrs. Ann Desnoyers: Basically, the Aboriginal people are like a hot potato that is tossed from one government to the next. Nobody really wants to handle it.

With respect to prisons, we note that it is mainly our men who end up being incarcerated. What happens is that our men are removed from our communities and directed to programs that are not culturally appropriate and which therefore serve absolutely no purpose. Why not ask what they need and what our communities need? Why are decisions always made from the top down? Why do we develop all these great programs which we throw at the communities and to which we, as small groups of people in small communities, are then forced to adapt? Why is it not the other way around? Every nation is different, and within a single nation, there can be differences between communities. Why don't we start from the grassroots up? So many problems could be solved that way! We are on the ground, in our communities. We know what our reality is. Let's start at the grassroots.

That's what I wanted to say.

Grand Chief Anne Archambault: When you are at the stage where you're a prison inmate, your future is already mortgaged. You have a criminal record and it is more difficult to be reintegrated into society. Unfortunately, these individuals are often lost. But prevention programs would allow us to do something before they go to prison.

We should be working with young dropouts who are having trouble by setting up an institution or a group that could work with these young people and help them go back to school. That is when you have to go in and save them. I worked with young dropouts who were having trouble. When they get into drugs and alcohol or end up on the street, that is when you have to go in and get them, find them some work and pay them to do some kind of gratifying work. You don't want them to end up in prison, because that will mortgage their life. We can't control everything, but it is critical to work with young people, men and women, so that they don't end up in prison. And that work is being done. We have seen young people go back to CEGEP. We have seen young men and women who are able to get away from the drug scene. We have seen some who managed.

As for the First Nations, it is important that they have an opportunity to develop their own institutions. Who could possibly be more concerned about a problem than the person actually experiencing it? We have our cultures and our language. Unfortunately, we have no laws to protect our language, and so it has been forgotten. I'm speaking in general terms. The First Nations have different cultures. They have ways of expressing their culture, through ceremonial practices, for example. I don't think filling our prisons is the solution, because all it does is mortgage people's future, particularly youth. It's not really a good idea. The answer is still education. Education is the key.

We need to put programs in place to get dropouts back on the right track. That is what is critical. We have to go out into the streets and take them back to their roots. That is where the street work has to happen. It's important. Who is in a better position to solve these problems then the communities that are suffering? That is how I see it. I always come back to the idea of our having our own institutions, because we can identify our issues as First Nations.

● (1040)

Mrs. Carol Hughes: I would like to add one thing. Not only do we have to invest large sums of money to build more prisons, but they're probably also considering privatizing those prisons. As you know, if prisons are privatized, the companies that own them will want to be funded. The only way to do that is to keep these people in prison. I just wanted to add that.

I have a question—

[*English*]

The Chair: I believe Madame Brassard wanted to answer.

Madame Brassard.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Renée Brassard: That is my niche. I actually did my Ph.D. thesis on Aboriginal women who are incarcerated in Quebec. I am currently completing a study on prison trajectories among Aboriginal men. At the same time, officials with the Correctional Service of Canada refused to allow me into the penitentiaries, because I wanted to collect information on Aboriginal spirituality programs in Quebec penitentiaries. My study was a little too touchy, politically speaking. So, I was not allowed access, but I was able to meet with people outside the grounds of the penitentiary.

I'm not trying to make political capital from this, but with respect to the question about building prisons, I just wrote an article called *Painting the Prison 'Red': Constructing and Experiencing Aboriginal Identities in Prison*. If we do build prisons, I can predict that we will end up filling them all, particularly with Aboriginal people. Proportionately speaking, Aboriginal women represent the social group with the greatest representation in prison.

The Commission of Inquiry into Certain Events at the Prison for Women in Kingston resulted in the creation of eight healing lodges. These are correctional facilities adapted to Aboriginal culture, with spirituality programs that focus on traditions and healing. Initial assessments of these healing lodges show the lack of independence of Aboriginal women. These women are still under the yoke of the Correctional Service of Canada and the same laws. The problem is governance; they don't want to give them any power. They do so very sparingly. They let them manage their dogs, dog barking and fences, because that is not too dangerous in terms of governance.

The problem with governance in Canada has always been the same. Canadian authorities are asking the Aboriginal people to convince them that they are capable of governing. If they can do that, they will be given a little bit of power. However, the current socio-economic status of the Aboriginal peoples is such that they are incapable of showing their capacity to govern. On the one hand, they say they have very high rates of suicide and levels of violence, but the government only hears what it wants to hear.

As regards rehabilitation, as you know, since 1996, Canada has taken a cross-cutting approach to corrections. They talk about risk management. But this approach is problematic. As soon as an Aboriginal person enters a detention facility, they ascertain his risk level. Unfortunately, however, several studies in Canada have shown that the risk of recidivism among Aboriginal inmates—women and men—is so high that they don't have access to rehabilitation programs. In order to access rehabilitation programs, you must have demonstrated that you pose a low or medium risk. It's quite paradoxical. Even if they did have access to rehabilitation programs, the fact is that the correctional system changes individuals, in terms of their beliefs and their way of behaving.

If you take that individual who has been changed by the system and put him in a criminogenic community… I am writing something now which is called:

[*English*]

"When Two Worlds Collide".

[*Translation*]

It talks about what happens when two worlds collide as an individual is transformed. That is what the inmates tell us. They try to escape from prison, even though they're extremely fragile. When they're in prison, they don't want to go back to their community because they know they will start drinking again and that there's violence. So, they are prisoners of these two worlds.

The Chair: Mr. Pomerleau, please.

Mr. Roger Pomerleau: Thank you, Ms. Fry.

I want to thank all of you for coming to meet with us today and for your very interesting comments. I have a question for anyone who wishes to answer.

