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Chair

Ms. Irene Mathyssen

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● (1530)

[*English*]

The Chair (Ms. Irene Mathyssen (London—Fanshawe, NDP)): Would members of the committee please be seated, we're rather short on time today because we are expecting bells at 5:15. To make sure that we have given the second panel enough time, I would propose we end the first panel at 4:20, and then move to the second panel so we can hear from those folks as well.

I would like—

Ms. Joyce Bateman (Winnipeg South Centre, CPC): Madam Chair, how much time are you giving to each of our guests?

The Chair: I'm giving them just over 50 minutes.

It's my pleasure to welcome Peggy Taillon, president and chief executive officer of the Canadian Council on Social Development, and Bonnie Brayton, the national executive director of the DisAbled Women's Network of Canada.

We have good reason to celebrate your return, Ms. Brayton, and we welcome you, Ms. Taillon, because we know that you will add immensely to this study. Each of you has 10 minutes, and Ms. Brayton, would you like to begin?

Ms. Bonnie Brayton (National Executive Director, DisAbled Women's Network of Canada): Certainly, thank you.

Good afternoon, everyone.

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much for hearing our testimony again today.

[*English*]

We thank the status of women committee for inviting us to participate in this important study on improving the economic prospects for girls with disabilities in Canada. It is vital to give us meaningful ways to participate in the decisions that affect our lives at policy tables. We are grateful for this opportunity to open what we hope will be an ongoing dialogue.

As visitors to the lands of the Six Nations people, we thank the Haudenosaunee people for the use of their lands to come together today. We ask for guidance and wisdom from our Creator for the words that will allow us to come to an understanding and meaningful change in our society so that we may all live free of violence, abuse, and poverty.

Concerning issues facing girls with disabilities, we offer the expertise of our limited experience as the basis for input and collaboration to increase our opportunity for inclusive attitudes and practices for Canadian girls with disabilities in their quest for economic prosperity. As I'm sure you've heard from other experts during this study, the social determinants of health have an enormous impact on the economic prospects for girls in Canada.

Canada lists the 11 determinants of health as: income and social status, social support networks, education and literacy, employment and working conditions, physical and social environments, biology and genetic endowment—I find that one fascinating—personal health practices and coping skills, healthy child development, health services, gender, and culture.

In our work we are focused on how gender and disability intersect in this regard and impact upon our constituents. Of course, we think also of how other things, such as race, culture, or sexual orientation also situate us in this regard.

I would be remiss in not pointing out that much of the data that we can and will cite in our brief, which will follow, is not current because the PALS, SLID, and long-form census data used are no longer being collected. This data set and these pieces of information need to be brought back, so that, going forward, we can continue to work with the Government of Canada on being well informed of the situation of girls with disabilities in Canada.

As for poverty, access to education, and underemployment, the statistics are grim. I could speak at length about this to you today, but I won't. I have some statistics that I'll share. I will tell you that there are some disturbing numbers, including that the highest rates of unemployment by far and the lowest levels of income belong to young women with disabilities and girls with disabilities, regardless of their age. This is consistent within any population you want to look at in Canada. We heard from you the last time about women having the highest rates of violence. Well, it's the same in education. It's the same in income supports. They're the most compromised, and again I'll remind the committee that we're talking about one in five Canadian women.

In Canada, half of working-age adults with disabilities aged 15 to 64 live on low income. People with disabilities are twice as likely to live on a low income compared to people without disabilities. Some 25% of Canadians without disabilities are without a high school diploma, compared with 37% of those with a disability. Research demonstrates that if proper supports are in place to have children with disabilities included in regular classrooms, all students benefit.

Recent studies show that 41% of children with disabilities felt threatened at school or on the school bus within the past year and that 36% were assaulted at school or on the bus. I don't want to dwell on the issue of violence, but I will come back to the fact that this is something that constitutes another impact and is one of the reasons that we always need to bring this back into any discourse about women and girls with disabilities, because it's a part of their daily lives.

Research indicates that inclusion promotes social skills for children with and without disabilities, and so the concept of inclusive education becomes extremely important around a lot of different things, and not just for opportunities for children with disabilities but for society as a whole to move forward in becoming a truly inclusive society.

Inadequate skills and education lead to barriers to employment. Among Canadians aged 15 to 64 without a disability, 75% are employed compared with just 51% of those with disabilities.

As I said, I'm not going to dwell on statistics today, but I want to share one more with you. There is some good news from a report from 2010 by a dear friend of ours from the government, from Human Resources and Skills Development, Aron Spector. It is called "Changing Educational Attainment and Enrolment Patterns Among Youth with Disabilities 1999-2006". The good news is:

> More youth with disabilities are successfully remaining in school to the point where they receive post-secondary accreditation.
>
> Youth with disabilities who complete post-secondary schooling are much more likely to find and keep employment.

And in employment rates for university degree graduates 25-29, there was only a six percentage-point difference between disabled students and non-disabled students in 2007. So this is really good news.

● (1535)

In other words, educational attainments have improved in Canada for young people with disabilities, and particularly young women with disabilities.

Finally, "Unemployment rates for this population were approximately 5%."

What's the message from this study? It was a huge study, and I'm not going to get into it today. Fundamentally, it is that:

> Accommodation in schools has likely been resulting in a substantially increased number of successes among young people with disabilities in both completing post-secondary schooling and in finding work.

So that is some really good and important news. And I will tell you that I was really pleased to see that, among girls with disabilities, the statistics are quite similar to those we see for non-disabled young women, which is that, based on the recent studies, the level of educational attainment for girls with disabilities has surpassed that of young men with disabilities. It's not a contest, but at the same time I think this is very encouraging. As I said, to see the parallels between disabled and non-disabled women becoming ever closer is a very encouraging indicator.

Today instead, I'd like to speak to you about one of our guests. She's one of the visitors present here. She's a friend of mine, Kuy Chheng Treng, from Cambodia. She's visiting Canada under the Coady Institute's international women in leadership program. She is, I'm pleased to say, staying with DAWN over a two-month period. She's a visiting scholar for our organization, and she and I are working together while she's here.

The reason I want to talk to you about Chheng is linked to the discussion today and this very subject. I realized that it was important to bring some exciting news from the international community to the table for discussion around social enterprise, which is an idea that DAWN Canada is committed to—social enterprise in the context of how social enterprise can be used and coupled to create both employment and educational opportunities for young people, not just in Chheng's community in Cambodia but here in Canada.

Digital Divide Data is a social enterprise with offices around the world, with its roots beginning in Cambodia, where my colleague Kuy Chheng Treng is from. If you look at the Canadian situation for young women with, say, a high school education, there are statistics to indicate that in the past 10 years or so she's much more likely than she was to finish her post-secondary education, but she is still very likely to face unemployment. That the rates of unemployment are still above 50% for women with disabilities speaks to what she's facing when she finishes her post-secondary education here in Canada.

Let me juxtapose this with the situation that Chheng found herself in at the age of 18 with the social enterprise called Digital Divide Data in Cambodia, which has focused on two things. It has focused on providing young people with disabilities and people who are marginalized....

Again I say, this model is transferable not just to women with disabilities, but to any groups in which there are high rates of unemployment and limited opportunities for post-secondary education. That includes our young people here in Canada, women or men. What happens with Digital Divide is that young people come to the organization and are given an opportunity to complete their post-secondary education while they work. So their day is split between post-secondary education and work.

Chheng has been with Digital Divide for 10 years. She has completed her master's in finance. She's a senior manager in accounting. She has travelled all over the place. She's here in Canada because she's been provided with the kind of supports that she said....

I have a biography. If anybody wants to see it after, I'd be happy to share it with them.

The opportunity Chheng was provided with was the opportunity to have two key things that young people need today: work experience and education. What happens otherwise, when you come out of post-secondary institutions, is that nobody will give you an opportunity and nobody wants to give you a job, because you have no experience.

I say to you today that when you finish wrapping up this study and you want to look at one of the most meaningful ways to change things here in Canada for young women with disabilities—and I would say for many other young women—it would be to consider supporting the idea of social enterprise as a way forward.

Social enterprise is one of the emerging models here in Canada.

● (1540)

The Chair: Ms. Brayton, I'm sorry; we're at 10 minutes. I am hoping that the committee will ask you the questions so that you can complete your brief.

Thank you, and welcome to Chheng.

Now we go to Ms. Taillon for 10 minutes, please.

Ms. Peggy Taillon (President and Chief Executive Officer, Canadian Council on Social Development): Thank you, Madam Chair.

It's great to be back in front of this committee this afternoon.

