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Chair

Ms. Marie-Claude Morin

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● (1530)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Ms. Marie-Claude Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, NDP)): Good afternoon, everyone. I hope you all had a good week in your ridings.

Welcome to the 36th hearing of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women. We are going to spend the first 20 minutes on committee business and afterwards we will resume our study on improving economic prospects for Canadian girls. We will begin with the work of the committee.

Ms. Truppe, is there something you wish to say?

[*English*]

Mrs. Susan Truppe (London North Centre, CPC): Madam Chair, since we're discussing committee business, we should probably be in camera.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Ms. Truppe moves that we continue the meeting in camera. Is anyone opposed to the motion?

Ms. Ashton, you have the floor.

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill, NDP): I am not in favour. Our discussions on committee business are not always conducted in camera. I don't see why that should be the case today.

The Chair: We will hold the vote.

Ms. Sgro, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): If I could just as, is there anything we're going to be talking about that's confidential, such that we need to go in camera? Otherwise, if it's routine business, I don't think we have to.

An hon. member: Point of order—

[*Translation*]

The Chair: There will not be any debate. We will have the vote immediately.

I now give the floor to Ms. Truppe, who will be followed by Mr. Albas.

[*English*]

Mrs. Susan Truppe: I was just going to say that it was non-debatable.

Thank you.

Hon. Judy Sgro: I'd like a recorded vote, Madam Chair.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Ms. Sgro has asked for a recorded division.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 7, nays 4.)

The Chair: Ms. Truppe's motion is carried.

We are going to discuss the work of the committee in camera. I am going to suspend the hearing for 20 minutes.

[*Proceedings continue in camera.*]

● (1530)

(Pause)

● (1550)

The Chair: We will now resume the public hearing.

Good afternoon. We are continuing our study on improving economic prospects for Canadian girls.

Today we will be hearing, live from Victoria by videoconference, Ms. Mary-Ellen Turpel-Lafond, from Representative for Children and Youth, and Ms. Jennifer Flanagan, President and Chief Executive Officer of Actua.

I welcome you to our committee, and I thank you for having agreed to share your ideas with us.

We are going to begin with Ms. Turpel-Lafond, who will have 10 minutes at her disposal. Afterwards, Ms. Flanagan will also have 10 minutes. Afterwards, we will have a round of questions. I will conclude my remarks and let you make your presentation.

Ms. Turpel-Lafond, you have 10 minutes.

● (1555)

[*English*]

Ms. Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond (Representative, British Columbia, Representative for Children and Youth): Thank you very much.

I intend to make some brief opening remarks on the issue of the economic well-being of girls and women, particularly pertaining to my work as representative for children and youth.

In that role, I advocate and support children and youth up to the age of 19 in the province of British Columbia. In particular, I work with vulnerable populations of young people, such as children and youth in government care due to child welfare concerns. I work with young people with special and developmental needs, and also complex mental health needs.

I also work closely with aboriginal girls and women. I highlight that because these are populations of young girls and young women who have particular vulnerabilities, such as living outside the parental home and being highly susceptible to economic disadvantage, from having been raised in poverty or transitioning into adulthood in poverty.

I want to talk about some of the factors that I see in their lives that present some long-term challenges to their social and economic mobility and to their safety. I will touch on a few, and then of course be available to answer any questions, should you have any.

I have a few general statistics about that population. British Columbia had a child and youth population of about 900,000 in 2011, or about 20% of the province's total population. Of this child and youth population, about 13,000 to 15,000 of those young people live out of the parental home. Some of them are in state care. Some of them are living independently before the age of maturity. More than half of the children in care are aboriginal children in British Columbia, which is disproportionate compared to their percentage of the overall population.

As for the children who are aging out of the case system, young women in particular, about 4,000 children in the past three years were discharged from care. Every month in British Columbia, about 57 young people are discharged from care because they turn 19. Many of them are aboriginal youth, in particular young women. We have a very strong interest in their doing well when the state is the parent and being as successful as they would be if they were raised in a parental home.

As to some of the vulnerabilities of the population of young women we're talking about, poor and low educational attainment is a significant and ongoing concern. We see from our detailed studies of the educational outcomes of vulnerable children, such as aboriginal children, children in care, and young people living out of parental home, that they are not developing the same level of achievement in the public school system. They are not achieving grade four, grade seven, or high school with their peers. For example, aboriginal students generally perform 15% to 18% lower on the standardized foundational skills assessment in British Columbia. Grade four is the first level. In grade seven, their performance goes down. The performance in the high school mandatory examinations declines.

Although British Columbia has better aboriginal outcomes than many other provinces, we're still looking at only about 42% of the aboriginal girls in care who are graduating. That's a significant lag compared to, say, 83% of the girls who are not in state care.

Another broad factor that makes these young women and girls more vulnerable in terms of their economic and social mobility is the ongoing issue of poverty. British Columbia has the highest incidence of child poverty based on any measure, whether it be the market basket measure or other measures adopted by Statistics Canada.

There are about 100,000 children living in low-income homes in British Columbia. In particular, I focus again on the aboriginal population. By the most recent available data in B.C., 58% of lone-parent families headed by an aboriginal woman had an annual income of less than $20,000, and only 7% had an annual income of $50,000 or above. We see the grinding impacts of parental poverty on children and their lack of social inclusion, lack of support and progress with respect to school achievement, and also issues around their health and well-being.

● (1600)

Another area I will comment on is issues pertaining to violence, which affect the social and economic mobility of girls and women.

With regard to girls and women's exposure to domestic violence, I know that in a previous incarnation this committee did an extremely valuable report on aboriginal family violence that pointed out some concerns. Certainly in my role as a representative for children and youth, children who witness family violence are harmed by it as if they experienced it themselves, which places them at risk. It certainly doesn't mean that there is a one-to-one relationship between that and poverty and a poor outcome, but active measures to support their resilience and well-being to prevent violence, and the duty to support victims of violence, are very significant issues in our social service system. We see significant frailties there for aboriginal girls and women in particular.

Whether they're off reserve or on reserve, the system of support is not as strong. The criminal justice system is not necessarily as responsive. The social services and supports to girls and women are not adequate, and as a result they can experience significant disadvantage. In fact all girls and women exposed to domestic violence experience certain disadvantages, but I would point out aboriginal girls and women particularly.

In terms of other forms of violence and exploitation, certainly in my work as representative I'm very aware of the impact of sexualized violence and sexual exploitation of girls and women. In my role, I receive reports of children known to the Ministry of Children and Family Development in British Columbia where there is an allegation of a sexual assault. As a matter of course I receive these reports and investigate them, and periodically I do investigative or aggregate reports on them.

If I could give you a snapshot of the last fiscal year, I've received reports of 62 sexual assaults regarding youth. About 15% of all the reports that I receive are sexual assaults on girls. Of these, 90% were assaults on females—some were assaults on males, but 90% were on females—and 66% of them were aboriginal girls. Aboriginal girls and women are three or more times likely to be the victim of violence from a partner, and sexualized violence in particular.

This continues to be an area requiring deeper examination in terms the core relation between the harm inflicted and later well-being. Understanding the social and economic issues behind someone's vulnerability to violence and having coordinated responses and supports to boost their resilience are very significant.

The final point I will draw to your attention as we look at things like health, well-being, economics, and the social mobility of girls and women are some concerns that I see in my office around access to mental health support. Where there are girls and women who have experienced trauma through adverse childhood experiences, whether that's abuse, deep poverty and social exclusion or the presence of an underlying mental disorder apart from trauma-related disorders, the ability to access and receive adequate early mental health supports and general health supports is a significant factor.

It's not uncommon for me in my advocacy role to work with girls and women who do not have family physicians, do not have referrals to mental health supports and services, and who are therefore not participating fully in their community or developing fully as children should.