Some of you talked about a lack of political will to really tackle the problem at all levels of government. From time to time, we see signs of some political will. For example, Joé Juneau did some remarkable work with the Inuit in the Far North. He decided to do it on his own. It was quite remarkable. That guy should be given a medal every day. We also saw the Canadian government in action, but not for the Aboriginal people; it was for the G8 and the G20. One billion dollars was invested to protect a few people for three days from anticipated violence. That would be like hiring 10,000 nurses and paying them each $100,000. That is what was spent to protect these people, when this gentleman was talking about the fact that the Aboriginal nations are only receiving several thousand dollars a year.

At the same time, we have to recognize that, for a certain number of years, the government has been providing funding and some resources. But the results aren't there. So, I would like to ask each of you what you think the main issue is. Is it the lack of money, the fact that it is poorly allocated, poorly defined, is not going to the right people or that the criteria are not clear enough? What is the fundamental issue, as you see it? Perhaps we could take you in order, starting with Mr. Savard.

● (1045)

Mr. Stéphane Savard: Could you repeat your question? There are several parts to it.

Mr. Roger Pomerleau: What is the priority, in your opinion?

Mr. Stéphane Savard: I would say it is prevention. You named a number of programs and initiatives that have been implemented. Often money is given to the communities and things do get done. Everything happening in the communities is not necessarily negative.

One example would be community healing. The Aboriginal Healing Foundation was funding a program. I want to talk about this, because it has funded a number of projects for more than three years, all across the country. They are yielding good results. You just drew a comparison with the G20. That program was cut on March 31 of this year.

Certain expectations were created. Services were made available in the communities and, from one day to the next, they found themselves with no more funding.

There are other examples that could be mentioned, but there is the whole matter of priorities in the communities. We talked about this. Communities are all independent, in a way, in terms of identifying the issues and so on. If it's not a priority for the community, money won't be invested in these different areas.

People often talk about large amounts of money being provided, but by the time it gets down to us, there is less money there. It's true that there are budgets of $285 million or $200 million, but at the bottom of the ladder what is left is just $18,000 for prevention.

At the same time, there is the matter of intervention and development. I come back to what Ms. Archambault said. Money has to be invested across the board and we need our own institutions. We talked about the fact that this is necessary for a number of reasons, including language problems and the cumbersome legal system. In closing, I would just like to say that, in a way, our communities are also prisons.

The Chair: I'm sorry, but I have to return to Ottawa.

Ms. Demers, you're on.

The Acting Chair (Ms. Nicole Demers): We are going to move right along.

A voice: Yes, yes.

The Acting Chair (Ms. Nicole Demers): I will be replacing the Chair.

A voice: Drive carefully.

Mr. Roger Pomerleau: Ms. Archambault, of the things you have mentioned, what do you see as the greatest priority if we could start tackling this issue tomorrow?

Grand Chief Anne Archambault: One of your comments irritated me. You talked about a lack of will, Mr. Pomerleau, but there is no lack of will along First Nations.

● (1050)

Mr. Roger Pomerleau: No, I was talking about the government.

Grand Chief Anne Archambault: Oh, I see.

The government's lack of will is easy enough to understand. We have an inherent right to self-government. I sincerely believe that the government does not want that right to find expression. But governments will have to consider the fact that the First Nations' population is expanding. At some point, budgets are established based on population.

We were talking about the $285 million a little earlier. But it's important to remember that this is over a two-year period and that this $285 million is to address five major issues, including diabetes and suicide prevention. There is a huge amount of work to be done in those areas. So, those are the things I see.

The First Nations are always being asked what they want. But we have basically been saying what we want for years. In fact, it is aptly summarized in the UN Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. There you have the explanation. People are saying that they want to have their own means of making a living and developing, and that they want to be able to freely practice economic, traditional and other activities.

An example comes to mind—natural resources extracted from our land. I will use the example of my own nation, so as not to offend anyone. It has received nothing—absolutely nothing. How can I live on my inherit right to self-government if I am not entitled to enjoy the economic spinoffs of these resources? I am not talking only about forest resources; there are also mining and natural resources. These are some of the many resources I don't have access to.

We are put in the impossible situation of acting on our inherit right to self-government. That is like saying that First Nations should sit down with the multinationals that are cutting down trees on our land and tell them they have to give us a percentage of the economic spinoffs. That would be a way of becoming independent.

But right now, we have nothing. We have no resources. We are kept in a state of depression. And the reason we are depressed is that we wonder how we will ever manage to extricate ourselves from our current circumstances. That would be an intelligent way of achieving that.

We are governments: the provincial government, the federal government and the First Nations governments, but we don't have—

Mr. Roger Pomerleau: You don't have the resources that go along with that status.

Grand Chief Anne Archambault: Exactly.

Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Ms. Nicole Demers): Would anyone else like to answer Mr. Pomerleau's question?

Mr. Guy Duchesneau: I would like to make a comment.

As I said earlier, in the communities, we are often dependent on budgets allocated for the different programs. We have to accommodate that in trying to provide a range of services to our community.

In terms of economic development, a lot of people who live there have made promises to themselves, like a lot of others. However, as this lady was saying, band councils don't really have the means to invest in development which would allow us to access our own natural and financial resources, so that we could become socially and economically independent. That is the issue for the communities.

We have some autonomy and a certain amount of latitude in terms of the way we provide services and deal with our client groups. But how can we develop financial resources so that we are able to provide other services to the community? The fact is that we are limited by the budgets we receive. We are prisoners of the budget allocated to us. We do what we can with that piece of the pie.

The Acting Chair (Ms. Nicole Demers): Thank you very much.

Ms. Brassard, please.

Ms. Renée Brassard: These are territorial prisons. We are about to start developing the North, according to the Charest government. But how will that development work? I think one of the priorities is the structural underdevelopment of the communities.

Will we once again find diamonds, treasures and oil? Will we move the Aboriginal people out without their having a chance to… There won't be any miracles. I think it would be intellectually dishonest to try and convince ourselves this morning that miracles are going to happen.