As many of you likely know, CCSD has been around for 92 years. We call it the grande dame of social policy in Canada. CCSD has contributed significantly to building Canada's social infrastructure in collaboration with multiple governments over its 90-some years, including the development of the concepts of EI, disability, and old-age pension.

I'm also here as the founder and president of the HERA Mission of Canada, an international NGO foundation I started while doing some development work in western Kenya, where I adopted my son. There we support over 200 orphans and 90 widows who are grandmas and great-grandmas. Part of my opening remarks are focused on Canada, but a lot of what I'll reflect on in the Q and A is also from some of our experiences in western Kenya.

The focus of this is really about honouring our promise to Canada's kids, particularly giving Canadian girls the best start.

We are a country at a crossroads. Yes, we've heard this before. It's an adage often used for dramatic effect, a footnote at key points in our country's development that is often used as a signal for a positive shift forward, marking progress and upwards mobility for our country.

This is not the case in today's Canada, for today's kids. The crossroads analogy clearly demarcates that, today in Canada, we are a country on two tracks, forging separate paths that are clearly segmenting and separating Canadians, drawing lines based on income, wealth, and for a small few, extreme wealth. The other segment of Canadians is stuck in a labyrinth, a maze with high walls, trap doors, and few exits that often guarantee re-entry.

For these Canadians, their path is cyclical—extreme poverty with little or no meaningful opportunities for upward movement. There is another segment emerging since the recent economic downturn—an eroding middle class whose financial security, once taken for granted, is now less certain.

With the weakened job market and costs rising on every front, these families are running a race and gaining very little ground. Canada is changing. We are more divided, more segmented than ever before, and yes, even when it comes to our kids.

Canada used to lead in this area. Regardless of the challenges in front of us, we always put our kids first. This was a collective promise we made to them, and to each other. Our children are our greatest resource, and all of us—parents, grandparents, neighbours, teachers, policy-makers, parliamentarians—share an obligation to give them the best start. That was an essential tenet, a Canadian value.

Then, something changed.

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the OECD, at 15.1%, Canada's child poverty rate is higher than the OECD average. More than one in seven Canadian children now live in poverty. Canada ranks 13th on this indicator, and scores a “C” grade.

The Nordic countries—Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden—have the lowest rates of child poverty, with less than 5% of children living in poor households. The relationship between social spending and reducing poverty rates is clear. These leading countries boast strong traditions of wealth distribution. They have addressed inequality while Canada has silently watched the gap grow.

A “C” for a country as well-endowed as Canada? It really is inconceivable.

At least we've been consistent. Canada's has received a steady “C” since the 1980s for our lacklustre performance on child poverty. We all remember the 1989 Canadian House of Commons' unanimous resolution to eliminate child poverty by the year 2000, and there was some initial success. The poverty rate fell from 15.8% in the mid-1980s to 12.8% in the mid-1990s. Since then, however, the rate has increased to 15.1% in the mid-2000s, reversing earlier progress.

● (1545)

Today in Canada we are leaving at least 639,000 children behind. That's one in ten. The message to them is: you don't count, you are on your own. When it comes to our kids, a “C” is a failure. We are all failing to address the critical need for early learning, universal child care, affordable housing, and necessary public supports that assist families in realizing their economic potential. That's where it starts—with our kids. Kids thrive when their parents are thriving. Kids thrive when they are given the best start between zero to five. The early years make the greatest impact and determine your life's path. We all know this. There are mountains of evidence to support this.

Any of us who are parents know that if our kids are going to thrive they need a stable, safe home environment; parents who have access to a support system; accredited and affordable child care; and places to grow, interact, and learn with other toddlers, and from other parents. They need fresh air, clean water, exercise, and nutritious food. Much of this is out of reach if your family is poor.

Despite knowing this, we have ghettoized Canada's poor and have officially become a country where your postal code matters more than your genetic code. Poverty is literally making segments of us sick.

Clyde Hertzman, an internationally renowned Canadian researcher on early child development, has demonstrated time and time again how to reduce the number of ADHD diagnoses, reduce school dropout rates, and slash the incidence of crime and drug addiction by better understanding the dynamics of early child interventions. When we invest in all children early in their lives, we can boost their academic achievement and set them on the right path for the rest of their lives. Hertzman has followed cohorts of early-years kids through life and has found instances of lower rates of chronic disease, higher rates of post-secondary education completion, and lower rates of unemployment.

Early learning is a life changer, and Canada needs to invest in it. Yes, we can afford it. The government could take the $2.5 billion universal child care benefit expenditure and divide it between the provinces and territories, invest in early child care and education programs, and make a difference to moderate- and low-income families immediately. Families in all regions of this country are desperate for high-quality, affordable child care so they can work or study. Provinces, local governments, and community groups are struggling to find the funds to provide early childhood education and child care for Canadian families.

Listen, as parents we are far more productive and effective in our lives when we know our kids are thriving in the best possible environment when we leave them to go to work. It is that simple. It's good for all of us. Canadian families are doing their part; our governments need to do theirs.

This is ultimately about inclusion, opportunity, participation, and shared prosperity. It's what defines us as a nation. It's a promise and an obligation we have made to our kids, each other, and our communities. It is the Canadian way.

Thanks.

● (1550)

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

We'll now go to Ms. James for seven minutes, please.

Ms. Roxanne James (Scarborough Centre, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to Ms. Brayton and Ms. Taillon.

I want to touch base briefly on the purpose of this committee. It's actually a study on the prospects of Canadian girls and what the Status of Women can do to improve their economic prosperity, economic future, and economic participation in leadership roles, etc. I know you both covered many issues. Some of those issues deal with the aftermath of the situation of what we can do at a very young age to encourage girls to succeed, to want to become the leaders of tomorrow, and want to achieve the same status that men have achieved for many decades.

I'll ask Ms. Brayton the question first. From that brief overview, what do you think the Status of Women can do? What is the message we can deliver to young girls right now? What can we do to empower them to want to succeed, and not stand at the back of the line? I know your expertise is with women and girls with disabilities, but in general what do you think the Status of Women can do to actually achieve that—to empower girls to want to succeed and prosper in Canada?

Ms. Bonnie Brayton: Thank you for your question.

I actually took the time to study Minister Ambrose's strategic plan. In looking at her plan, I know that she's focused on gender analysis across all levels of government. We know without question that this is the only way women and girls with disabilities will see real impacts, and that's if an intersectional approach, which we talk so much about in our sector, is actually applied across the government. So we applaud Minister Ambrose for understanding that gender analysis across the government is the first step.

We know that improving the economic prospects for all girls in Canada, and not just girls with disabilities, is fundamentally linked to the social determinants of health, education, and employment. The reason I spoke about those before was that we know that these are key. We know that for girls with disabilities, this can also mean enhancing income support programs. There's a whole host of things linked to this cross-ministerial approach Minister Ambrose has identified.

I would ask each of you to work with her to ensure that this analysis will be inclusive and will lead to a meaningful application of this critical tenet of real gender equality. The real strength of this strategy lies in the leadership with which it is applied, and as parliamentarians who now know how, you are called upon to lead also.

Ms. Roxanne James: Could we just stop for a second?

I'm trying to get more at the actual message. What is it that Status of Women can do? A lot of times we'll do funding or projects. We recently did a call for proposals on getting young women and girls in rural and remote communities more involved. My question is kind of along those lines.

What is it you think the Status of Women can do to actually encourage women and young girls to succeed? I don't want just an overview statement. I'm wondering if you could suggest one specific thing.

Ms. Bonnie Brayton: I'll use two words together: capacity and leadership.

Ms. Roxanne James: Thank you.

I'm going to touch base on this as well, because I know that you had talked about girls with disabilities and that a high ratio of them are without high school diplomas. I didn't catch the percentage.

Ms. Bonnie Brayton: I didn't bring a detailed list of statistics. I have them, and I'm going to present a written brief to your committee as well.

Ms. Roxanne James: You've indicated that it has actually improved.

Ms. Bonnie Brayton: The statistic that's really exciting in terms of improvement is showing up in post-secondary education statistics. What we're seeing, and again, I mentioned that we're seeing this not just in disabled young women but also in young women in general, is that they're getting a higher level of educational attainment. This is positive. This is a shift in the right direction. We are seeing higher levels of educational attainment. The problem I'm identifying, and I think this is consistent for young women, regardless of whether they're disabled or not, is being able to get jobs when they finish their post-secondary education.

Ms. Roxanne James: Thank you.

Again, your focus is on young girls with disabilities or women with disabilities. But you actually mentioned just a moment ago that it goes right across, regardless of disability or gender. Those who stay in school obviously have greater opportunities for economic prosperity. If we're trying to keep young girls, and young boys, in school to at least get a high school diploma, what is it we can do at a very early age? What is it Status of Women can do to really promote to young girls staying in school and taking that first step towards getting their high school diplomas?