If we want to improve the economic prospects for Canadian girls and women, while the prospects are generally very good across the society, I think we need to pay particular attention to some deeply vulnerable groups of girls and women. We need to use the evidence we know is available to develop and innovate with more effective approaches in our social policy and community development approaches so that we can adequately engage and support girls and women so that they will have better outcomes.

I haven't spoken a lot about this, but I'd certainly be happy to do so in response to any questions.

● (1605)

Here I would note that we have the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.The processes pursuant to that convention have made some significant findings about Canada's progress in supporting vulnerable populations of women and girls, such as aboriginal girls and women.

We also have the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Mechanisms under that convention have also made some pointed references about Canada's ability to plan and respond to some of the deep inequalities for women and girls.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you very much for your presentation.

We will now continue with Ms. Flanagan.

You have 10 minutes.

[*English*]

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan (President and Chief Executive Officer, Actua): Thank you.

It's really my pleasure to be here. I'm very grateful to have the opportunity to address this committee on such an important topic.

My name is Jennifer Flanagan. I'm president and CEO of Actua. Actua is a national charitable organization that represents a network of 33 organizations located at universities and colleges across Canada. Together with our members, we're engaging 225,000 youth, ages six to 16, in 500 communities covering every province and territory. We engage them in interactive, hands-on science, engineering, and technology experiences, and that's what my comments will address as well. These include school workshops, year-round clubs, summer camps, and other community outreach initiatives.

Over the past two decades of offering programs, we've developed and refined a program delivery model that engages youth at an early age, before they make decisions about careers and futures and what is possible for them. From our years of formal research, we know that our programs are successful in influencing the attitudes and behaviours of youth toward future studies and careers in science, engineering, and technology. More broadly, and I think more importantly, we're playing a critical role in improving science and technology literacy among Canadian youth, which we know is key to full participation of the next generation of Canadians in all economic sectors.

Women, as we know, are still vastly under-represented in science, engineering, and technology. While there has been progress in some fields of science, such as health and medicine, women remain under-represented in many others, such as engineering, computer science, physics, and math. This is particularly evident in management roles in these sectors, which are traditionally higher paying and thus more important for improving the economic prospects of girls and women. This under-representation of women is also very evident in the trades.

With the considerable employment opportunities these fields will represent in the coming years, this under-representation is a significant issue for the future economic prosperity of girls. In addition, our country simply will not reach its full innovation potential without women equally represented at the table in these fields. To improve the economic success of girls, we must engage them and show them that there is a place for them in these critical fields. Strategies are needed now to narrow the gender gap in these areas. This will not only ensure economic independence among women and improve their economic prosperity but will also contribute to the development of a larger and more diverse workforce.

Actua's national girls program was developed in 1999 in response to a noted pattern of decline in the participation of girls in our camps across the country. We were also witnessing negative changes in girls' attitudes, confidence, and interest when they were transitioning from our junior programs, which engage them at around the grade four level, to our middle school programs, which engage them at around grades six and seven. This was particularly evident when working with more at-risk groups of girls.

Feedback from parents across the country also indicated that stereotypes were still preventing them from encouraging their daughters to consider futures in science, engineering, and technology.

Based on those observations, our experience, and our ongoing research into the lives and realities of girls, we developed an all-girls program model that provided girls with a safe, non-judgmental, and fun environment in which to explore, create, and interact with role models. Our programs, which include all-girl clubs and camps, are designed for girls to acquire critical life and employability skills, such as team-building, collaboration, problem-solving, critical thinking, financial literacy, and technical proficiency. I should also mention that we are focused within our girls program on engaging girls who have other economic and social challenges, particularly aboriginal girls. We have a significant focus on aboriginal youth across the country.

Our national girls program is designed, first and foremost, to increase the girls' self-confidence and self-efficacy, as we know that these are the most important predeterminants of future success. It also provides an early, positive experience at a university or college campus, which again is another key experience that will increase the likelihood of their considering post-secondary study in the future.

One of the most important findings from our early research was that although girls in our programs were increasing their knowledge and skill and interest in science and technology, we weren't changing their future intentions with regard to studying science and technology or considering them as future career options. The lack of female role models meant that although girls were interested in science, they were still not imagining themselves in these fields in the future.

● (1610)

We started a national girls mentorship program in response to that research finding in 2003. Girls in our programs now regularly interact with positive female role models with whom they can relate. We want the girls leaving our programs to know that their perspectives matter and that there's a place for them in science, engineering, and technology.

We also focus heavily on reinforcing among parents and caregivers the importance of encouraging girls to study math and science, and to view these as subjects that can open doors to many exciting career and life experiences, not just those in pure science.

The fulfilment of these objectives prepares young girls for the full exploration of their academic and professional potential as leaders in science, technology, and engineering studies and careers. This results in a significant contribution toward the empowerment of girls to achieve their full economic and financial independence.

Early engagement is absolutely key to this work. A lot of efforts to promote post-secondary studies and careers are focused on high school aged youth. Research has demonstrated, and we certainly find from personal experience, that this is too late for most girls. In fact research shows that girls decide very, very early on what they believe they can or can't do when they get older. They need to have experiences very early, in elementary school or before, that change these perceptions.

Based on our experience, our research, and the success we've had in engaging thousands of girls over the past two decades, we would make the following key recommendations to the committee.

First, we need to invest in science, technology, engineering, and math outreach programming designed to develop science literacy; and we need to engage, inspire, and influence girls to participate in these important fields of study. Specifically, support should be directed to programs that engage girls at an early age, before life-changing decisions regarding education and careers are made. These types of programs are playing a significant role in building resiliency and economic independence among girls and young women. This will also result in a significant overall contribution to economic prosperity and a much-needed boost to diversity and the job force.

Second, we need to provide financial support for mentorship programs designed to introduce young girls to inspirational women scientists and engineers who can share their stories and dispel the still existing stereotypes about what careers are the future for women in Canada.

Finally, we need to advocate for and support those who educate girls—the parents, caregivers, schools, community organizations, and the private sector—about the importance of supporting girls through informal education opportunities at an early age.

In summary, I hope that my remarks have underscored the importance of engaging girls in positive experiences that will allow them to imagine bright futures for themselves. Investments in these areas will narrow the gender gap, increase our labour force and, most importantly, achieve the committee's overall objective of improving the economic futures of girls and women.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now move on to our question period.

Ms. Truppe, you have seven minutes.

[*English*]

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank you both for being here today. It's very important to have your expertise here so we can conclude our study.

Madam Flanagan, I've actually never heard of Actua. It sounds like you've done a great job with the organization. All of the things that you do are amazing.

It's my understanding that the federal government supports some of your organization. Is that correct?

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: Yes, it is.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Which aspect, or how does this work?

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: We receive support through the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario. We also have a small grant through NSERC, and a grant through CIHR, to support the work we do to promote health and health research.

● (1615)

Mrs. Susan Truppe: That's great.

How else do you fund the organization? Is it just by donations, or do you also have companies on board?

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: It's primarily through corporate partners who are investing in the work we're doing, so companies that have an interest in increasing the science and technology workforce.

Our biggest corporate funders are GE Canada and Suncor Energy Foundation.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: That's good: GE Canada and Suncor.

I think you said you had 33 organizations. Is that correct?

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: Yes, we do.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: So how does that work? What are the organizations?

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: The 33 organizations are hosted by universities and colleges—always within the departments of engineering and science, and usually as an organization supported by the dean of engineering, for example. The organizations are administratively supported by the university but responsible to be cost recoverable.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: How do you measure the success of the projects?

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: We do a lot of different measuring and evaluation, both at a local level and on a national scale. Within the programs our members are offering, they evaluate their camp programs, for example, on an ongoing basis. It's a formative type of evaluation. They're constantly asking questions about what activities are working and what activities aren't, what kinds of learning outcomes are being impacted and which aren't. That's an ongoing evaluation.