You know as well as I do that money is the sinews of war. The financial wherewithal that goes with taking your wallet and leaving home to work full-time and earn a living, build self-esteem and see yourself as independent, is absolutely critical in life. By taking that away from them—

For me, the priority is structural development in the communities. You and I will bear witness to what happens in the future, but I would be surprised if northern development considered the realities of the Aboriginal peoples. We will start scrapping rivers, distorting the natural environment and breaking up and cutting back their land so that we can become a wealthy and self-assured Quebec society. Because Quebec is also in the race for autonomy; that should never be forgotten.

● (1055)

The Acting Chair (Ms. Nicole Demers): Ms. Brown, is it your turn?

[*English*]

Ms. Lois Brown: Thank you, Madame Demers.

I wonder if we can explore something that we talked about a little earlier, but first of all, I just need to make sure the record is clear: it was a former administration that put the money in place for the friendship centres. There was always a sunset clause on that. It was our government that extended this year over year.

That money has now been rolled into Health Canada. I know we need to get this budget passed in order for any moneys to flow through there. It's still a work in process, but that money is flowing into Health Canada, and the sunset clause that was always in place was put in place when the legislation was created. I think we need to keep that in mind.

I want to explore an issue that came up when we were talking earlier about skills, and I think, Madame Desnoyers, you said that aboriginal men in prison are not receiving...correct me if I didn't get the vernacular. What they're receiving is not culturally sensitive, so it's useless. I think that was the word you used.

First of all, is there agreement that aboriginal men want to provide for their families? Is that a fair statement?

Anyone can answer that.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Renée Brassard: I will take the first question, which dealt with the Aboriginal Cultural Awareness Program provided through the correctional system.

The reality in Canada is this. Provincial prisons do not have adequate budgets. They receive less money than facilities operated by the Correctional Service of Canada. As a result, the culture awareness programs for Aboriginals are only offered in federal penitentiaries in Canada, in the five administrative regions.

But again, as I was saying earlier, inmates need to be classified based on their needs, and not on their risk level. That is the change we have noticed since 1996. Previously, they were looking at their needs, but now they are assessing the risk level. When you start thinking about that, the question that comes to mind is: what risks do Aboriginal offenders pose to others? Not much. They are more of a danger to themselves than they are to others.

Your second question dealt with what men want. I would like to come back to something I consider to be very important, and that is the compartmentalization of responses with respect to violence against Aboriginal women. I should really be talking about Aboriginal violence. Our system is built around interventions aimed at women. When a violent incident occurs, police officers arrive on the scene, handcuff the man and give the woman a business card telling her where to get services for victims. People are boxed into the status they have been assigned. The man is necessarily the aggressor and the woman is necessarily the victim.

For 10 years now, I have been hearing Aboriginal women say that they want to work with their men. The traditional feminist approaches don't jibe with what Aboriginal women are asking for. They don't necessarily want to leave their family and their husband. They want to work through the problem of violence with them, in healing circles, because the violence affects the entire family. You don't solve the problem by taking the woman away from her family and sending her out of the community to live in a safe house, whether it is culturally sensitive or not. Whether or not the safe house or the prison has dream catchers, as opposed to bars on the windows, the fact remains that it is a prison that restricts human freedom.

That is something that has to be considered. We have to stop putting people in nice neat boxes, as Anne so eloquently explained. It is critical that Aboriginal men be able to start a dialogue with Aboriginal women so that they can understand each other better. And I am about to submit an application for funding to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. I want to explore the experience and the way that Aboriginal men build the violence they're involved in.

I want to give these men a voice, and get their perspective.

● (1100)

[*English*]

Ms. Lois Brown: If I could just interrupt there, though, what are the skills that are being given to aboriginal men when they are incarcerated? I guess that's my question. What skills are they being provided at that point that Ms. Desnoyers considers useless? I think that's the question I would like to have addressed here.

Madame Desnoyers, can you tell us what you think are the useless skills?

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Ann Desnoyers: I think it's less about tools and more about needs. The men all have different needs. What do these men who are locked up need? That is the question we should be asking.

[*English*]

Ms. Lois Brown: But what are the skills they're being provided now that you do not think are beneficial to them when they are released? You specifically used the term “they are useless”, so the skills they're getting are useless....

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Ann Desnoyers: Culturally, they are not appropriate. That's what I said earlier.

[*English*]

Ms. Lois Brown: What skills would be beneficial to them, then, so that when they are released they will have the tools they need to go back into society? What are the skills they need to develop?

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Ann Desnoyers: Too often, I think we release these men without providing any follow-up. It's important that they be followed up inside the community and that the communities have workers who are trained to help these men. That could be seen as a specific need in the Aboriginal communities.

[*English*]

Ms. Lois Brown: Okay. I'm not really sure we're getting to the heart of what I'm trying to get to.

Madame Archambault, you spoke about this as well. You talked about gratifying work. What does gratifying work look like within the aboriginal community and within the aboriginal context as far as the skills they need are concerned?

What skills do they need in order to have that gratifying work? You talked about being integrated into society.

Madame Brassard, you spoke about being integrated into society. What does that look like within the aboriginal context?

[*Translation*]

Grand Chief Anne Archambault: I hope I will be able to answer your question.

I noted that you talked about skills, so that we can provide help. I think if we actually did a diagnosis in a number of different areas, we might be better able to introduce training that would meet the needs of these individuals. That diagnosis could be cultural, spiritual and educational, so that we would really be identifying the individual's needs in order to direct him to the appropriate resources.

● (1105)

[*English*]

Ms. Lois Brown: Who would do that diagnosis? Who would be the person to provide that?

Grand Chief Anne Archambault: The first nation.

[*Translation*]

That is why I emphasized the need for us to have our own institutions, because we know what our needs are and can then… What we are lacking are resources. We know what the needs are.

[*English*]

Ms. Lois Brown: I'm going to come full circle on this question, then. Part of the problem we're dealing with here is a lack of self-esteem. We've heard that across the panel and we heard that yesterday.

If the problem is a lack of self-esteem that is creating this sense of not being productive and not being able to provide for their families, and if part of that contributes to violence, or to addiction and substance abuse, which in turn contribute to violence against women, then it would seem to me that we need to come back to the very beginning. We need to ask what it is that we need to provide in order to help individuals develop the self-esteem and the self-reliance they need to feel that they are contributing members.