● (1555)

Ms. Bonnie Brayton: In the instance of girls with disabilities, it's ensuring that inclusive education is identified by Status of Women as an important priority. As I said before, it's understanding that the work Minister Ambrose has identified as a priority, which is gender analysis across ministries and an intersectional approach, which is linked very much to gender analysis, will make a significant difference. Because if policies and programs, going forward, reflect an understanding of gender analysis and an understanding of what it can bring to any issue, they will result in important changes.

These are systemic changes that will take time. We recognize that this is something that parliamentarians need to look at from a long view, which is why we really appreciate the fact that you're doing this as a study and are not just looking at immediate solutions, but at long-term solutions.

Ms. Roxanne James: Can I just ask the chair how much longer I have?

The Chair: You have about a minute and a half.

Ms. Roxanne James: Okay, I'll try to speak very quickly, which shouldn't be difficult.

I ask this question quite frequently. Obviously, there are differences between families of different income classes, but there are also issues with regard to ethnicity or religious background that may prevent young girls from having the same opportunities as those who may come from a different family background, heritage, or ethnicity. I'm just wondering, and I'll ask both of you the same question and touch base, whether you would agree with that statement.

What can we do as a society, as a government, as the Status of Women, to reach out and speak to both the girls and the boys in these community-based groups about how we really need to promote women as being equals and provide them the same opportunities. What can we do at the Status of Women to achieve that?

The Chair: Please answer very quickly.

Ms. Bonnie Brayton: You go ahead first, Peggy. I've been talking my face off here.

Ms. Peggy Taillon: Young women need to see themselves in their environment. They need to see that there are opportunities, not by our telling them but by seeing them. So they need to see that their mothers are successful and not isolated.

That's why I focus so much on the early years because imagine a new Canadian mom who comes to Canada, and English is not her first language. She is isolated at home with her kids because she can't afford child care or they don't have a full-day kindergarten program. They become that much more isolated and less integrated into the community.

Ms. Roxanne James: How do we reach out to them—

The Chair: That's it. I'm sorry. No, we're done. Sorry.

Now, Madame Brosseau and Ms. Freeman, you have seven minutes.

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau (Berthier—Maskinongé, NDP): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank you both for the work you've done and for taking the time with us today.

I have seven minutes. I'm going to be as fast as possible and I'm going to share my time with Mylène.

I think what's really important is that we need to address the root problems. Actions do speak louder than words. We have undertaken this study. I think we need to identify root problems and find solutions, and I hope this comes out as a good report.

Poverty is really big. When the moms aren't doing well and the moms are poor, the children are poor. Education is very important.

Ms. Peggy Taillon, I wonder if you could expand on your experience? And I'd like to commend you for the work you've done and the research with the group.

Ms. Peggy Taillon: Thanks.

Poverty is a big issue. We have to create opportunities for kids, and if I had to give a hit list of things I would tackle, education is a biggie.

In Kenya, there are so many things that we could do, and we're doing a number of different things through my foundation. But the one thing that we know is a game-changer in our villages is access to education. So getting as many kids in a generation as possible a good quality education will increase the opportunities they have in front of them.

As DAWN said, you can get through the education system but if there are no meaningful, good quality jobs, what's the point? We know that youth unemployment is at its highest in the country in 10 years, so that is an issue.

When I talk about education, I'm also talking about financial literacy. I look at our demographics, our aging. I look at my parents and their generation. They were not given financial literacy, the fundamentals about planning for a future, building a cushion, etc. It's not found in our curriculum in a way that speaks to kids and gets kids excited about those opportunities. There is this sense that at some point somebody is always going to take care of them—that there is some program. So we need to create an awareness and some responsibility around some of those issues.

A big thing for girls is self-esteem. As I was saying to the previous member, you need to see yourself. If you believe there are opportunities for you in the community, you need to see that for yourself. If you've witnessed your mother and your grandmother isolated without any opportunities, living in cyclical poverty, sick because they've had poor living conditions, living in an abusive relationship, you don't see very many options for yourself.

So this is about community building. You cannot deal with kids without dealing with their families. You cannot deal with kids without supporting their parents, so dealing with poverty is a big one.

● (1600)

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau: So if the federal government had a national child care strategy that would help moms pay for child care for their children, that would help.

If education wasn't so expensive.... Women earn 71 cents for every dollar a man does and if we fixed that also.... These are the steps I think we should be taking.

Ms. Peggy Taillon: Yes, early learning and child care, housing, and making sure that people have the best start because they're living in a safe and affordable environment. Nutrition, getting the—

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau: A national food strategy.

Ms. Peggy Taillon: If you haven't eaten and you're going to school, it's very likely that you're not going to be successful. By midday you won't have the capacity to learn and take in any more information.

That's why I focused on the early years because if we don't give kids the right start, we're squandering the opportunity of several generations, the next generations of Canadians.

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau: Kids are our future, and I think we have to acknowledge that.

I'll just pass on to Mylène, really quickly. We don't have much time. I'm sorry.

Ms. Mylène Freeman (Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, NDP): Thank you. Sorry. We're always short on time.

I have questions for Ms. Brayton. In 2010 the government announced that the long-form census was not going to be mandatory anymore. Obviously, experts argue that the data collected will no longer be statistically accurate, neither will it be representative, and therefore we can't really use it.

Can you speak to this committee about how this affects the way that you have been and will be able to advocate for disabled women, how it affects Status of Women's ability to consider disabled women in policy-making?

Ms. Bonnie Brayton: There are actually three things that Statistics Canada was doing that were really important. One of them was the long-form census. That's not as impactful on girls. The SLID data and PALS data sets were both really key. In terms of the studies that I'll send to the committee afterwards with our written brief, what they will show is that most of the best data I shared with you today comes from PALS and SLID. It's because of the particular orientation of those questions.

Certainly, I would say that the long-form census is another really important piece of data because, again, it tracks families with disabilities. We've heard a lot already today, and I'm sure you've heard ad infinitum the fact that poverty is a big piece of this. As you know from hearing from me so many times already, the poorest people in this country are people with disabilities. And if so, so are children with disabilities, and so are girls with disabilities and their families.

One of the social determinants of health that's not on the official list is on the list for people with disabilities. I will really underline this for you in terms of how you're going to make a difference for girls with disabilities. It is to understand that the transportation system in this country is a key piece for young women with disabilities. Access to education is not just the obvious. Access to education includes how you get there. It includes accessible housing on campuses. It includes a really critical thing here. Please take this back with you. It is being able to take your income support and leave your province to go to another province to go to school.

I could give you an example of a young woman I know who actually continued a relationship with her live-in caregiver simply so she could continue her education. If she had not agreed to have him move with her to the other province while she went to school, she would have missed her opportunity for an education.

The income supports for people with disabilities are not flexible, and this is a huge barrier in every aspect of their lives, and particularly for young women. This is something that will prevent them from having a post-secondary education, as will transportation, as will accessible housing on campuses. These are really critical for young women with disabilities.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Bateman, for seven minutes, please.

● (1605)

Ms. Joyce Bateman: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you both for being here. I appreciate your comments. I was excited, Bonnie, when you said that post-secondary education for young women with disabilities has substantially increased. If you could include the details on that in your written brief, that would be awesome.

Ms. Bonnie Brayton: To be clear, in terms of where the data set comes from, it's from 1999 to 2006. I don't know what the new stats are because we don't have any new data.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: That's an interesting time period, because actually your colleague, Peggy.... I think I'm just going to call you Peggy; you can call me Joyce.

Ms. Bonnie Brayton: Peggy and Bonnie works for both of us, I'm sure.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: The Canadian Council on Social Development had a 2006 labour profile that stated the gender gap had actually reversed and the employment market had improved more for girls than for boys. I'm fascinated that we're hearing exactly the same thing from you.

Peggy, could you speak to that first? I'm definitely going to come back to you, Bonnie. I'm very interested in what that's attributable to. Those are concrete stats. You published them. Your organization stands behind them. What's it attributable to?

Ms. Peggy Taillon: I think there was a concerted focus on putting more resources into those particular areas.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: No, but it's employment for youth. It's the labour force profile of youth. Your report stated that the gender gap had reversed and that the employment market has improved more for girls than for boys. What is that attributable to?

We're here to find out how we help young women.

Ms. Peggy Taillon: I would guess it goes back to that gender lens that has been placed on social policy. If you think about some of the movements from academics and the research that started to point very concretely to where we needed to focus on creating those opportunities for young women.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: Do you have concrete data on different industries that young women have gravitated to?