We've also done formal research. We had a researcher at the University of Ottawa do a three-year formal impact evaluation of our programs, pre-attendance and post-attendance, that looked specifically at those intrinsic values of self-confidence, interest in science and technology, and knowledge of those areas, all with a view to gauging what future behaviour would be. The results were significantly positive pre-attendance to post-attendance.

Interestingly, the girls who came into the programs with lower levels of self-reported confidence had the most significant increase over the course of the program.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: That's great. It sounds as if you're doing a great job. I agree that we're under-represented when it comes to management roles, so I think what you're doing is great.

You were talking about how you measure success or whether something is not working. What would you say is the best success you've had? Which program works better than the other ones you have?

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: For the past 15 years, we've played with which elements matter the most. I think the combination of the safe space we've created to allow girls to explore and make mistakes and learn new skills with their peers, combined with the mentors we're able to engage, is really the formula that seems to be resonating the most with the girls and with their parents. It's the environment with the opportunity to interact with role models.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: I'm sure that you understand what our study is about, but I'll just reiterate it. It's economic prosperity, economic participation, and economic leadership.

Keeping that in mind, given the mandate of Status of Women Canada, because the funding you have comes from a different department, what steps do you think Status of Women should be taking to try to directly improve the economic participation, prosperity, and leadership of girls in Canada?

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: We made a long-term commitment to do this work until it was no longer needed. It's extremely hard to fund it. As an organization, we have done quite well securing the kind of investment we need to meet the community demand. The girls program is the hardest one to fund.

Among corporations, the interest comes and goes. It's not that they're not interested, but there are other priorities.

I think investing in these types of programs for the early engagement of girls in experiences that promote careers in a different way and that promote future opportunities in a different way would be highly impactful.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Thank you.

How much more time do I have?

The Chair: You have one minute and thirty seconds.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Perfect.

How do you think men and boys can be engaged by Status of Women Canada to improve the prospects for Canadian girls in regard to economic prosperity, leadership, and participation?

● (1620)

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: That's a great question.

I can speak from our experience. We tend to create all-girl environments, where most of the instructors are women because of the lack of those role models we spoke about.

We do gender awareness training. We do it for the 600 undergraduate students who are engaged as instructors in our programs across the country. We employ about 600 undergrads. Half of them are men. They go through the same type of training. It is just about gaining awareness of how girls are perceiving these subjects differently and how they're treated in classrooms differently. I like to think of that as a very positive, unintended benefit. These are people who are going out into engineering and science careers in leadership roles who will have that kind of awareness. I think any opportunity to engage in awareness-building with men and boys is important.

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Great. Thank you for that.

Just very quickly—

The Chair: Madam Truppe—

Mrs. Susan Truppe: Oh, we're done? Okay.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: I do apologize, I am going to have to stop you; your time is up.

The members of the official opposition now have the floor.

Ms. Ashton, you have seven minutes.

[*English*]

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you very much, Ms. Turpel-Lafond, and Ms. Flanagan, for your great presentations today.

I'll be splitting my time with my colleague, Anne-Marie Day, but first I have a couple of questions. I'll start with Ms. Turpel-Lafond.

My question is with respect to some of the work you're involved with, touching on the testimony that previous witnesses have shared with this committee around the reality many aboriginal girls face when it comes to being in care. Is there the need for the federal government to step up its funding when it comes to family services, particularly on reserve and for those who work with on-reserve youth?

You would know this in the case of British Columbia, and of course, as we know, it's intricately related to the kinds of opportunities girls have later on in life. I'd like to hear your thoughts on that.

Ms. Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond: I think that's a very important issue both in British Columbia and across Canada. I also serve as the president of the Canadian Council of Child and Youth Advocates, so I'm well acquainted with the situation for advocates across Canada pertaining to aboriginal children in the child welfare system. There is a gross overrepresentation of aboriginal children—in particular, girls as well.

The reasons for their involvement in the child welfare system tend to be very much rooted in the socio-economic disadvantage that aboriginal families experience. That has been persistent: the deep poverty, lack of opportunity, and the absence of a detailed coordinated federal strategy to support girls and women and promote their resilience. Of course, recently there was a national panel commissioned by the federal government on Indian education on reserve—K to 12—which found there were staggering inequalities and gross underfunding. That results in very poor outcomes.

I mean, childhood is short—it's not 188 weeks. If you don't invest and you don't adequately build systems and support people, they don't succeed. For aboriginal children and youth in Canada, we see this as almost a national tragedy. I'm not saying there aren't places where there are efforts under way, but there's a gross inequality in the personal and institutional supports allowing women and girls to succeed equally with their peers. It requires deliberate, focused, federal intervention to remediate that.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you very much.

Ms. Flanagan, one of the points you raised was the importance of mentorship and young girls being able to see women working in science, technology, and engineering. A previous panellist shared with us that one of the challenges faced by many women in this field is in fact the work-family balance.

As we know, many women in Canada don't have access to affordable, accessible child care. You have many women who are either of child-bearing age or with young children and are leaving some of these grounds of employment, therefore taking away some of the mentors young girls could have.

Do you think, Ms. Flanagan, that ensuring there is accessible and affordable child care is critical when we're talking about encouraging women to stay in these fields and that it's also something that might allow more girls to look up to more women in these fields?

● (1625)

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: Although it's not particularly my area of expertise in terms of the work we do, we do look at the studies down the road, because we're very concerned about the "what's next" question. We get these girls pumped up for these fields and in this pipeline, and we want to make sure that things are looking positive or that we're working with organizations working downstream.

It used to be the case that the attrition of women in these fields would happen either in university or soon after, when they entered the workforce, but now, as you've mentioned, that is shifting more to their early thirties. I guess that's the age range when they're having families.

Do I think that's an issue? I hear a lot about it as being an issue. In the circles and networks that I am in, that is an issue. I think it's combined with a lot of issues that still exist in these fields in terms of how women are treated generally, not just as a child care issue but also more broadly in regard to some of the opportunities or the lack thereof. Again, that is from hearing stories in doing this type of work over the past 20 years. I certainly think that the child care piece is an issue and the work-life balance is an issue, but it goes a little bit beyond that.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP): My question, which will be brief, is addressed to Ms. Turpel-Lafond.

We know that there is a correlation between mistreatment and economic costs—we know how much it costs. Canada committed itself to reducing and eliminating child poverty several years ago. The poverty rate has gone from 11% to 9%. So there is still a great deal of poverty.

Who funds your organization? Has the Canadian government reduced funding to alleviate youth poverty, the poverty of those who are under 19?

[*English*]

Ms. Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond: Well, I'm an officer of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, so I oversee the child welfare system. In British Columbia the child poverty rate is around 12% or a bit higher than the national rate.

In terms of effective interventions to reduce child poverty, I think there is a fairly broad consensus among everyone with respect to the market basket measure and allowing a parent or parents adequate social assistance to attend to the immediate needs of their children, with an adequate amount of money for housing, shelter, healthy food, and basic necessities, all of which are required.

In many places, particularly in British Columbia, social assistance rates fall below what is required to have healthy child development in terms of access to good quality food, and many children are reliant through their parent or caregiver on food banks. In terms of state direct support, there are the social assistance issues.

Quite apart from that, there is the social mobility issue of why it is that children living in low-income families are not advancing as successfully in elementary and secondary schools and not transitioning to post-secondary education. Education is a very significant leveller in the life and democratic nature of our society, but it is not working effectively. This is an additional issue of what other supports—

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Excuse me, Ms. Turpel-Lafond, I have to stop you now. Thank you very much. Ms. Day has used up all of her time.

I will now give the floor to the government members.

Ms. Ambler, you have seven minutes.