We heard yesterday from one of our witnesses that part of the problem they see with aboriginal people is that on the reserve there are people who are given certificates that allow them to do work on the reserve, but those certificates are not recognized as professional or formal certificates off the reserve. So a person may be working as a social worker on the reserve, but they can't take that same certificate or certification and go to an urban area where they might want to work with an urban aboriginal community.

Off the reserve, they're told, “I'm sorry, but your certificate is worthless here”. So there's no continuity. There is no ability for a person who moves off the reserve to make an adequate living when they're living in an urban centre.

What I heard earlier from Mr. Duchesneau was that with a population of 3,000 aboriginal people in your community, more than half of them are living in an urban centre. So if we can't take that level of service, that diploma, from those individuals and say to them that they can come into town and work in town with the community, then we really have not provided a tool that is useful.

Madame Desnoyers, as you said, the tool is useless because it's not transferable.

How do we help our aboriginal people gain that level of certification, that recognition, so that they are then able to parlay that into a job, into a resource that will provide for their families? In the process, we would see a reduction in substance abuse and also a reduction in violence against families, which clearly has to be addressed.

[*Translation*]

The Acting Chair (Ms. Nicole Demers): If you don't mind, I'm going to ask Ms. Mélanie Denis-Damée to comment first because she wanted to respond earlier to Ms. Brown's first question.

After that, we will hear from Mr. Savard and Ms. Brassard.

Go ahead, Ms. Denis-Damée.

Ms. Mélanie Denis-Damée: I would like to talk about self-esteem. You referred to self-esteem twice but it never came up again in the conversation.

In terms of violence, it isn't always easy to rebuild as a person, whether it's a man or a woman. In each case, there are often fears and doubts that remain. You have to be able to trust the person you're with. But it isn't easy to trust another person again, to rebuild as a person or give yourself a new opportunity to start afresh in life.

In terms of my own experience, I can say that it wasn't easy for me to rebuild at a personal level, because I had trouble trusting people, even though I had resources. I have been living in an urban environment for a long time and I didn't really turn to my community for help to rebuild my life.

There isn't really any encouragement for people living the communities. That person will feel alone, because he or she has very little self-esteem. There is no encouragement, even for young people—and I can speak for young people. When they don't receive any encouragement, they don't look any further than what is there.

In the communities, they often say it takes an entire community to raise a child. My experience is that most parents don't provide any encouragement because they have alcohol and drug addiction problems.

As a result, a child grows up thinking that it's perfectly normal to use these substances. And violence reigns; the children don't know where to go and they don't know what a normal life really is. And there are also the children who are left on their own. They grow up faster. They see themselves as adults sooner, as was my case. At the age of 13, I was an adult because I had been left on my own. In the house, there was drinking going on and violence mixed in. The sexual abuse occurred in that context. And we still see that in today's reality.

So, it's not easy to rebuild on a personal level. I work on that on a daily basis. And today, I have the sense that I'm not sitting here for nothing. If I were still the person I was in the past, I would not be here today talking about the Aboriginal reality.

I agree with Anne when she says that the men also need to receive services. I agree with her when she suggests that there has to be psychological and mental support for the men, because this also comes from their own past. It isn't always easy to reach the male ego. They will tell you that everything is fine, that they feel better today, but you don't know what is behind all of that. I have often seen that happen. I wouldn't say they are egotistical, but their ego is not easy to reach. Getting them to talk about what they have been through is not easy either. Their past is a burden for them, a burden they have to carry. When I was young, I often saw my uncles hitting their father. They also fell into that whole dynamic. It has become a vicious cycle.

I agree with Anne when she says there have to be resources for the men. In any case, that is part of the reality.

● (1110)

We have been talking about young people and youth protection services. But it's the same thing today. What will happen to these young people if they are always being taken away from their families?

I am about to begin a social work program. It's not easy to be under youth protection services. It was a good thing for me, but it is not always easy. When children are placed in non-Aboriginal foster homes, they lose their culture. That is what happened with my children. I had to take them back there.

● (1115)

The Acting Chair (Ms. Nicole Demers): Thank you very much, Ms. Denis-Damée.

[*English*]

Ms. Lois Brown: May I have just one moment, Madam Chair?

Madame Denis-Damée, I would like to thank you for being so transparent today about your experience. I'm sure it's not easy for you to be here and to open yourself up that way to the committee, but I'd like thank you very much.

I applaud you for doing the work you're doing. Being able to go back to your community with a certificate that is recognized and that you can use anywhere is going to be very valuable to the work you can do in the future in identifying the problems and helping to come up with solutions to them. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Acting Chair (Ms. Nicole Demers): Mr. Savard, please.

Mr. Stéphane Savard: I will try to answer all your questions. I took notes as you were speaking. There are certain realities when it comes to the communities. You talked about education and certification. We need our own structures. It has to start from the grassroots, from our own economic development. The fact is that the communities are emptying out. We are losing our resources and all of that. And it is that way because we are talking about a dream. We all have dreams. Our dream is to work in our community. That was and remains our dream: to work for our own people, for our own community, within structures that we have built on our own. Economic development means taking an active role. That is what our communities want and that is what the men want.

Often we are unable to meet basic needs. You talked about self-esteem, which is a basic need. Having a roof over our head, food, clothing and a job are basic needs. After that there can be self-esteem. Housing is overcrowded, with eight to ten people living together in cramped conditions. So, there is a whole mixture of problems.

I talked about the dream, but I also talked about our profound discontentment. And I would like to talk to you about that. I worked with people in my community. But what kind of dream or inspiration can you give someone who comes to you for help? You have to try to help them to empower themselves. You have to work with them on a personal level, but you also have to have levers so that the dreams and goals an individual sets for himself are realistic.