Ms. Peggy Taillon: We could certainly pull that out. I could get our head of research to provide it.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: I'd be really interested in that. To think that the gender gap has reversed for young women.... As a mother of a daughter—I have a son too—as you've both clearly stated, it can be different. I'd be very interested in seeing that and finding out whether it's different industries that they have been attracted to. Are they entering non-traditional industries, for example?

Then, the other critical piece—because I'm not just a mom of a daughter—what's happening with boys? Is there something going on that we're not aware of? We care about everybody here. Is there a piece that's missing?

Bonnie, you were clear that the girls are increasing—

Ms. Bonnie Brayton: Educational attainment at post-secondary levels has improved more for girls than boys. I think that's a reflection of a lot of things. I think that some of what Peggy said is very clearly part of this.

The feminist movement has been in place for several decades now. The impacts and understanding of gender and gender needs is reflected in a lot of institutions today—in educational institutions, in a lot of work. The reason we have the Status of Women committee today is because the feminist movement pushed forward at a time in our history when women were not equal, when employment opportunities, educational opportunities were not the same for men and women, and for boys and girls.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: I'd like to ask what you, as an organization, are doing to reach out.

At the last session of this committee we had two remarkable women who are leading their companies and making a difference in terms of inclusion, just doing the right thing in the workforce.

In fact one of them said she wasn't sure she could apply for a prize. They kept asking her to apply for it. They said they wanted to give it to her because of her stats, that she had such a significant number of women working for her. She said she wasn't sure because they didn't have all these committees and the infrastructure; they were just doing the right thing.

Are you reaching out to organizations like this? Are you reaching out to build bridges based on the stats that the gender gap is changing? How are you building the bridge between your world and the world where the jobs actually are?

● (1610)

Ms. Bonnie Brayton: In terms of an overall approach—I'll be very blunt, Joyce—my organization is very underfunded. In terms of how I do a lot of my work, I have to do it very creatively. One of the things that we did in DAWN as an approach is that we adopted a mantra that's really a strategic plan. Our mantra is leadership, partnership, and networking.

Coming back to what you're alluding to, there is absolutely no question in my mind that the way I'm going to move things forward for women and girls with disabilities in this country is by engaging people in leadership, including parliamentarians, in understanding their needs and issues, and in trying to provide input on the kinds of policies, strategies, and funding that will make impacts.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: What is your mantra again? Leadership—

Ms. Bonnie Brayton: Leadership, partnership, and networking.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: I think you're on to something.

Ms. Bonnie Brayton: A mantra means words for change, and that's what the mantra's about. It's how I focus my work and my approach.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: So given that one-third of your mantra is about networking and another third is about partnership, have you created any partnerships with the private sector to help these young women?

Ms. Bonnie Brayton: You heard me make reference to my visitor and dear colleague Kuy Chheng Treng. I think that speaks exactly to the kind of strategy DAWN is trying to take.

We recognize, as I said, that social enterprise is a really important way that we can address educational and employment issues for young women, and older women, with disabilities—for any woman with disabilities. To be really clear, that kind of approach is very much moving outside the model of looking at the government and asking how do you fix this.

It's how do we fix this together. I want you to understand that social enterprise is a really important way that the Government of Canada can start to support and make significant changes for young people with disabilities. Internships—

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now to Ms. Sgro, please, for seven minutes.

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Thank you very much.

Thank you both for being here.

I'm going to continue with Bonnie on that whole issue of the social enterprise and Digital Divide. Would you expand a bit on that, and how did that work so well for your young visitor who is with you? How would we apply that here?

Ms. Bonnie Brayton: I'm delighted to.

As I said, I think it would be wonderful to hear from them. I realize we can't do that today.

In terms of Digital Divide's model, the background is that somebody from California who's actually originally from Canada, Jeremy Hockenstein, was part of a group of people who were looking to expand in terms of new markets. He went into Cambodia about 10 years ago and developed the Digital Divide Data model, which is built around the idea that they have a viable social enterprise.... I'll give you an example. Their sales last year were $2.3 million. What did they do with the $2.3 million they made last year? They reinvested it in more social enterprise.

What are they doing? They're providing a technical service. As I said, I don't need to go into the specifics of it, but it's a highly technical company that has developed a market internationally, including here, and they provide services to countries around the world in terms of the work they do. But the key thing they do is that they give opportunities to young people like Chheng, who came to an organization and started at 18, as I said, with her high school degree, her ambition, and not much else in terms of support.

Chheng had really an awful lot of barriers against her chances of getting to post-secondary education. Due to the way that Digital Divide is modelled, she was able to work her way through the employment opportunities at Digital Divide while completing her degree. As I said, she's now a senior accountant there. There are colleagues of Chheng's I know who left Digital Divide and went on to other work in the private sector.

Fundamentally what social enterprise does in this particular model is that it uses education and employment experience to create revenue or, in other words, to generate human and financial capital to keep investing in more human and financial capital. It's a wonderful cycle. It takes really essentially what I would say is the capitalist model and turns it on its ear, and says no, instead of the profits going to a few, the profits are reinvested in the people on whom the social enterprise is grounded.

In this case it's very focused on creating employment for young people with disabilities and young people who are from very poor incomes. It's not specifically people with disabilities, but with an understanding that is one of the poorest communities in Cambodia or anywhere, they are inevitably one of the groups that have been focused on.

● (1615)

Hon. Judy Sgro: How many Ms. Chhengs have you had an opportunity to observe or be part of...?

Ms. Bonnie Brayton: In what context, Judy? I'm sorry, but I don't understand.

Hon. Judy Sgro: In the sense of the whole Digital Divide, you reference—

Ms. Bonnie Brayton: Well, Chheng's actually working in my office. Again, this comes back to the question of leadership. It's something that I speak to often. Chheng and I have both committed to a leadership project that steps both of us outside ourselves to work on an international project that will actually develop a social enterprise in the Caribbean region.

In my view, it's very much about creating a country and reminding ourselves here in Canada that the greatness of this country was built not just around business but around social inclusion and economic inclusion for all Canadians, and that the social enterprise model is one that beautifully addresses this vision of who and where Canada can go.

Hon. Judy Sgro: Peggy, you mentioned some of the work you've done and what you've seen in the village in Kenya in particular, but you were very focused on our girls, and our Canadian kids here. And I agree with everything you said as to what the basics have to be in those first five years and all of those things.

But now, when we're starting to say, okay, we have a young woman who is 16 or 17 years old at this point, what kinds of economic opportunities are there? What roadblocks can we be removing that you think stand in the way of her success?

Ms. Peggy Taillon: That's a great question. Discrimination starts early and it's often latent. It's not obvious. People don't set out to create barriers. Often the barriers are institutionalized or systemic. As women, you experience them and question it.

Finding a high-quality child care place that's safe for your kids—when you find that, it shouldn't feel like a lottery win. It's funny, because I'm a single mom of a little boy, and one of the things that I've learned is that elementary school can be very geared to young women. The environment is very geared towards young women. Often boys don't thrive in that learning environment the way that girls do.

It's flipping the paradigm and finding balance for both genders to thrive. It's trying to create opportunities in which kids see themselves and they see mentors who they respect, and where there are opportunities for them to grow and flourish. The gender analysis, for example, is a great opportunity. But if it's only an analysis, if it's only a “what are the barriers”, if there is no actual implementation, and if it doesn't go beyond government, then we're not really shifting the balance.

In regard to your question earlier about those employers who got it right, where we're seeing shifts in the demographics with respect to more women working in certain segments of the job market, likely somebody in that organization had the leadership and the vision to actually put a gender lens on their company or their organization, and started to create those conditions that everybody can come to work and thrive in. It starts there.

A gender lens is really about men and women, girls and boys, thriving and finding balance in those environments. Often what we end up doing when we do these analyses is that we look at one or the other, as opposed to creating those conditions where everyone can thrive equally. A lot of those barriers can be seen as divisive. Often they're latent. Nobody sets out to create those barriers, just like for people with disabilities, but they're there.

Making shifts in those takes time, but it takes concerted effort and it takes leadership. I also think that young women truly need to see themselves in government, in prominent decision-making roles, at the head of leadership.

I come from health care and I was a senior executive at one of the largest teaching hospitals in the country. I remember sitting at my first meeting of medical heads. There were 47 medical divisions in the hospital. There was only one female head. Imagine. What does that say about the culture?

● (1620)

The Chair: I'm awfully sorry, because I'm so enjoying hearing all of this wonderful information, as I know all the rest of the committee is enjoying it, but we do have to move on.

I want to say thank you, again, to Ms. Brayton and to Ms. Taillon. It's wonderful to see you and we appreciate the contribution that you make, not just here today, but every day.

So at this point I'm going to suspend for a couple of minutes so that we can bring in our other guests.