[*English*]

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

Thank you to both of our guests today for your presentations and for all of the good work you're doing with children and youth in Canada.

Ms. Flanagan, I'd like to ask if Actua works with aboriginal youth and/or girls in rural communities?

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: Broadly, within Actua's mandate of reaching boys and girls, we engage 225,000 youth a year in 500 communities. A major focus for us is to engage the youth that no other organizations are engaging, that is, the under-represented youth.

The biggest program we have is our national aboriginal program, which engages 30,000 aboriginal youth a year in 200 communities across the country. It's a huge geographic reach and area of focus for us, including rural and remote communities as well. A significant emphasis for us is to get into every possible tiny fly-in and boat-in community in the country.

● (1630)

Mrs. Stella Ambler: That's great.

Does the funding you receive from the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency help with that?

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: Yes, it does.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: Can you tell us a bit about that?

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: Yes. In fact I neglected to mention that before. We have a grant that is helping us to deliver programming across the three territories. This past year we delivered programming in 35 communities across Nunavut, Northwest Territories, and the Yukon. Again, that is the same type of programming, but very much focused on being relevant to the community context. There's a heavy focus on engaging local community leaders and elders.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: Excellent. That's great.

You did mention FedDev Ontario. That's something I know a little bit about. Would the funding be specifically for literacy programs, or for STEM—?

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: It's all STEM. It's STEM as it relates more specifically to innovation and economic development—so the business of science, entrepreneurship, and those types of topics.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: And it's always for youth?

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: Always for youth aged 6 to 16, and always STEM.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: With a few minutes to think about it, I can figure out what NSERC stands for: Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council.

I'm not very good with these short-forms. As for CIHR, I can't figure that one out.

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: It's the Canadian Institutes of Health Research.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: Can you tell us how those programs or organizations fund Actua?

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: CIHR provides us with two grants. One grant is to support national health-based programming—so healthy living and health research. We approach health messages for youth with a scientific lens. Instead of telling them to exercise, brush their teeth, and wash their hands, we show them the science behind those things. Taking a different view of those topics is critical in the aboriginal work we're doing. Also, promoting health research in Canada, connecting them to health mentors—that's CIHR. They also give us a small grant to do that work in the north.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: Is the theory behind it that if you tell someone the reason they're doing something they're more likely to make the right choice?

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: That's our theory.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: It makes sense.

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: It certainly resonates in a different way with youth, rather than saying the same old, same old—

Mrs. Stella Ambler: You would do that instead of simply telling them what to do.

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: Absolutely.

Particularly the health-based program for girls is very relevant. We talk about issues such as body image and healthy eating, again in a scientific manner—that this is why your body needs fat, this is what a healthy lifestyle looks like, etc. It's a different angle on a subject they've heard about.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: Excellent. I like that.

And NSERC?

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: NSERC supports us broadly at a national level. Again it's a relatively small grant. There's a small portion that goes to the north, and a small portion that goes broadly to support programs.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: You mentioned private sector support as well from Suncor, Imperial Oil, and Shell. What kinds of things do they do? Is it mentorship mainly?

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: No. They invest in us financially, but they all have a component of wanting to build capacity within the organization. They also contribute mentors when possible. Most of our funders are more actively engaged beyond just providing funding.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: I thought that might be the case.

Can you tell me how long you've been involved with Actua, how you got involved, and what your background is? I'm curious to know if you're an engineer or a mathematician.

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: I'm actually part of the small team of university students who founded the organization. We will celebrate our 20th year of incorporation next year.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: Congratulations.

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: Thank you.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: You just told us how old your are too.

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: Yes, I was 18 when I started!

It was a very grassroots beginning. We were university students who thought there was a need for this type of programming. We thought it would be a great thing to do nationally, and started it that way.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: That's fantastic.

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: I have a science degree and got an MBA after that.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: Fantastic. Thank you so much.

● (1635)

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: Thanks for asking.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: Do I have more time?

The Chair: You have one minute.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: Perfect.

I want to ask you about the all-girls model and why you think that's important. Even though it's not our jurisdiction specifically here at this committee or for this government, we have talked to other witnesses about all-girls models for education and other programs. Why do you think they're important?

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: That is based purely on internal research we've done. We asked the girls what they prefer, where they're more comfortable, and how they like to participate. Overwhelmingly, within the context of science and technology and engineering, they prefer an all-girls environment.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: Even at a young age?

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: Yes. They will often do coed as well once they're in the program, but from the response from parents and the girls.... And in terms of the waiting lists, it's never a problem to fill all-girls camps. So there's definitely a demand.

Mrs. Stella Ambler: That's good to know. I found it interesting when you were talking about the grade levels, and where you found the switch happening between grade four and grade six.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: I must stop you here. I am sorry. Your time has expired. Thank you.

Ms. Sgro, you have about five minutes left. Please go ahead.

[*English*]

Hon. Judy Sgro: Thank you very much, Ms. Flanagan, and Ms. Turpel-Lafond, for the caring attitude you have to these issues.

Ms. Turpel-Lafond, would you please explain something to me? One of the issues of foster care that has always concerned me is what happens when they turn 19. How much preparatory work is done in advance of that young person being discharged from your jurisdiction in B.C., as an example?

Ms. Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond: One of the challenges is this transition to adulthood. The approach in British Columbia and most provinces is that it happens around 18 or 19. In British Columbia it's 19. But through research and experience with Canadian families we know that adolescence extends into the early twenties. Most people peg it closer to 24.

There's very limited work done before a child ages out of the child welfare system. In our surveys, in our work with children who are aging out of the case system, many of them don't understand the social service system. They're aging out of care into social assistance.

The types of personal and institutional supports that a child and a family would receive, let's say around supporting post-secondary education or supporting children who may have had poor starts in these things, don't happen for children in care. So there are some very significant gaps and inequalities around that. There are inadequate services provincially and, of course, nothing federally.

Hon. Judy Sgro: Is there much of a difference in the way boys are treated in foster care versus girls?

Ms. Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond: No, there isn't much of a difference. It's just that we have an elevated teen pregnancy rate, so the dependency ratio, the requirement that there be a young mother.... Mothering and not having achieved the education, then not having the personal support within a family context to be parent at a young age, if they keep the child, which young girls and women often do.... I think we see some really persistent issues around whether we have adequate programs for young people in care and whether we're adequately engaging them and listening to them and supporting them.

We also have a class of young people who live independently before they age out. At around 16 or 17 they may basically be given social assistance and live independently. In our work we see a lot of risk from that in terms of their safety, well-being, and lack of social connection. It's a deeply vulnerable group that, not surprisingly, has some of the poorest outcomes.

Hon. Judy Sgro: Yes, it would be very challenging. There's no question about it.

Ms. Flanagan, do you think that science and technology, from a young woman's perspective, is still looked at as very much a man's game? It's still probably 10 to 1; there are 10 boys to every girl who graduates in science or engineering.

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: That's very much what we find. That stereotype is still widely held, which seems almost unbelievable. One of the biggest challenges we have is actually demonstrating the need for our work, because so many people think, you know, that we've been working on it for so many years, how could it not have changed.

There have been improvements. As I mentioned, certainly within some fields of science and health-based fields, such as medicine, women have made significant advances. Unfortunately, that hasn't been as much the case in engineering and computer science careers.

When we get them in grade three, some of them already have that stereotype unless they've had a mom or an aunt or a dad who has turned them on to that.

● (1640)

Hon. Judy Sgro: How do we get to them even earlier than that? I guess you go on to what the kids are seeing on television as far as who's doing what, I guess, in cartoons and all of that. Maybe we need to have more scientists and more engineers and all the rest of it.

Ms. Jennifer Flanagan: I have colleagues who think we should start in prenatal classes, because a lot of it is educating parents.