Yes, education is important, but it must reflect our own way of doing things and our own needs, particularly in terms of economic development. That is why we want our own institutions and to be in charge of our own economic development. We don't have any economic levers. Unfortunately, the Indian Act just aims to assimilate us.

The Acting Chair (Ms. Nicole Demers): Ms. Brassard, I think you want to comment.

Ms. Renée Brassard: Your question is important. You need to have specific things in mind when talking about skills development. In terms of skills development, it's not really that complicated. What actually is a skill?

Well, it is a gap or something missing in someone, such as a lack of self-esteem. You say that everything flows from self-esteem, but I don't think so. Self-esteem is a consequence of the historic wrongs suffered by the Aboriginal peoples. It is only an outcome.

And let's talk about skills development. Let's look at your example of a work certificate. You say that one of the current micro-issues is that a certificate received in an Aboriginal community is not transferable to somewhere else. So, people can't go and work outside their community. But the problem is the example itself. First of all, skills development is an individual action. Since 1990, commissions of inquiry have been telling us that individual actions are not yielding any results. What is needed are collective actions. We have to take a comprehensive approach to the problem, rather than chipping away at it in pieces. I would like to use your example to explain the risks associated with this.

I am an Aboriginal person and I have a work certificate which is valid within the geographic confines of my community. We also need to think about what is going to happen if that certificate is valid outside the community. Outside the community, Aboriginal people are serious victims of racism and discrimination. As a result, Aboriginal Canadians are rarely interested in leaving their community. Just take a look at what's happening in communities in the North, in major urban centres like Val-d'Or. It's total discrimination. Aboriginal people are also telling us that they want to work for their own people. Indeed, Trudeau's white paper clearly showed that the Aboriginal people have always refused, throughout their history, to empty their communities.

If certificates that allow an Aboriginal person to be exiled from his community become a reality, what effect will that have? Well, it will result in a massive exile of community members, massive urbanization, and ultimately, the assimilation of Aboriginal people in the urban environment. It will result in a cultural loss. In an urban environment, people will not be in contact with their culture. It is terrible for an Aboriginal man, for example, to have to leave his nation and his extended family, when we know that their relational systems operate primarily on the basis of extended families. Providing for a work certificate to be valid outside the community also makes for a break with the individual's cultural identity. Aboriginal people will never be interested in that kind of measure—never, and I understand why.

● (1120)

The Acting Chair (Ms. Nicole Demers): Thank you very much, Ms. Brassard.

Ms. Hughes, please.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: I would like to stay on that topic. I agree with you, but a lot of Aboriginal people want to move forward. The fact is that they don't have the money to do that. The fact that they live in poverty prevents them from pursuing post-secondary studies. The amount of money they receive the from the government is not enough to educate young people. You are our future, and your children are our future.

The lack of funding for infrastructure plays an important role in the fact that your communities live in poverty and Aboriginals in urban environments are also living in poverty. Program funding is inadequate. For example, this lady talked about funding for friendship centres. It's fine to say that the money is flowing through Health Canada, but they are not getting more. They have been making do with the same amount of money for 10 years now. The urban Aboriginal population has increased. They can't educate and help people the way they should. As a result, they're very restricted.

In terms of a lack of funding for education, you talked about the Aboriginal Healing Foundation. Perhaps you could explain what impact this is having on your community at the present time. Are those programs still operating? The government said that the money had been allocated to the Department of Health and that programs would be set up through it. What does that mean for your community?

I would also like to say a word or two about the Canadian Firearms Registry, because we are talking about violence here. I am one of the MPs who voted to see the bill move forward in committee. Inside my own caucus, I voted to see it move forward in committee. And I will explain why. There are 17 Aboriginal communities in my riding. How does the Canadian Firearms Registry affect your communities and your rights as Aboriginals? Has the Canadian Firearms Registry really had a positive impact on your communities? It's important to remember that when the registry was first created, a number of things happened. Some organizations that worked with victims told me that it wasn't really the registry itself, but rather the fact that there were changes to the way shotguns had to be locked up and stored and the fact that ammunition has to be stored separately, that really resulted in changes in their community. Could you tell us a little bit about the impact of these measures and whether you are in favour of the registry?

Chief, you talked about sharing natural resources. I can tell you that in Ontario, and with Mr. Layton and the rest of our caucus, we are talking about the fact that, where natural resources are concerned, this money has to be shared. You would not have to ask the government to give you the necessary funding, because you would already have it. A community that had its own money could set up its own programs.

Let's not forget that when the white man came here to your land, you said that you would share. But instead of that, we see governments taking more and more. They stopped giving what they used to give, even though they said you shouldn't live in poverty. I would be interested in your comments on that. I think there is really an impact on violence against women. We could eliminate it if we made some adjustments.

● (1125)

I have to mention a story that Jack Layton told yesterday. He was talking about a community in Attawapiskat where 15 people live in the same house. Someone asked a member of the family where his brother was, because Mr. Layton wanted to meet him. The person answered that his brother had gone to bed because it was his turn to use the bed. There were 15 people living in that house and they had to use the beds on a rotational basis. I will end on that note.

The Acting Chair (Ms. Nicole Demers): Mr. Savard will begin, followed by Ms. Archambault.

Mr. Stéphane Savard: I would like to come back to what you said about funding through the Aboriginal Healing Foundation. You were saying that funds for certain services are allocated to Health Canada. But previously, the money was allocated directly to the communities. The money was there for structural projects in the communities. Now it is Health Canada that handles this.

So, what happened? We were giving hope to the communities with promising projects, but it was decided to transfer management of the money to a central authority, because there was a loss of control. We talked about autonomy for the communities, but that was part of it. It was based on the basic needs of the community in terms of healing. Let's go back to healing, which has to be community-wide.

We talked about the men's role. Their role in all of that has to be seen in the family context. What is the role of the father, the mother and the children? We talked about this earlier, and Ms. Denis-Damée also talked about it. We see children 7 or 8 years of age becoming adults. That happens because they were taught that it had to be that way. But life isn't like that. There is a need to talk about the role of the parent in light of people's experience in the residential schools and so on. The family has to again be at the centre of the communities and there must be a focus on communications. I believe Ms. Archambault also referred to that. We need to talk about communication, the role of the father and the role of the mother.