● (1620)

(Pause)

● (1620)

The Chair: We are ready to begin again. I would ask the committee to resume their seats.

We welcome today Ms. Jocelyne Wasacase-Merasty, and of course, Ms. Paige Isaac. Thank you very much.

We'll begin with Jocelyne, please, for ten minutes.

Ms. Jocelyne Wasacase-Merasty (Regional Manager, Prairie Region, National Centre for First Nations Governance): Good afternoon.

I want to start by thanking the Standing Committee on the Status of Women for this opportunity to speak today. I consider this a great honour. I accepted the invitation without hesitation. Once I started to prepare my thoughts on how I was going to present this, I realized I could only present a statement based on my own personal issues and experiences as an indigenous woman in Canada, and drawing upon my role as the regional manager for the National Centre for First Nations Governance. I also appreciate the fact that there are many different approaches that could be considered on how we, as Canadians, collectively work toward improving the economic prospects for Canadian girls. But for my presentation today I've decided to centre my thoughts around the theme of “nation rebuilding and indigenous women—the strength of our nations”.

Today we hear about many reconciliation processes. A very important healing movement is under way in Canada between indigenous and non-indigenous people, overseen by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, dealing with the devastating legacies left by residential schools. However, I want to bring in another aspect of reconciliation, because I feel that it's a multi-dimensional process, and talk about other issues of restoring lands, economic self-sufficiency, and expanding the jurisdiction of first nations. It can also provide an opportunity to reaffirm the role of our indigenous women through the reclaiming of balance in their home communities and in the Canadian society at large. It is only through forums for dialogue such as this that all parties can search for respectful approaches that will recreate the just relationship we are seeking.

It has been said that indigenous women are the strength of our nations. Traditionally, indigenous women have always played a central role within families and within their nations. Specific tasks were overseen by women in traditional governance structures and in spiritual ceremonies. Cultural teachings passed through oral traditions of indigenous peoples illustrate that indigenous men and women were equal in power, and each had the autonomy within their own personal and social lives.

No more can we ignore the misplaced role and the marginalized voice of indigenous woman. There are too many stories of our indigenous women's accomplishments, their unique strengths, and their ongoing resilience. It is from showcasing these types of examples that our indigenous women will find a place of empowerment and celebration, leading them to their rightful place in society. In an effort to reclaim this balance, indigenous women need to begin to understand the historical context that has challenged the role of indigenous women in today's society, especially in the areas of leadership, governance, and economic development.

Speaking about historical context and traditional indigenous societies, indigenous women played a central role within their families, their government, and in ceremonies. Women were viewed as both the life-givers and caretakers. Men respected women for the sacred gifts they believed the creator had given them, such as being responsible for the early socialization of children, and keepers of the home fires.

In a presentation I recently went to by Kathleen Whitecloud at a conference of first nation managers said that colonization—the imposition of foreign values and their cultural standards—brought about tremendous historical, social, and economic changes.

Suppression of indigenous society and their traditional practices was a common custom—a way to bring about assimilation and the dismantling of the indigenous identity. Unilaterally imposed federal legislation, such as the British North America Act and the Indian Act; attempts at assimilation such as the 1969 white paper; residential schools; over-policing; an ineffective justice system; the loss of our traditional livelihoods; and the removal from our traditional lands to be placed on reserves have all contributed to dependence on a welfare economy, thus creating intergenerational poverty and a very poor socio-economic status. Women were all but ignored, as can be seen in the treaty-making process and in subsequent federal legislation such as the Indian Act, and in many administrative rulings regarding citizenship and gender inequalities.

Today we see the effects of colonization as a dispossessed people, alienated from their traditional practices. The breakdown of families is apparent. There is overrepresentation of aboriginal people in the justice system. There are social inequalities, institutionalized discrimination, systemic racism, lateral violence, discriminatory hiring practices, and violence against women—such as the file on missing and murdered aboriginal women of Canada.

● (1625)

I've come to learn, and I have always talked about this when I'm in communities delivering workshops, that the path to self-determination and nation rebuilding begins with the self, and any journey begins with one person. For indigenous women, empowerment and decolonization will appear in the form of sharing indigenous knowledge, increasing leadership roles, and capacity development with special attention being paid to post-secondary education and skills development, indigenous language revitalization, and the revival of the traditional role of women.

The importance of post-secondary education and skills development as the turning point for anyone seeking to better their life and the lives of dependants cannot be overstated. However, what must be stressed are the types of support systems that are required for indigenous women as they pursue their educational and career goals. The treaty right to education means investing in the future by educating our indigenous people. Educated people will be part of the solution.

Adequate resources don't just mean funding, scholarships, and bursaries, especially for indigenous women. Additional factors are often associated: proper child care, health, transportation, and access to student services that are first nation specific, for example, ceremonial activities and elder counselling. Never mind the fact that to pursue the dreams of higher education or career development means once again leaving their home communities for urban centres and all that this change entails.

Indian control of Indian education speaks to the need for culturally appropriate educational institutions and the need to have educational opportunities that focus on this cultural alignment. Bilingual, bicultural education talks about the challenges of walking in two worlds, and it is equally important for an indigenous person to have the knowledge base from both worlds, both contemporary and traditional.

Indigenous knowledge includes traditional teachings about creation; learning our songs and our stories; exploring our indigenous laws, protocols, and methodologies; practising our ceremonies; sustaining the arts; reconnecting to our sacred places; and much more. As these teachings are shared among indigenous people, women's identity and cultural connections will increase, resulting in long-term, positive impacts on their families and communities.

Why am I talking so much about this cultural identity and how it is linked to stronger economic independence?

I'm taking a quote from a professor at the University of Regina, Dr. Bob Kayseas. He just made a presentation to a conference here and he talks about this. He says:

> Over time the strengthening of aboriginal culture will converge with the entrepreneurial pursuits of our people. This convergence will lead to increased involvement in sustainable entrepreneurship.

As we navigate away from the nucleus of the self and the family, and move toward the larger realm of community and nation rebuilding, we start to see another group of challenges that discriminates against the role of the indigenous woman. Today's mainstream approach to leadership, business, and governance structures is very top down and non-inclusive, and too often these approaches are adopted by first nation contemporary governance structures, once again marginalizing the voice of the indigenous woman.

This is reaffirmed by Dr. Kayseas' research when he spoke of livelihood and economic independence with a group of elders who spoke of the disruption in the family and the community systems, and the impact on the transmission of culture, the language, and the value system. The researcher made the connection that indigenous peoples' traditional pursuit and conception of livelihood are strongly linked to their world views and their survival depends on innovation, hard work, sharing, and mutual respect for all creation. Our resilience as independent people, our livelihood, can be described in today's terms as economic independence and prosperity.

The National Centre for First Nations Governance, Prairie region, has listened to the concerns of the people in our workshops and our forums, in the work that I do working and sitting as a board member for the First Nations University of Canada, and also in participating in the Indigenous Leadership Development Institute and Aboriginal Women's Leaders: Saskatchewan. We talk about the need to bring women together so they can start discussing these issues, and how to move forward and come up with strategies to deal with them.

● (1630)

So we are developing a proposal to host a forum to discuss these issues.

The Chair: I'm sorry to interrupt. I hope we can discuss the rest of your paper in the course of the question period. I'm sure that we'll be able to.

Thank you.

Now Ms. Isaac, for 10 minutes, please.

Ms. Paige Isaac (Coordinator, First Peoples' House): *Kwe*. Hello, everyone.

My name is Paige Isaac. I am Mi'kmaq and I am from Listigouche First Nation.

I want to thank the Standing Committee on the Status of Women for inviting me here to speak. I feel very honoured.

I'm a McGill graduate. I'm a biology major. I started working at the First Peoples' House at McGill University as soon as I finished, and have a new-found passion for education and advancing aboriginal education in this country.

I'll say a little bit about the First Peoples' House and how we contribute to the economic prospects of aboriginal people through education.

We're a part of student services. We're dedicated to providing support for first nations, Inuit, Métis, status and non-status students by establishing a sense of community and a voice for these students who have left their home communities in order to pursue their education. A large part of our student population is women and mothers. We see a lot of the active student population. They're in medicine, law, education, and social work, among other fields. We offer wide-ranging activities. Our staff has actually grown in recent years to help manage this. We do everything from outreach to communities as early as grade school and high school, to families, and to other universities. We support them while they're here, we celebrate them at graduation, and we help with their integration into employment.

I just want to highlight a couple of our really successful outreach programs. This year will see our sixth annual Eagle Spirit High Performance Camp. It runs for a long weekend in May and brings together aboriginal youth ages 13 to 17 from all over the country to come to McGill, spend a weekend here, learn about health careers, amongst others, and find their passion. And there's a lot of focus on sports and physical fitness and overall well-being.