There's no question that when we have the girls in grade two or grade three, their minds can be changed. Their perceptions about what they can and can't do can be changed. They have the perceptions already, but they can be changed. That's why we work so heavily with parents, because we know that they're still the primary influencers on the lives of girls.

Hon. Judy Sgro: Well, it would certainly mould the—

[*Translation*]

The Chair: I must stop you. Unfortunately the time allotted to this group of witnesses has expired. I thank them for being here. Thank you very much.

I am going to suspend the meeting for one minute in order to allow us to welcome our next two witnesses properly.

● (1640)

(Pause)

● (1645)

The Chair: We will continue our hearing.

I want to welcome our witnesses. Firstly, we will be hearing from Ms. Claudia Mitchell, from McGill University, by videoconference; Ms. Mitchell is a professor in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education.

Welcome, Ms. Mitchell.

Afterwards, we will have Ms. Danforth on the telephone; Ms. Danforth is the Executive Director of the Native Youth Sexual Health Network.

You will both have 10 minutes. Then we will have the question period.

Ms. Mitchell, you have the floor and you have 10 minutes.

[*English*]

Dr. Claudia Mitchell (James McGill Professor, Department of Integrated Studies in Education, McGill University): Thank you, and thank you very much for accommodating my change in schedule. It was very important.

I'm going to read my remarks in order to stay within the 10 minutes.

I would like to congratulate the committee for taking on this very important issue of studying the economic prospects for Canadian girls, and I would like to thank the committee for inviting me to appear before you today.

I have had the opportunity to read at least some of the evidence that has been presented already. In the interests of time, I will try to not simply repeat what has already been presented. Having said that, I also want to note that what I have read or that particularly has been most impressive are the presentations on aboriginal girls in Canada in relation to poverty.

I appear before you today as an academic researcher working in the area of girlhood studies as an academic discipline. In 2008, I co-founded with two colleagues an international peer review journal called *Girlhood Studies*, which, as far as I know, is the only academic journal that specifically focuses on girls, and not just as part of the category of children, or youth, or women.

As part of our journal's mandate of working with girls, for girls, and about girls, we've embarked upon a set of international consultations across a variety of social and economic contexts: Nordic girlhood and the changing contexts for girls as the social welfare state changes; girlhood in Russia and the new market economies; and comparative work between Australia and Canada on girlhood. We will be highlighting this comparative work at McGill, at a McGill-based conference on girlhood, between October 10 and 12, which will coincide with the first International Day of the Girl Child.

I also appear before you as someone who works in what might be described as the global milieu of girlhood, having served three years on Plan International's "Because I am a Girl" campaign and having conducted numerous studies on girls' education in South Africa, The Gambia, Ethiopia, Zambia, and Swaziland, and recently having conducted an evaluation for the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative, UNGEI.

What I would like to do now is put forward four broad areas about which I would like to offer some recommendations that come out of my work in these various contexts.

The first recommendation I have for the committee is in the context of the emerging research agenda of the Status of Women and other organizations of Canada, and that is in relation to the critical area of the direct participation of girls and young women in research. The early 1990s may have been the heyday for Canada and support for girls. CIDA offered impressive support for girl child programming, and Canada was well known for several key studies. One was the "A Capella" study on adolescent girls, organized by the Canadian Teachers' Federation, and the other was the Status of Women conference "We're Here, Listen to Us!". What was exciting about this work were the groundbreaking innovations in terms of the engagement of real girls and what they had to say.

My own research around the globe suggests that now more than ever we need broad consultations with girls across this country, and we need funding for new scholars coming along to take on this work in participatory ways. I would like to go so far as to suggest that this committee—your committee—consider making recommendations to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada to establish as a priority area work on the economic prospects of girls and young women.

As you might know, they already have several priority areas. One is aboriginal research. Another is on the digital economies. Neither of these rules out participatory work with girls and young women, but in the absence of naming girlhood as priority area, it is likely to fall through the cracks. What we have learned in the international arena with UN Women, with UNGEI, and with other organizations is that the issues have to be named as priorities in order to get on and stay on the agenda, so I've put forward this as a first recommendation.

My second recommendation pertains to the situation of studies of girlhood in the context of work with boys and young men. This is a tricky area in the global north, where girls are typically seen to be outperforming boys in many areas of schooling and of employment.

However, as the already presented previous evidence suggests, the situation for aboriginal girls does not fit this analysis. I believe the Girls Action Foundation also highlighted the new studies on school dropouts in Quebec and suggested that the work is far more complex. I would like to recommend to the committee that every effort be made to not pit the situation of girls and the situation of boys against each other when it comes to funding.

● (1650)

There is ample evidence to suggest that boys and men have to be allies in work with girls and women, especially in such areas as gender violence, and that Canada is in a key position to take leadership in the area of moving forward in ways that make gender studies—boys' perspectives, girls' perspectives, and gender relations—prominent. We need support for both boys and girls, and we need new scholarship and new policy guidelines in this area. This has been a feminist dilemma for some time. Plan International's Because I am a Girl campaign last year actually focused on the place of boys in addressing the situation of girls. This was groundbreaking work, but it cannot stop there. This doesn't mean that we stop focusing on girls, but that we need to look to models and designs that are separate but inclusive if we are to understand economic prosperity.

My third recommendation pertains to girls, sexuality, and risk in relation to STIs and especially HIV and AIDS. This is an area that is central to my own research with aboriginal youth, both boys and girls, in the Canadian context. I know we will be hearing more about this from Jessica Danforth. It was very important when we were studying aboriginal youth leadership, particularly in relation to colonization. It is also an important part of my work in South Africa. There the rates of infection are very high, and girls and young women are up to three times more likely than boys and young men to be HIV positive.

This work links to gender violence, low self-esteem in negotiating sex in the first place, and certainly the ability to negotiate the use of condoms. I know there are many initiatives in Canada that look at girls and leadership, but I would like to recommend that we need more focus on looking at sexuality and how it links to economic prosperity, and how it links to leadership in a more direct way.

Finally I want to say something about addressing the enormous challenges of drawing together the research and programming related to girls in Canada and internationally. What is probably obvious through this consultation is that there is a great deal of work going on in the area of girlhood, but it is very hit and miss in terms of being coordinated or available through some type of clearing house. Part of that circumstance is related to the vast range of issues, and the fact that the study of girls' lives cuts across so many different sectors that do not speak to each other—health, technology, education, social services, labour, aboriginal studies, immigrant studies, and so on. I would like to us to consider that if there is one country that could take leadership in an information age in this area of coordinating work related to girlhood, it is Canada.

What would a girl-focused agency look like? Could it be housed within Status of Women? How could it advance the kind of participatory roles I have spoken about, and how could it involve girls and young women in advisory ways? How could such a body also integrate some aspect of "what about the boys"? The complexity of studying the economic prospects for girls demands this type of attention, and it would be an important move on the part of such bodies as Status of Women Canada to establish some type of directorate on girls that speaks to the situation for girls in Canada but that is also linked to Canadian initiatives in the world through CIDA, IDRC, and other institutions.

These are my four recommendations. I thank you for your attention. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

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

We will now continue with Ms. Danforth, who is with us on the telephone.

Can you hear me clearly?

[*English*]

Ms. Jessica Danforth (Executive Director, Native Youth Sexual Health Network): Hello. Can you hear me?

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Yes, excellent. I now yield the floor to you, Ms. Danforth. You have 10 minutes for your presentation.

● (1655)

[*English*]

Ms. Jessica Danforth: Okay. Great.

Thank you, everybody. I apologize for the awkwardness of the teleconference and not having the video facility.

My name is Jessica Danforth, formerly Jessica Yee, and I am the executive director of the Native Youth Sexual Health Network. I'm also the chair of the National Aboriginal Youth Council on HIV/AIDS in Canada, and the co-chair for the Global Indigenous Youth Caucus for the North America region at the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. Today I will primarily be speaking about my work at the Native Youth Sexual Health Network in the executive director capacity.