In several communities, it is often the women who are working. The role of provider was mentioned and we considered whether men want to be providers. But perhaps we should be thinking of the other roles that a man may play. Hunting, fishing and being out on the land are not as prevalent as they were before. So we have to find alternatives. We keep coming back to the same issues. They may decide to give the money to Health Canada, but they may as well give it to the Good Lord in that case. Health Canada comes into our community and tells us what we have to do with federal programs that don't reflect the basic reality of our communities.

● (1130)

Mrs. Carol Hughes: Have the programs disappeared?

Mr. Stéphane Savard: Well, some communities that were receiving funding previously are no longer getting any. I can cite the example of a community where there were four resource persons working as a result of that funding. Those resources disappeared on April 1, 2010. They were resources in such areas as mental health, drug addiction, traditional healing and a nurse position as well. Those positions have all been abolished.

We have opened wounds by talking about healing and about what is needed to heal the deep scars left from life in the residential schools. We open those wounds, but we never close them again. The consequences of that are serious. We talk about hopes and dreams. This was a program that helped to make things better but, from one day to the next, that program was slashed and can no longer even be called that. There is nothing left of it.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: Do you think that will have repercussions on violence against women?

Mr. Stéphane Savard: In general, I think it will because we have open wounds. People went before adjudicators and relived the memories of what had happened to them in the residential schools in terms of sexual abuse and violence.

What support are we giving these people in the communities? That is the reality. Talking about it also means considering the consequences.

The Acting Chair (Ms. Nicole Demers): Ms. Archambault.

Grand Chief Anne Archambault: I would like to return to what we were discussing earlier. We were talking about financial transactions dealing with land use, the construction of the railroad and the white man compensating our communities. There are cases where governments had pledged to pay a certain percentage for use of reserve lands, but hadn't been authorized to carry out certain activities on those lands. So the percentage that was paid was not the one that had been promised. There has been a lot of dishonesty at certain times, and at certain levels, when it comes to the use of our land.

I know whereof I speak because I am talking about the Whitworth Reserve. A railroad crosses that reserve, as well as a bicycle path. Highway 185 cuts right through the Whitworth Reserve. According to the law, this infrastructure is not supposed to be on that land. As for the railroad, at the time, it is my recollection that 6% was supposed to be paid to the community, which actually received 4%. In fact, we have a specific claim that deals with that.

So now we're talking about specific claims; this is where it gets interesting. The problem is that governments always fix things so that we are forever having to go before a court of law. And the lawyers are the ones that get the money, because we are always on the defensive. We are never able to be on the offensive. So, these issues always end up before the courts. If something goes wrong, we're told to go to court. But we can't always afford to go to court either. It's important—

That money that ends up in the hands of lawyers and people other than the First Nations is money that we have no choice but to use to defend ourselves. And the cases that have gone before the Supreme Court of Canada are evidence of that. That takes money. We have no choice but to defend ourselves. We are put in a position of having to invest money in order to defend ourselves.

It's true that the government is investing $285 million over two years, but it should have done that a long time ago. Now the harm is done. We are also on the defensive when it comes to our health. Things are difficult.

The Viger Maliseet First Nation and the First Nations in general are now having to deal with the after-effects. We are trying to find ways to cope at every level: in terms of our society, health care, education and claims. As peoples, we have been crushed. We have been the victims of assimilation. We returned to the reserves 100 years later, and we were asked what we were doing there. We were not where we belonged. According to the Act, we had no right to be there.

We have to deal a lot with the after-effects. Losing one's mother tongue is also a form of violence. Women who are victims of violence have to force themselves to come and testify in front of their torturers. Violence is omnipresent in the First Nations. That is quite something! We are currently experiencing the after-effects. The money invested in First Nation communities is not enough to meet needs, in any area.

There is a serious diabetes problem in the communities. Members tell their chief that they are not able to be airlifted out, that they have no money and that they come back home to die. In 2010, there are still communities that have no water and no electricity.

● (1135)

If we don't start to invest serious money in the First Nations, there will be… The after-effects are already obvious. Hence the importance of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. That is something; it is key. We've been doing this for a long time and we will continue to do it.

Your comment gave me an opportunity to talk about the status of the First Nations in Quebec and Labrador. When I attend a meeting of chiefs, we see the problems. It has become a matter of life or death. And there are statistics to prove it. For years now, we have been collecting statistics and trying to tell the government that members of our community are dying, that people are not well, that we need help and that they should give us our rightful share of natural resources.

We are the custodians of this earth. Mother Earth is not doing well, not well at all, because resources have been plundered to make money. The First Nations are the keepers of this earth. At some point, they will have to listen to us as governments. We are governments. We were governments when you came to our lands.

Your comment gave me an opportunity to pass on my message. Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Ms. Nicole Demers): Thank you very much, Ms. Archambault.

Ms. Brassard.

Ms. Renée Brassard: I want to come back to a comment made by Ms. Brown about the problems related to developing skills programs. I am going to try to give you a very practical example.

Several years ago, we decided to all focus on development. We looked at Aboriginal families and decided that Aboriginal parents had a real parenting deficit. We found it unbelievable that they would leave their children alone without supervision, that they were all dirty, that 17 children would be living in the same house, and that their daughters would be pregnant at the age of 15.

So, the child welfare system decided to try and develop parenting skills among Aboriginal mothers. But the problem with these parenting skills is that, once again, white people will be defining the appropriate skills and what it means to be a good parent.

I'd like to give you a very concrete example. Recently, at a discussion group on maternity with 10 or more Aboriginal women, one of the women in attendance told me that she had always been able to grow in her community. For her, going to the neighbours to ask for butter was not a problem, because everyone does that there: they never lock their doors and they help each other out. It's a form of community solidarity.