We're seeing a lot more campers, actually, apply to McGill. We have our first student completing his first year at university here. He wants to get into sports medicine. So it's a really successful program. We collaborate with many different people, and you can see that in my notes. We also raise awareness in the McGill community about aboriginal history, culture, and identity through various programs.

I'll talk a little bit about the obstacles. The recommendation I would have is for a sustainable and long-term investment, especially to keep some of the new positions we have. They're running on grants and need to be continually renewed. Funding for students—the post-secondary student support program—is not up to par with the cost of living. This program needs to be maintained. I would encourage that it not turn into a loan program, and that the cap be removed and increased. It offers a lot of restrictions. A lot of our students have to be full-time, they sometimes can't take classes in the summer, and it is good for only certain programs. It doesn't actually support transitional programs, which some universities are developing because they see a need, because some K to 12 students are not being qualified to go into university. So it would be really great if some of these programs could be supported.

In terms of housing, we actually offer housing in our building, but the costs are very high and it's not suitable for families.

I see the need for culturally appropriate counselling. There's a lot of healing needed, and a lot of students do not feel comfortable seeing just any counsellor. There's a need for more communication between community post-secondary counsellors, institutions, and federal and provincial governments to come together to create a more uniform and modernized strategy to advance aboriginal education.

I was recently at a conference and we were discussing unemployment and poverty. They had the statistics up there—high unemployment and high poverty—and one student brought up a really good point. She asked if we could break down these terms and ask who sets these standards.

● (1635)

I think a lot more could be in the discussion on unemployment and poverty, such as our aboriginal values in these standards that have been put in place. What does it mean to aboriginal people to be unemployed and living in poverty? It's a very diverse situation for many different people.

You know, we're always associated with some of these nasty statistics. There is not enough recognition that the situations of aboriginal people around the country are diverse. Stereotypes still exist because of these statistics. More emphasis could be put on what we are doing right and what we're doing well. We are doctors, lawyers, and CEOs. This needs to be visible.

There are structural and systemic problems. Aboriginal and western values tend to clash. I think there needs to be better coordination and more education and awareness campaigns. I think it needs to be moved beyond just awareness. We need to move towards more understanding.

I think a mandated improved aboriginal curriculum in K to 12 is definitely needed. Then we wouldn't have to go do all these education and awareness campaigns. We would be dealing with these in school, talking about them more in-depth, analyzing them, and coming up with solutions together. We would have a curriculum with indigenous perspectives and resources.

Faculties of education in universities and colleges across the country can do the same. We're teaching future teachers, and everyone has to be in the same boat learning how to engage with aboriginal issues.

There should be more mentoring and support, especially for graduate students. As I work in the university, we would like to see that happening.

There should be more aboriginal inclusion. One of our students would really like to see a commercial highlighting various aboriginal people in various positions to really make these positions and fields more visible so that young aboriginal women and boys can see themselves in these work fields.

We should highlight or create a document on useful grants that could help fund economic projects on and off reserve. Making that information easily accessible would be good.

I'll raise some particular factors affecting women. Child care is one. Raising a family while in school, away from community support, is a big one. In most cases, the women going back to school are the sole caretakers. We tend to see aboriginal mothers going back to school later on, because they see the importance of education, and they see it influencing their children. If they want their children to grow up to be successful, they know that they need to set that path. We need to support them.

Discrimination is another one. Being a woman and indigenous, it still happens.

There is self-esteem. Again, we need more mentoring programs. Programs that exist could be tailored and could connect with aboriginal communities to make sure that we're empowering all women.

There is a little bit of a difference between those on reserve and off reserve. Again, aboriginal people are very diverse, and we need to always keep that in mind. They're very diverse socially, culturally, and economically. We need to be aware of assumptions. I give an example here. When we're creating an outreach program, say with a school on reserve, that's great. At the same time, there are a lot of parents sending their children to private schools or urban schools, because they think that's a better opportunity for them. I think we need to make sure that we're aware of that and we reach out to those students as well.

I've noticed that a lot of on-reserve students coming to an urban setting have a lot more social, cultural, and emotional needs, because that's what they're getting in the community. We need to make sure that we're having that in the urban setting as well, and are creating that community. Students on reserve usually have to move to an urban setting, if they want the same opportunities as the rest of the population—whether that's going to high school, going to post-secondary, getting employment, or even for health.

● (1640)

So there are a lot of trade-offs. Because to get a good education and a chance to succeed, you most likely have to leave your community and your family and integrate.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Ms. Isaac. We're at 10 minutes. I hope the committee will give you an opportunity to finish your remarks.

Now we'll go to Ms. Young for seven minutes.

Ms. Wai Young (Vancouver South, CPC): I want to thank both of you for your presentations and for taking the time to share your personal experiences as well. I think that's also very important for us to hear about.

What I also wanted to hear about from you is a bit more of a focus on the subject of this study, which is the economic participation of girls and young women, and what it is that we can do as a country to overcome some of the challenges. If I were to ask each of you to say what your top three things are that we could or should be doing, that would be really interesting to me. Maybe we'll start with Jocelyne.

I hope you don't mind if I use your first name.

Ms. Jocelyne Wasacase-Merasty: On the top four things that I see as an area that we could start exploring, again, I could talk a lot about the colonization, but I think we really have to understand that as first nations women we have to understand the impacts and how that looks in today's culture. So it's about understanding the role of the woman, the leadership and the governance issues, and how nation rebuilding and self-governance are all tied into that, and really showcasing stories of success—stories of women leaders and of the resilience that we have as first nations women.

Another area would be encouraging economic independence. Again, it would be showcasing a lot of entrepreneurs and corporate and community people, and building the financial literacy among them, really promoting that strong administrative practitioner approach, building their capacity, and building those opportunities for training. So it would be really focusing on profiling that.

Also, the mentorship aspect is key in this. We have to look at the next generation of our emerging leaders and reach out to them to see what kinds of needs they have, and we have to really think about how we can service and facilitate that with them. If it's through projects that are already out there, NCFNG has some things that we do with our services. We have a mentorship program. There are also other organizations, such as the Indigenous Leadership Development Institute and their project, where they're really trying to empower women.

Also, another area that I think is key is to start to look at the role of women in the area of board governance, because I think there's a role, and there's a decision-making aspect in there, and women have to start becoming more aware of that as an avenue. Because when you think of indigenous leadership, the first thought for a lot of them is that it has to be an elected position, but there are other avenues whereby we can start participating in decision-making. So really, it's about building that capacity at a first nations level and at the indigenous women's level, increasing the board governance role, and talking about the challenges and why is it important to have women's voices in these areas.

Those are my top four.

● (1645)

Ms. Wai Young: I think those are excellent. Thank you so much for sharing that.

Before we go on to Paige, I'd like to ask you, Jocelyne, if you know that in budget 2012, which is the budget we're currently presenting, there's a huge initiative in there called the women's advisory council. We want to strike a national women's advisory council specifically to help other people be on different boards across all sectors in Canada, to then increase our voice in all these different areas.

So that's just something for you to watch for, and in the future, hopefully participate in. That would be great.

Ms. Jocelyne Wasacase-Merasty: Yes, sure.

Ms. Wai Young: Paige, could you share with us your top three things that you think would be really critical and that we could use to overcome the challenges in increasing the participation of girls and youth in economic success?

Ms. Paige Isaac: Sure. I guess I would maybe say supporting pipeline projects. So connecting with aboriginal people while they're young and keeping that connection as they follow their path to getting their job. I think mentoring is a really big one, and I keep hearing it. Also, there are internships. Creating interesting internships and really trying to integrate aboriginal people into the marketplace would be interesting. I've heard from a few students that internships really helped to empower them.

Ms. Wai Young: Is it because they gain skills and experience during their internship, as well as having the ability to gain networks and contacts through their internship, so that they can then apply those or use them as supports to move on?

Ms. Paige Isaac: Exactly, and I think it also maybe demystifies the scariness of getting into the workplace. I think it just offers a really good introduction. It's exactly that, putting it on their resumé, gaining experience to go ahead and do something different.

Ms. Wai Young: If I may ask the two of you.... I believe I have a bit more time, Chair?

The Chair: A minute and a half.

Ms. Wai Young: Do you think there are any differences between rural and urban girls? Do you think that city girls have different challenges from rural girls, etc., and what might those be? Would you like to just throw something out there on that?

Ms. Jocelyne Wasacase-Merasty: I definitely see that career-wise the opportunities.... That's where a lot of our skill development and our leadership skills come from, being in the career path that allows for this. But when you're in an urban setting, especially in a first nations setting, those kinds of resources are limited. So I see there's a huge difference, a huge job barrier that we have to consider when we're thinking of rural and urban.