The Native Youth Sexual Health Network is an organization that is by and for indigenous youth. It works within the full spectrum of sexual and reproductive health, rights, and justice throughout the United States and Canada. I'm calling today from our U.S. office here on the Oneida reservation in Wisconsin. We are a completely peer-based, national organization of indigenous youth who are under the age of 30. We work in alliance with elders and communities, as well as other peoples of colour.

Some remarks we often get at our organization are: how can we be completely peer-based, how can we be North-America wide, and how can we really be by and for young people under the age of 30? We've learned at our organization over the last five years that to speak about peer-based work and actualize peer leadership means that we have to live it, and not just in a single or token role. This is something that has to be structured overall.

We're also proud to say that we're an organization that strongly supports the self-identification of women themselves. That includes two-spirited, lesbian/gay, bisexual, transgendered, transsexual, intersexioned and intersexed, queer, questioning, and other gender non-conforming women. I think it should be explicitly understood that to gender-police or press by definition what constitutes a woman in this study specifically, without including and centring the experiences of those afore-mentioned identities, will result in a severe erasure of some of the most economically oppressed women in Canada.

Classism and poverty for us are certainly tenets of the realities we face—and by "we" I'm talking about the realities of indigenous but also racialized, LGBT, and other communities of colour in Canada. As I've heard and read in the documents from the committee, the numbers and statistics are just that: numbers and statistics. You may have heard of the stark realities of violence against aboriginal women, and about the stark realities of suicide, poverty, and single-parent families of indigenous women. But it has to be understood that what is happening is in fact the systemic and structural oppression of women, both economically and socially, and that the Government of Canada itself continues to orchestrate this large and root factor at the root of what I'm calling economic injustice.

I think it's critical that we not just talk about statistics and numbers, but that we talk about achieving economic justice. This is a term I've learned working here in the United States part time, and from our neighbours and allies to the south of us. Economic justice is what we need to be centring on, in talking about the success of Canadian women and girls. Economic justice asks us to be critical in challenging and changing the systems that actually create poverty and economic injustice in our communities. Through our work at the Native Youth Sexual Health Network I want to give some examples of how we see economic injustice and economic justice working. I would like them to be included in the study you're looking at.

If we're going to talk about achieving economic justice, it first has to be actualized without the fear of economic or legal penalty. For example, if in the study we're going to talk about establishing or protecting the legal rights of poor and working-class people, we have to encourage and facilitate self-advocacy for that. We have to advocate for radical, compassionate changes in the systems we're talking about, such as housing and shelter, the workplace, courts, prisons, welfare and other public benefits, citizenship and immigration, health care, and other social services. We have to understand the interconnections between different oppressions that perpetuate economic injustice and work on multiple levels to eradicate them. We also have to work on effecting these changes through grassroots organizing, public education, advocacy, community-based research, legal action, leadership development, and coalition-building. This specifically is a tenet of economic justice, as it's understood.

● (1700)

One key area of our work where we see this lack of acknowledgement of economic injustice and the reality that indigenous women are facing is environmental and reproductive injustice.

In numerous places in Canada where there is resource extraction—mining, gas, oil, drilling—particularly in rural and remote and northern areas in the provinces or territories, we see so-called economic prospects and development that at the same time result in numerous and drastic changes for indigenous women and girls on a community level. While we see, for example, in northern Alberta, the tar sands and different mining, gas, and oil resource extractions, what's not understood is the escalating high rates of sexual violence; HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, including syphilis; as well as suicides, different mental health issues, depression, and the list goes on.

While one thing is called economic development, another thing can be called economic injustice. The simultaneous realities are not being understood.

I want to quote from the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, in which Canada said it endorsed, very, very recently, the tenet of "free prior and informed consent". If economic justice were achieved in Canada for self-identified women and girls, then it must be achieved with free prior and informed consent. It cannot be achieved with simple consultation, or saying that we talked to certain groups of women or one token person or representative and say we have permission from them to achieve justice for them or to try to eradicate their oppression. Free prior and informed consent, as it's understood in the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, is something that requires Canada itself not just to consult but also to get prior, understood, and informed consent—in multiple languages, cultures, and communities—to actually do something and to do it differently.

I want to close by leaving everybody with a promising practice that we would like to see continue. We received partial funding from the Status of Women for a national partnership project we had with the Girls Action Foundation entitled indigenous young women: speaking our truths, building our strengths. This was a name that was given by our peer advisory group made up of 10 indigenous young women across Canada, which is directly coordinated by the Native Youth Sexual Health Network.

It is led entirely by self-identified indigenous young women, and it includes things like a national gathering, the first of its kind, by and for indigenous young women explicitly. It also includes resource development in terms of [*Inaudible—Editor*]-making and toolkit creations for self esteem. It is something we would like to see continue, but again it is proving to be harder and harder to fund something that is entirely peer-led and doesn't require somebody to prove themselves otherwise.

In closing I want to say that we cannot talk about creating new funding opportunities or throwing money at different issues that continue to silo or isolate the multi-identities and multi-communities and multi-issues that people are coming from.

In the circumstances of environmental injustice and reproductive injustice that I have cited, in cases where it's called economic development but results in multiple oppressions in terms of environmental injustices toward indigenous communities specifically where resource extraction is happening, we can't talk about these without the free prior and informed consent of communities. It is very clear that what's called economic development does not have free prior and informed consent, which is an internationally upheld human right for women and girls.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

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

We will now move to our question period. We will start with Ms. James.

You have seven minutes.

[*English*]

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

Thank you to both of our guests.

I would like to point out that I'll be splitting my time with Madam Bateman, so could the chair let me know when my three and a half minutes is up?

If I still have an important question, I may cut you off a bit, so I apologize in advance.

My question is for Ms. Mitchell to start. You had recommendations in four different particular areas. One that was of interest to me was that you mentioned engaging young boys and young men in the equation to improve the economic prospects of girls. As you know, that's also a mandate within Status of Women. I personally feel it's very important that they're included.

You didn't really touch base on exactly how you would engage them. What is the message that you would give, or that Status of Women should give, to our young boys on how we can improve the economic prosperity of our young girls for the future? I want to get more on the message that we should be passing on to the young men with regard to improving—

● (1705)

Dr. Claudia Mitchell: I think your question is very important. There is a whole range of ways to engage boys and young men, starting with who they are in relation to the girls and women in their lives. What are their own aspirations? What kind of privilege do they bring to the situation?

For me, it's about discussion and dialogue. I think it can happen at any point. I think it can happen in elementary schools. There's the kind of work we do in life skills programs and in conflict resolution. I think it can also take place in high school and in university.

I think it's the sense of unpacking privilege and unpacking what it is that you are allowed to do. How would your life be different if you had been born a girl or a boy? I think much of this is about dialogue.

Ms. Roxanne James: Thank you.

Is it as simple as saying to very young boys and girls that girls are equal and they should have every opportunity, the same as boys, and that they deserve respect? I'm looking for a definitive message that we can get out there.

I bring this up because a witness from Actua in the last session talked about how young girls in grade 4 are very interested in various topics, including science and technology. Once they're in grade 6 and grade 7, their interest levels drop. I'm trying to determine, is it puberty? What makes girls' interests in certain issues drop, whereas boys go on to achieve success in those fields? I'm trying to understand, from your knowledge, what you think causes girls at a certain age to lose interest and not necessarily go into those fields and what you think we as the status of women committee can do to encourage them, and also to include men and boys in that equation to encourage our young girls to continue with their interests in those particular areas.

Dr. Claudia Mitchell: I think you have to listen to girls and why they aren't going into scientific areas. I think there is a very complex set of messages here perhaps—or maybe they're very simple.