She told me that it was the same thing for their relationship with the land. She said that often, when there are meetings of Aboriginals, you can see one person's children over there in that corner, another person's children over there in another corner, and that all the children are outside. She explained that the relationship with the land is a fundamental value among the Aboriginal people. Children are very free to explore.

In the youth protection context, leaving a child without supervision like that or letting the neighbour look after your child is tantamount to parental negligence. So, the youth protection authorities came into her life. They told this Aboriginal woman that her cultural system amounted to parental negligence. As a result, she was caught up in the youth protection system, and her children were taken away.

And the wonderful social response in Quebec was to amend the Youth Protection Act in 2007. Now it imposes certain timelines. Now they have latched on to the child attachment theory. So, depending on the age of your child, you have a certain period of time to work on or correct your bad parenting. If your child is aged from 0 to 5 years, you only have six months. If your child is between the ages of 6 and 11, you have 12 months, and if your child is aged from 12 to 17 years, you have 18 months.

But is it realistic to impose these timeframes, considering all the things we have been talking about together this morning? Is it realistic to demand that an Aboriginal woman acquire proper parenting skills in 18, 12 or 6 months?

And, if you are not able to rectify or improve your skills within that timeframe, your child will be subject to adoption until the age of majority. That is what happens when you focus on skills and it shows the extent to which this is all part of a government-based post-colonial system of domination.

Right now, we are reliving the 60s scoop. Many Aboriginal women saw their children taken away, supposedly because they were incapable of looking after them. As a result, we are now witnessing an overrepresentation of Aboriginal youth in institutions, youth centres, friendship centres and group homes. Aboriginals are overrepresented in our prisons and penitentiaries. And the women are in safe houses.

● (1140)

The Acting Chair (Ms. Nicole Demers): Mr. Duchesneau.

Mr. Guy Duchesneau: I would just like to make one clarification.

Ms. Brown, you talked earlier about skills among people with certification. People in our community are educated and skilled at their job. However, the salaries we are able to offer in our community are not the same as what is available outside. In spite of that, people want to work for their community and remain on staff. That is not necessarily what you seemed to have understood when you were saying that, in terms of certification, people are not recognized for their skills outside their communities and want to leave them. We do not want to leave. We want to stay in our communities, but we also want to be paid the same wages as people in neighbouring communities in Quebec.

For example, a social worker in our community is paid $50,000, whereas that same person would earn $69,000 under the provincial system. We do the same job, we have the same skills and the same certification. Furthermore, we have experience in the community. Because of the budgets allocated to the communities and distributed among all the different services, the communities are not able to offer more than that if they want to be in a position to provide a range of services to their people and ensure that those services are of high quality. That is what I want to clarify. It's not a question of certification. That may be the case in some communities, but our goal is not to go and work somewhere else. We want to earn the same salary as people elsewhere and continue to work in our community.

● (1145)

The Acting Chair (Ms. Nicole Demers): Ms. Brown, I am going to let you ask a very brief question. We will soon have to wrap up the discussion, but I would also like to ask a question.

Mrs. Carol Hughes: Madam Chair, I appreciated the comments, but I would like to point out that many of the answers were addressed to Ms. Brown.

There is one issue that is sure to interest our witnesses, it seems to me. It is causing a lot of controversy in the House right now: the Canadian Firearms Registry.

Would you agree to let the witnesses answer the question I asked earlier in that regard?

I would like to know whether they agree that the Canadian Firearms Registry should be maintained. I would also be interested in hearing their comments with respect to the registry.

Ms. Renée Brassard: With respect to the registry, I think it would be a little silly to say that controlling access to firearms and ammunitions… I think you would receive a better response if you talked to the police. They have raw data on cases involving violence or the use of firearms.

However, there is one thing I do want to say. Even if we got rid of all the guns, that would not put an end to the violence. Other means are also used. As I see it, it's a non-issue. Certainly, some women are killed with guns and the possibilities of that happening are higher in Aboriginal communities, since they use guns all the time for hunting.

At the same time, do you think that if we got rid of guns, there would be no more violence against Aboriginal women? Unfortunately, I don't think so.

The Acting Chair (Ms. Nicole Demers): Thank you.

Mr. Savard, please.

Mr. Stéphane Savard: Yes, if it's not a gun, it will be something else. Suicides in the communities are not committed using guns. In every case, the victims hang themselves. And people don't hang themselves using ropes they have bought; they use anything that is at hand—

The Acting Chair (Ms. Nicole Demers): Thank you very much.

My apologies, Ms. Archambault. Ms. Brown has the floor now.

[*English*]

Ms. Lois Brown: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Mr. Duchesneau, may I just go back to your comment?

My question came from Ms. Desnoyers' comments about skills that were being acquired in the prison setting. When an aboriginal man is incarcerated, assessments are done. Bear in mind that in my job before I went into political life, we did assessments of injured workers to help them find the best place to contribute. We did assessments to help them gain employment that was going to give them a reasonable income in order for them to provide for their families, and also for self-satisfaction and to build their skills levels in other areas. We did those assessments on a regular basis.

Hopefully, the skills that are being provided in the prison setting right now will help individuals—and not just aboriginal people—who have been incarcerated find employment when they return to their communities and will help them build their abilities and contribute to their communities. Not everybody is going into social work, so other skills are being acquired.

I guess I'm asking which skills are going to be valuable. We need to be providing them to our aboriginal people so they can find success when they leave the prison setting. My question was specific to that issue.

● (1150)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Guy Duchesneau: We are talking about skills, and it seems to me that people who have been in prison are already labelled. When they return to the community, employers do a check to assess their credibility and find out whether they have committed robbery, for example. There are inquiries made, so that employers know whether an applicant has committed a crime. Any applicant who has been involved in robberies will obviously be convinced that an employer will never hire him.

That's why people who have been in prison very often think that their only recourse is to continue to do what they were doing before, rather than try to develop skills. Despite that, they are labelled and they very often wear that label for the rest of their lives. We are only able to rescue a few of them. And here I am not talking only about Aboriginal communities; this is the case for everyone who lives in that environment. Some manage to escape, but most of them continue to suffer the consequences.