Ms. Paige Isaac: Maybe it's generalized, but my first idea would also be identity and connections to culture. Perhaps more urban aboriginal people are just integrated into mainstream society and have those opportunities at hand, and have easier access to them, than aboriginal youth coming from on reserve. They might be a lot more connected with their community, they might want to stay in the community, where the same opportunities might not exist. I think that would be my first idea.

● (1650)

The Chair: Now it's over to Madam Boutin-Sweet for seven minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP): Ladies, thank you very much for joining us.

I will ask my questions in French.

Ms. Wasacase-Merasty, your website talks about effective, independent governance. You also talked a lot about cultural identity and self-determination.

However, all too often, the proposed solutions come from outside your communities. What would you recommend in terms of the report we will produce on the economic prospects of aboriginal women? Do you have any specific recommendations that would encourage aboriginal women's self-determination?

[*English*]

Ms. Jocelyne Wasacase-Merasty: I think what happens when we're in the communities is that there's a bit of an eye-opener that happens in those communities when we start talking about inherent rights. Basically, what we say to them is, this is about you and it's about you putting your voice back into how you want to see your community governed. I always tell the people in the community that what's missing from that whole process is their voice. Too often we're looking at our chief and councils to make these decisions, make these changes, and going back into the history, there are a lot of things that have displaced our traditional systems.

So when we start talking about building something from the grassroots, from the ground up, one of the very first aspects that comes into play, where we start having a lot of heavy discussions, is our culture, our traditions, our language, and our history. That really shapes the outcome of the way that they're going to design their governance structure. So it's an important discussion to have.

But when we start having those discussions, we always talk about how, traditionally, there was a role that women played in that. One of the things that they say here in the Prairies is that we were the lawmakers, the men were in charge of upholding those laws, but we were the ones who made the laws. Where is that process now in today's society when a lot of the laws that we are given, our polices, have been given through different legislative acts? So if we're going to start building that from the ground up, then we have to start having those discussions.

I think there's a third point there that I'm missing. I just got kind of lost in that.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: Do you have any specific recommendations for the committee's report, with regard to self-determination?

[*English*]

Ms. Jocelyne Wasacase-Merasty: I think we really have to start focusing on increasing that voice of the aboriginal woman. We have to really start empowering her to participate. There's a lot of fear in our first nations communities, because a lot of backlash has happened to women. When they take steps to try to become part of this bigger process, to be part of the decision-making or even stepping up into election platforms, sometimes they have negative backlash. There's a lot of fear from our women just to find their voices, just to start participating in what we need to start recreating.

That's why I believe talking about colonization and its effects on our people, on our women, is a good starting point. We really need to understand how that plays out, how it looks today, and how it surfaces. Then we can start dealing with some of those issues. It's just creating that self-awareness of the things we do that we're trying to move away from.

So that's one recommendation. I always believe in the input of the community. I always believe that we have these issues and we'll talk about these issues, but a lot of the solutions need to come from the women themselves. They need to identify some of the strategies. They need to be engaged at the earliest possible steps.

That's my recommendation: start having that dialogue and see what happens.

● (1655)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: Thank you.

I have another very quick question for you, and I ask that you keep your answer very brief.

I assume you are familiar with native friendship centres. Today, I learned that cuts have been made to the Montreal centre's federal funding. Do you think that will affect the economic future of young women?

Were those centres helping young women?

[*English*]

Ms. Jocelyne Wasacase-Merasty: You know, from what I understand, the centres have a stronger role when you go out east. When you come out to the Prairies, our friendship centres play not so big a role in that.

So it would be hard for me to really give that a just answer, because I don't have enough information, based on my own knowledge, but I think it's—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: Thank you very much.

Ms. Freeman will use the rest of my time.

[*English*]

Ms. Mylène Freeman: Thank you.

Thanks to both our witnesses for being here, for taking the time to speak with us today.

My questions are for Ms. Isaac.

Aboriginal peoples in Canada are the fastest-growing population, comprising about 13%. Do you know the average percentage of McGill students who are first nations, Métis, Inuit, etc.?

Ms. Paige Isaac: It's very small. We have about 120 self-identified aboriginal students among 3,200 students across undergraduate, graduate, and continuing education. It's very small.

Ms. Mylène Freeman: That's too bad.

I mean, it's great; really I love McGill—I went to McGill—and I know you guys do good work.

I'm actually just going to take a side note here and go and correct something that Ms. Bateman had said earlier, which was that the gender gap is getting smaller in Canada. Actually, the OECD shows us that it's been getting larger since 2006.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: And I appreciate, Madam Chair, with your permission, my colleague's correction—

Ms. Mylène Freeman: I actually don't want you to take any of my time.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: —but it's not wrong. I was not—

Ms. Mylène Freeman: No, I'm sorry, you're taking my time.

The Chair: Order.

Ms. Mylène Freeman: I just wanted to correct that on the record.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: But that's a falsehood, because I was quoting our witness's—

The Chair: Order!

Madam Bateman, please; I want to hear from these—

Ms. Joyce Bateman: But that's a falsehood.

The Chair: I want to hear from our witnesses, and we'll have to be very, very quick, because—

Ms. Joyce Bateman: On a point of order, Madam Chair, my integrity has been impugned by this woman, and you are not permitting me to clarify it.

She misunderstood, because she may not have been paying attention.

What I said was that the Canadian Council on Social Development, in their 2006 labour force profile of youth, stated—they stated—that the gender gap had reversed, and that the employment market had improved more for girls than for boys.

I was quoting one of our witnesses. My words were misdirected.

I have been maligned in front of these people and I would like an apology.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Bateman.

I appreciate your intervention and that you are now on the record.

I did want to give our witnesses an opportunity here. I think it's important that we hear from them. We only have....

Well, actually, we have no time left.

Ms. Mylène Freeman: Oh, no.

The Chair: I'm awfully sorry, Ms. Freeman.

We'll go to Ms. Truppe, for seven minutes.

I'm sorry.

Mrs. Susan Truppe (London North Centre, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you both for being here today.

Jocelyne, you mentioned or suggested that the things that would be helpful to you are empowering the voice of the aboriginal woman, solutions by women themselves, and engaging them early.

With respect to economic participation, prosperity, and leadership, do you have any suggestions how Status of Women might be able to help you with these three suggestions?

Ms. Jocelyne Wasacase-Merasty: I would suggest getting the stories out there and showcasing other successful aboriginal women, not just aboriginal women, but women in general, and maybe taking that extra time to talk about skill development and the needs that they feel are important to start helping them access those avenues.

Talk about entrepreneurships in a forum that's designated specifically for them, because a lot of times, as I said, because we have a marginalized voice, a lot of our women are not comfortable speaking in a forum where there are men, when you think of business and entrepreneurship. Have that specific avenue for them to talk about some of the issues, some of the barriers, and then brainstorm some of the needs or supports that they see are key, and try to achieve some of those goals.

Again, it's all about the dialogue. That's always my approach.

● (1700)

Mrs. Susan Truppe: You just mentioned they're not comfortable when speaking in groups, maybe with men.

What would make them comfortable, any suggestions? What can we do for them?

Ms. Jocelyne Wasacase-Merasty: Participating in an aboriginal women's leadership project, we've had a strategic planning session where a lot of these issues came out, and I heard from them. They talked about all these issues, so I see that as one of the most effective ways that....

And then just strategizing the needs they had. For me, it all came back to cultural identity, understanding the historical context that has put us on this path and some of the things we need to do to rectify some of those situations, and also celebrating and supporting the women who are already doing it out there, but also adding to that pool of women who are participating in that world.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Thank you.

Ms. Jocelyne Wasacase-Merasty: Again, you know....

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Go ahead, sorry.

Ms. Jocelyne Wasacase-Merasty: No, I was probably just going to go off on another tangent.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: You've been very helpful, thank you.

When the Girls Action Foundation appeared before us, they recommended providing mentorship and diverse role models for girls growing up, educating boys and young men to think critically about gender expectations, promoting equality between sexes, and implementing and expanding programs that reduce gender harassment, especially in educational institutions.

Since then, a number of witnesses have expressed support for these recommendations.

I'll start with you again, Jocelyne. What are your thoughts on this approach? Are there other factors that should be considered?

Ms. Jocelyne Wasacase-Merasty: I like the approach. It's creating awareness of some of the issues we put in front of ourselves. I think the same approach can be taken to the first nations' level. When we talk about lateral violence, institutionalized discrimination, those kinds of things, I always find that if we start labelling them, then we can start identifying them, and we can start dealing with them.