Unless you have a participatory approach, unless you have other girls and women doing this work—and I know there have been studies around mentorship and so on.... I don't think we can ever do enough of that. I think we have to take a look at what is happening to girls when they are 12, 13, and what the competing messages are.

It's totally fine for boys to make these kinds of decisions; it isn't for girls. I think that until we have a complete change of—

Ms. Roxanne James: Thank you.

We've heard from previous witnesses that it might be a confidence issue. Do you feel that girls of a certain age start questioning themselves or they lack the same level of confidence of boys? Is that part of the problem?

How do we as the status of women committee get the message out that girls should have the confidence that they can do anything they choose?

We've heard from other witnesses as well. You hear stories of two people who face the same challenges in life but one is much more determined, one strives to succeed, and the other decides to drop out of high school. What is it, from your experience, from your knowledge, that you think we can do to make sure more people stay in high school and more people try to empower themselves to want to succeed?

You're going to get diversity in all areas, whether among boys or girls. Some will go on to succeed; some will do other things and so on. What can we do as the status of women committee to make sure that more girls succeed, that more girls are empowered to make that decision to want to strive to succeed in life and not drop out of school and get a minimum wage job? What is that clear, definitive message we need to give?

● (1710)

Dr. Claudia Mitchell: I think we have to empower the women around them. I think we have to give them a message. There's the idea that you can do anything, but unless we have a support system for girls, I don't think they can necessarily do anything. I would put a lot more into the social support systems in schools and in communities. School can only do so much; community organizations are very important.

Ms. Roxanne James: Thank you.

The last witness—I think she was from Actua, if I'm not mistaken—talked about three different areas. One was mentorship programs. Here I might take up Madam Bateman's time on that question as well.

She mentioned the importance of educating parents, communities, schools, and various other outreach organizations to encourage girls that they can achieve, that they can succeed. My concern is, how do you get to the girls who don't necessarily have the support of their parents, or who maybe come from different cultural backgrounds where there is some discrimination between the sexes within their own families?

Again, it's what Status of Women Canada can do to reach out to get to these young girls and deliver that message. How do we cross over to make sure that the girls are given that opportunity by parents and in schools?

Dr. Claudia Mitchell: Well, I think some of this is—

I'm sorry. Go ahead.

Ms. Roxanne James: Sorry.

I think there really are some barriers within some cultures—

Have I used up my seven minutes?

[*Translation*]

The Chair: I am so sorry, Ms. James, your time has expired. I indicated this to Ms. Bateman, but...

Ms. Joyce Bateman (Winnipeg South Centre, CPC): She would really prefer to continue.

The Chair: Yes, but the time period has expired.

[*English*]

Ms. Roxanne James: I'm sorry. Have seven minutes gone by?

The Chair: Oui.

Ms. Roxanne James: Oh, my apologies.

Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: There is no problem.

I will now give the floor to the members opposite.

Ms. Freeman, you have seven minutes.

Ms. Mylène Freeman (Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair. I am going to share my time with Ms. Ashton.

[*English*]

My questions will be for Jessica Danforth from the Native Youth Sexual Health Network.

You're a very impressive activist, so I'm just going to jump right in and get you to speak as much as possible about what you know is happening on the ground. Could you explain to this committee the importance of ensuring access to reproductive services in the communities that you know and work in?

Ms. Jessica Danforth: Yes, absolutely.

Reproductive services in the full spectrum of what we call reproductive justice are very similar to what I was talking about in terms of economic justice. We can't look at improving access for economic development for Canadian women and girls without ensuring that their reproductive health is included in this—and by that I mean even in big cities such as Toronto.

The Toronto Teen Survey was conducted in partnership with Planned Parenthood of Toronto and noted just last year that about 80% of teens in Toronto aren't even accessing sexual health services. Some of the key reasons they noted were that the services were culturally irrelevant and not peer-based, and also that they didn't speak to the realities teens were facing, particularly for aboriginal youth and youth of colour. So that's one example of how, even in a big city where you would think that there would be a lot of services, economic development, and choices, youth are not accessing those services, and that's absolutely because of the lack of peer outreach or engagement with them.

I can also speak to multiple realities that happen in rural, remote, and northern areas in Canada. Even though, for example, the legal right to abortion exists in Canada, it does not mean that it's accessible. It also does not mean that it's a reality for many Canadian women to access it even if they wanted to; if you live in a northern, rural, or remote community, you have to jump through several hoops to access what the law says is your legal right, but in reality you can't even get that right respected or actualized in your own community.

For example, communities in, let's say, northern Ontario or northern Alberta—or even on Prince Edward Island, where there are no abortion clinics available, even though it's a legally protected right—if you have to apply for a northern travel grant to travel south, if you have to front some of the money yourself, if you are a student, for example, outside of the province you're living in and you have to face reciprocal billing for provincial health care.... Those are just piecemeal some of the realities that Canadian women and girls face in regard to their full reproductive health control and access.

I also cited some of the realities in areas where so-called economic development is happening in northern communities where there is mining and gas and oil, but simultaneously there is sexual violence and extremely high rates of sexually transmitted infections, with minimal services available.

● (1715)

Ms. Mylène Freeman: Yes. Could you also just elaborate on why access is important for this study, and for this committee. Why is having access important?

Ms. Jessica Danforth: It's extremely important to have access. One, it's supposed to be a legally protected right in Canada, but as I said, if it's a law in Canada, it doesn't actually mean that it's something that's accessible. So it can't actually be something that you have a right to if it's not accessible, or if you can't have access to it no matter how hard you try, because of the economic injustices I mentioned, but also because of your geographic location and so on and so forth.

It's important particularly for this study, though, because we can't look at economic prospects and development for Canadian women and girls without understanding that without having control of your own reproductive health, your own body, and your own choices, having full, true economic justice and economic prospects will never be achieved. We can't be worrying on the one hand about whether we're going to have control over planning our families or getting out of a violent or abusive relationship on the ground and also be trying to plan all of the other economic prospects that we say we want.

We have to actualize this stuff on the ground. I speak from the experience of being in northern, rural, and remote communities, where so much of the focus of these studies is urban based and doesn't speak to the reality that it might be a right but it's not accessible, and it's not happening on the ground.

Ms. Mylène Freeman: Thank you, Jessica.

I'm going to give the rest of my time to Ms. Ashton. Thank you.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Thank you very much, Ms. Danforth, and Ms. Mitchell, for your great testimony.

My question is for Ms. Mitchell.

You spoke about the bold idea, which I thought was quite interesting, of working with the SSHRC and giving some direction in terms of its research and a vision when it comes to girls' futures in Canada. However, in the broader spectrum, over the last six years we've seen numerous cuts to both research and advocacy when it comes to women's programs under this government, and in fact, most recently, to the women's health networks, which are all across the country. Some years ago actually, some of the first programs to be cut were ones that did advocacy work around HIV and AIDS. I know there was a program in northern Manitoba, where I come from, that was cut, and of course at the same time we have seen rates of HIV and AIDS go up.

Could you please tell us what impact we will see on the futures of women and girls in Canada from the loss of research and advocacy funding?

Dr. Claudia Mitchell: There's no question that researchers go after the money that exists in the priority areas. There has been some criticism of SSHRC right now, in terms of what its priority areas are, but I think we have everything to gain by really promoting the idea of special areas. Right now there is one on sport that has made a huge difference in relation to what researchers are able to build into their work.

The other side of that is that if we don't have these priority areas, we really will lose out.

I don't know what else to say other than that I think this study has a tremendous role to play in bringing some pressure on organizations like SSHRC. I know the cuts are going to be absolutely detrimental, and so I think having the kind of study you're doing and showing these kinds of economic possibilities is critical.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Mitchell.

I now yield the floor to the government members.

Mr. Albas, you have seven minutes.