Before placing people in these environments, we should work with them and try to ascertain the skills they could acquire and some way for them to restore their dignity, or see how we could help them to live better in today's society while still respecting them for what they are. If we work with people on the ground, in their environment —with people who are part and parcel of their communities, in Quebec, Canada and elsewhere in the world—we will succeed.

In terms of child protection and family services, children are placed in foster homes, but we don't work with either the children or the family. When the children are returned to the family, no work has been done. What happens then? Well, the cycle starts all over again. Right now, we are trying to do the opposite. The Aboriginal communities have asked the government to consider their vision, so that it is possible to develop close relations with communities and families, and work directly with the parents to help them fulfill their responsibilities to their children. The goal is not for children to be placed in foster homes or, under the new regulations, that they be taken from their communities again and adopted by other societies.

So, there is a great deal of work to be done with respect to individual responsibility and dignity. We very often forget those things. It is easier to move people around and camp them in specific places than it is to work with them. It is easier to put people in institutions than to work directly with the communities to try and help them.

The Acting Chair (Ms. Nicole Demers): Thank you very much.

Ms. Brassard.

Ms. Renée Brassard: I would like to come back to skills development and the penitentiaries. In Quebec at least, there are no programs. There is no attempt being made to develop inmates' skills in prison. There is no money. So, inmates serve their term and there is nothing else. It is kind of a parking lot for human beings.

At the federal level, if you are Aboriginal, they already know perfectly well where you are from—which community. They don't offer you any programs because they consider the risk to be too high. Therefore, prisons or penitentiaries, which should allow for certain skills to be developed, are discriminatory towards Aboriginals, because they have too many needs and represent too high a risk of recidivism. In Canada, there are obviously correctional programs offered to drug addicts. They deal with the use of substances. There are also anger management and sexual abuse management programs which are aimed at controlling sexual deviance among Aboriginals.

However, even if we work at developing skills at the individual level, these people return to their communities afterwards, where the unemployment rate is 90% and the rate of sexual violence and abuse of all kinds is as high as 80%. So, how can you expect time spent in a penitentiary to have any preponderant effect, in a living environment such as that?

● (1155)

The Acting Chair (Ms. Nicole Demers): Unfortunately, Ms. Brassard, I am going to be the one to ask you the final question.

However, I would first like to thank our witnesses.

Ms. Denis-Damée, you worry about the contribution you can make, but your testimony was the most effective of all. It reflected the experience of a person who helped us to understand the realities of her community. I want to extend my deep thanks to you for having the courage to do that.

I would also like to express my sincere thanks to the other witnesses for telling us what is needed. You particularly focused on the need to work in cooperation and to set aside the paternalistic approach, which we have used for far too long.

I would like to ask a question which deals with my favourite topic. I now have a great deal of respect for the Aboriginal communities, but I did not have much before I actually got to know them. I was one of those people who believed that members of these communities don't pay taxes and spend all their time selling cigarettes. Before I got to know Ms. Gabriel, I did not know much about the Aboriginal communities. Fortunately for me, I got to know them. I was wondering whether we should be educating the non-Aboriginal communities about their culture and history. Perhaps that would allow us to get out of the straightjacket that has existed now for hundreds of years.

Ms. Archambault, I would like to know whether you are familiar with the Akaitcho First Nation in the Far North. It negotiated a special agreement with the Government of Canada with respect to its diamond mines. We passed a motion in Parliament on that several years ago. I wondered whether the results had been positive.

Grand Chief Anne Archambault: At the Viger Maliseet First Nation, we are currently trying to reach an agreement on a modern treaty. We relied on the 1760 treaty and the Supreme Court of Canada ruling in the Donald Marshall, Jr. case. My belief is that we have to give future generations an opportunity to succeed and create a future for themselves. In our case, we are already in it up to our teeth, as they say.

I also wanted to thank you for being so frank about your opinion of us previously. As far as we are concerned, that is one more person that we have won over. At the same time, it is important to say that this is an opinion that prevails even today.

The Acting Chair (Ms. Nicole Demers): Thank you.

Ms. Renée Brassard: At university, I teach 400 students a year. And the first exercise I assign to them involves naming the Aboriginal nations in Quebec. Unfortunately, only about 10% of students are able to name some. So, I invite members of Aboriginal communities to class. We start from the bottom up to raise awareness.

Mr. Pomerleau asked us earlier how it is that these people remain invisible. The answer to that is that as far as their reality is concerned, there is still a great deal of work to be done in terms of educating and raising awareness among Quebeckers and Canadians. There is no need to go and visit favelas or the like abroad: we have our own favelas.

The Acting Chair (Ms. Nicole Demers): Thank you very much.

Ms. Denis-Damée, please.

Ms. Mélanie Denis-Damée: I simply wanted to thank you for hearing me out. As far as I'm concerned, it was a real treat to be able to share my thoughts with you today.

The Acting Chair (Ms. Nicole Demers): Thank you.

Mrs. Ann Desnoyers: I would just like to add that organizations like the Quebec Provincial Police are increasingly calling on anthropologists to recount the cultural history of the First Nations. Mr. Serge Bouchard, in particular, has given a lot of lectures to police with respect to what the First Nations have experienced and the myths surrounding them. That is a great resource. We see an improvement in that area. I know that non-Aboriginals are very pleased to hear that, because their attitude will change. We have to get rid of our prejudices.

The Acting Chair (Ms. Nicole Demers): Thank our very much for being here.

Mr. Duchesneau, please.

Mr. Guy Duchesneau: In closing, I would like to thank you for giving us this opportunity to express our views on this. Very often, non-Aboriginal Canadians talk about things like cigarettes and alcohol. But that concerns only a small number of Aboriginals, and they hide another system underneath. We have to be careful when accusing Aboriginal people.

● (1200)

The Acting Chair (Ms. Nicole Demers): Thank you very much.

I need a motion to adjourn the meeting. Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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