The more educated we are about some of these negative things that are holding us back, the more effectively we can deal with them. I like the approach. I think the same approach can be modelled for first nations in this kind of approach too.

Some of the issues might change. Some of the terminology would have to be suited to the kind of challenges we're facing in our first nations communities.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Thank you.

Paige, I have the same question for you. Do you remember the question?

Ms. Paige Isaac: Yes.

I agree. I would support that.

I think educating both sides can only bring them closer. An emphasis on exactly that: becoming a supportive community and learning how to not—I don't know how to say this—keep women back.

We need to create a supportive community because to be successful, we need to support each other. If we want to get somewhere, we need to work together.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Do you think that educating boys and young men to think critically about gender expectations would help in your communities? That is to either of you or both of you.

Ms. Paige Isaac: I think so. Definitely. By developing the language, developing the learning about different actions and expectations, young men and boys could be learning differently.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: I'll ask you the same question in regard to the boys and men.

Ms. Jocelyne Wasacase-Merasty: I think the more awareness among all the parties involved, the better it will be in the long run. It will start creating that synergy to start moving towards what I've always believed is a common goal.

We're always here. We're about trying to make a better place for the next generation, and men are just part of that. They've come to realize their reality. They have to rethink that, because traditionally, we were on an equal footing, and we complemented each other. What's missing right now is our voice, because we're not in balance. That has an impact not just on the women but also on the overall holistic version of the world we want to try to accomplish. They are equal partners in this, definitely.

● (1705)

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Thank you.

The Chair: I'm sorry, we're at seven minutes.

Now we'll go to Madam Sgro, for seven minutes.

Hon. Judy Sgro: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

To Ms. Merasty and Ms. Isaac, in the statistics we have seen, especially at the beginning of our examination of this issue, aboriginal women or aboriginal girls have not been making the same kind of progress other Canadian girls have been making. There continues to be a much higher percentage of aboriginal girls having a lot of difficulty. Do you have any comments on that?

Why do we continue to see that there's not a balance, a level playing field for both. I know many of the different parts of those answers. But I'm wondering, from both of you, as you're young, what you continue to see are the kinds of things preventing aboriginal girls from achieving the success we would like them to see.

Ms. Jocelyne Wasacase-Merasty: You know, I'm not so young, but culturally—

Hon. Judy Sgro: You look pretty young in the video. It looks good.

Ms. Jocelyne Wasacase-Merasty: I see those same issues with our women. It's a complex issue. I actually deal with an emerging leadership program, too. The women who are more confident, who are willing to put themselves out there, and who are on the right path in education for their career paths are to me the first nations women who are in tune with who they are and their cultural identity. There's a lot of pride that comes from having that connection to your own community, having that connection to your own people, and having that connection to the land and your family. There's a lot of pride that comes with that, and that's really key in trying to make those changes that need to be made.

When you look on the flip side, you see some of the youth at risk. You see that a lot of their culture has been replaced by maybe subcultures, such as gangs. It makes you sad to see that they've replaced something that's so special and so integral to who they are and what they're about.

I also tell people that we have to govern ourselves. When I compare the way we govern ourselves.... We do our own indigenous laws. We see more value in that. We hold ourselves to that standard of that law. If there is an imposed set of values and an imposed set of laws and we're asked to hold ourselves to those standards, it's not as important as it is to do it standing on the side of our own culture. Maybe that's some of the disparity we see among women. I don't know.

I could probably go on more with that, but I just want to start with that point.

Ms. Paige Isaac: I would say that it all depends on where they're coming from, on their family supports. Perhaps their parents didn't go to college or university, so they don't see anyone going on that path.

I think independence also plays a big role. If a young aboriginal is independent, they might make those choices for themselves. I think codependency could be a problem, whether that's with relationships, or drugs and alcohol—just codependent behaviours.

I think a lot of healing needs to be done because of the intergenerational trauma that they might not even be aware of and that exists due to residential schools. Also, through the sixties scoop, as you know, a lot of historical trauma happened, and that has had an effect on their grandparents and their parents—they might not even be aware of it—and even on their community. I think a lot of aboriginal people see a lot of trauma that we need to start healing. These are historical things that the non-aboriginal Canadian population might not have experienced.

● (1710)

Hon. Judy Sgro: Madam Chair, how much time do I have left?

The Chair: About two and a half minutes.

Hon. Judy Sgro: I know that my colleague had a particular question that she was hoping to ask, so I'll give my minute and a half —or whatever it is by the time I stop talking—to her.

Ms. Mylène Freeman: Thank you very much, Ms. Sgro.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to apologize to our witnesses for the problem we had earlier in terms of not being able to ask questions. I really do appreciate Ms. Sgro giving me the time.

I want to talk about the fact that under-representation in higher education is probably a major factor. I mean, in getting to higher education, there are barriers there already, and even if we can get the right amount of women.... I mean, we have a lot of women. In some departments like law, we have more women studying law than men, and yet women have less opportunity to become lawyers, right? So it's not just getting to education, although I do recognize that aboriginal people face certain barriers in getting there.

There are also things like pay inequity and discrimination systematically, and in the case of aboriginal peoples, it's the legacy of Indian residential schools. So what I want to ask you about is what kinds of social factors make it difficult for aboriginal girls to get to higher education.

That's for both of you, starting with Ms. Isaac.

Ms. Paige Isaac: Social factors? I don't know. The only thing that's coming to mind quickly is what I just —

Ms. Mylène Freeman: If you like, maybe we could go to Jocelyne first, and then you can add anything you have at the end.

Ms. Jocelyne Wasacase-Merasty: Maybe I'll give you a personal story. When I first started going to university, I had no clue what fields were out there. It was just whatever I stumbled upon. Actually, back then, it was the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, and I had a person come out to me and actually fill out my forms. I didn't even know I was registered for university until the first semester was over.

It just speaks to the understanding we have of post-secondary. We don't have those people in our lives, those role models who say that university is a must. We don't have a parent sitting behind us writing out our forms and stuff like that.

So I didn't too well the first time I went to university. I was a young mother and I had a lot of social issues. I was actually in an abusive relationship. University didn't work out for me. I had a child, and then I was a young widow, so I had to go back at a later time—

The Chair: I'm awfully sorry. I keep cutting you off and I regret that, because it is a great honour for us to have both you and Ms. Isaac here and to hear what you have to say.

We are expecting bells soon, for a vote, but we will go into the second round for as much time as we're given.

I would like to remind members of the committee that they can indeed submit any additional questions for witnesses to the clerk following this meeting. The clerk would like to have those by five o'clock tomorrow.

Ms. Ambler, for five minutes.

Mrs. Stella Ambler (Mississauga South, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I feel so badly that you didn't get to finish your personal story, Jocelyne. Please take a minute, if you'd like to, and finish your thought.

Ms. Jocelyne Wasacase-Merasty: I was just going to say that, for me, I was that young, single aboriginal woman trying to go to university. I had a lot of issues that I had to deal with. That's a common story for a lot of us. It's 60% of the story you'll hear from all the aboriginal women across Canada who enter into post-secondary. I actually went back to university about seven years ago and I finished my degree in communications, but I had to go outside. I had to take it in Victoria, B.C. I had to finish that course with a newborn on my lap. There were times when I spent three days in my pyjamas trying to write a paper and look after a newborn.

These are common stories. If you ask the aboriginal women, they'll echo the same kind of story. That's the part of their resilience, and we need to bring out and find ways to embrace those challenges and those stories.

● (1715)

Mrs. Stella Ambler: Sure. Thank you.

I think all of us who have been mothers can sympathize with you there in some way.

I'd like to ask you both, as a matter of fact, a question that my colleague, Ms. James, asked our two previous witnesses here earlier today.

How do you think that Status of Women Canada can empower women to want to succeed? What are the things that we, as a federal government, and Status of Women Canada can do?

Ms. Jocelyne Wasacase-Merasty: It would be to create those forums for that dialogue to start happening at the first nations level and really getting them to understand that you're there to listen to them and you're there to understand, first of all, some of the historical concepts, and secondly, some of the challenges that are faced. And also just embrace it by saying we're here to listen and we want to collaborate on a way whereby we can find those solutions, those creative solutions, those innovative solutions, and those things that we haven't talked about yet, and start from there. For me, that's always the place where I love to start any kind of project.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: Paige, do you have any suggestions?

Ms. Paige Isaac: Yes. I think I would just add supporting programs put in place already, just letting aboriginal women know they can make a difference and that there's support available, and maybe making that support known. Some aboriginal people just don't know where to look and don't know what exists, so it would be just making sure that information and those connections are made and are accessible.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I am sorry, the bells are ringing and we do have to go. But, again, we're most grateful to you. You have provided some remarkable insights.

Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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