[*English*]

Mr. Dan Albas (Okanagan—Coquihalla, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank both of our guests for being here to offer their testimony today.

I'd like to start with Madam Mitchell.

I do appreciate your expertise in this area, particularly around girlhood. I actually have three beautiful daughters, so this is an issue that is quite important to me. I'd like to ask a few questions, though, based on what some of my colleagues brought up earlier in regard to some of the current trends.

In 2006, there was a labour force profile of youth by the Canadian Council on Social Development, which stated that the gender gap had reversed and that the employment market had improved more for girls than for boys.

In your opinion, what would this probably be attributed to? Is it that industries girls traditionally worked in have done better? Are girls entering non-traditional industries at increasing rates? Is something happening with boys that we're not aware of?

● (1720)

Dr. Claudia Mitchell: I can speak for Quebec, where boys are dropping out at a much greater rate and much earlier, but I think there was a recent study done in Quebec—and again, I'm speaking particularly about that province—that looked at what actually happens to boys who drop out and girls who drop out. It was found that there are many more possibilities at a later point for boys to come back in again. And regardless of the findings of that one particular study, we still know that there are far more men in key positions in organizations in Canada.

So I think that it's the type of work perhaps—maybe semi-skilled labour—but we're not seeing the gains for women that this kind of a study would allude to. I think we still have a long way to go.

Mr. Dan Albas: So you're saying there's a greater context as far as a learning cycle goes—

Dr. Claudia Mitchell: Yes, yes, absolutely.

Mr. Dan Albas: —in which there would be reintegration further downstream.

I appreciate hearing that.

Now according to the sixth edition of *Women in Canada*, "The majority of...women continue to work in occupations in which they have been traditionally concentrated." The report goes on to say that young women entering the workforce are choosing non-traditional industries.

Is it just a matter of time before we see some of these remaining gaps close, and have you been able to identify reasons why girls are growing up to enter more non-traditional industries?

Dr. Claudia Mitchell: Well, I can't say that I have studied it directly, but I'm certainly familiar with some of the literature. In many high schools, there is perhaps more career guidance now than there might have been a few years ago. I don't know that this has necessarily happened everywhere.

Perhaps it is just that there are more non-traditional jobs available. If we just look at what's available, young women, actually, by virtue of what's there, are able to go into more of these non-traditional positions. Again, it may be that we're just seeing some areas in technology, science, and so on that we wouldn't have seen a few years ago.

Mr. Dan Albas: It could be technological innovation. It could be demographic. It's a very complex situation. Okay.

We were fortunate to have earlier the Girls Action Foundation. They appeared before us and made a few recommendations. I'll just share them with you briefly.

Number one was providing mentorship and diverse role models for girls when they are growing up. Second was educating boys and young men to think critically about gender expectations and to promote equality between the sexes. Third was implementing and expanding programs that reduce gender harassment, especially in educational institutions.

I'd like some of your thoughts on this approach. From your experience and expertise, are there any other factors, given those recommendations?

Dr. Claudia Mitchell: I think I would like to maybe say a little bit more about the area of harassment. I'm not sure if you're speaking to any people who are working in the area of cyber-bullying and so on. I think there still is a great deal of harassment in institutions. At universities, unfortunately, such as my own, we have harassment committees.

I think it becomes more and more subtle. These are not areas people are easily able to report on. Once we get into areas of class, looking at perhaps elementary and secondary schools, I think harassment is still a great detriment to girls' experiences. We can't do enough to address that issue. It still remains in meetings among colleagues. People become a little more subtle as we go along. But I think that for a girl to walk across a room in a classroom, sometimes, and be in a minority, remains a really critical issue. I think we have to do a lot more than we currently are to make schools and institutions walk-safe areas.

Mr. Dan Albas: Madam Chair, how much time do I have?

The Chair: You have one minute and thirty seconds.

Mr. Dan Albas: I appreciate talking about this.

From your last comments, it seems to me that technology changes, society changes, and sometimes the form in which harassment may take place—you mentioned cyber-bullying, for one—changes. We should also be looking at different ways of countering it or adjusting so that we deal with these circumstances. Is that correct?

● (1725)

Dr. Claudia Mitchell: Yes, that's correct. It's an area that we think has passed, but we haven't passed it. We still have a lot to do. As soon as you add in race and class, these areas are still very profound in our institutions.

Mr. Dan Albas: Thank you very much for your testimony today. Madam Chair, I appreciated the opportunity to work with the witnesses. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

As Ms. Sgro had to leave, we are going to move on to the second round of questions.

Ms. Bateman, you have about five minutes.

[*English*]

Ms. Joyce Bateman: Thank you very much, *madame la présidente*. Thank you to both of our witnesses today. I very much appreciate the comments we've heard.

I just wanted to continue, Professor Mitchell, with some of your comments. I so appreciate that you came with concise and very clear statements of what you want to accomplish.

I want to zero in on one of those topics. You were talking about working with boys and young men. I have a daughter and also a son. I see the importance of their actually getting along and functioning productively in the world.

You spoke at one point about boys currently being outperformed in a number of situations by young women. Could you speak to that?

Dr. Claudia Mitchell: Yes. Certainly in a range of subject areas, girls have outperformed boys in areas around reading and language for a long time. There have been many debates about whether this is nature or nurture, and whether girls are more socialized into language so that when they go to school they do much better in language-related areas. But there is some research that suggests that it isn't just around language. I cannot settle the nurture-nature issue here. But I do think girls are outperforming boys in many of these areas, but I think that they're also outperforming them in a whole range of areas in upper elementary and secondary school. There are many arguments about this, such as that the schools are perhaps too feminized and that we have more female teachers and need more male teachers as role models. There have been many different hypotheses put forward for why this is.

It doesn't mean that then there are no biases against girls; in fact, once they finish school, we still find that males are having higher salaries. But in the school milieu, girls are actually doing better in a lot of ways—albeit not all girls and not all schools. Overall, I think there has been a great deal of leveling in terms of what's happening. And some people are arguing then that we should be doing more to support boys. And, of course, I always think that's a good idea too. I want us to learn from what we have done about girls.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: And on that point, you made another lovely comment in my view, that you didn't want to pit boys against girls or girls against boys.

Ms. Claudia Mitchell: Yes.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: Could you speak to how? I think in your description you used the word “allies”. If you could speak to that, just enrich us on that point.

Dr. Claudia Mitchell: First of all, I think it's because there are small pots of money. I can speak particularly about the context in South Africa, where there are still many problems. But I think the people who are working on masculinities there have made a very convincing argument as to why the funds should go to them and not to girls, that we've already settled all the problems with girls.

I feel that one of the issues we have to think about is that all children need support and that we cannot have masculinity studies and feminist studies pitted against each other. If anything, we would still have these as academic areas but we have to be thinking strategically about how this kind of work can actually be supporting both males and females. And I really worry that as soon as you start talking about the idea of a special agency for girls as I did, people will say yes, but what about the boys? And I think we have to show that we're working for both groups and also encourage support for the work of the people who are seeing problems with boys. We have to avoid this polarization and binary analysis.

● (1730)

Ms. Joyce Bateman: Okay. I appreciate that.

I just have a little bit of time left and I'm wondering if you could speak to the importance of mentorship, because a number of our witnesses have spoken of that. Could you lead us through your views on that.

The Chair: Be very quick.

Dr. Claudia Mitchell: Yes. We need to have older girls mentoring younger girls; and it doesn't have to be women to girls. I think we've got mentors in every single school and in every single community, and that's what we have to work on, to think about how girls who are even just a couple of years older can be mentors to younger girls. It's a very important role.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you. I must interrupt you here, unfortunately. What you had to say was very interesting.

I thank our two witnesses who agreed to talk to us today in the context of our study.

I wish you a pleasant evening. The meeting is adjourned.

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