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Chair

Ms. Marilyn Gladu

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● (1545)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC)): Good afternoon, colleagues. I hope you had a good summer.

[*English*]

Welcome back. We're going to get right to work on our cyber-bullying study.

We're pleased today to welcome Rena Bivens, assistant professor, from the School of Journalism and Communication at Carleton University, and Valerie Steeves, associate professor, from the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa.

We are excited to see you. I believe you both have 10 minutes for opening statements. Then we'll proceed to our questions.

Rena, we'll start with you.

Ms. Rena Bivens (Assistant Professor, School of Journalism and Communication, Carleton University, As an Individual): What I will share today is informed by a number of different research projects, ranging from a study on the use of social media by anti-violence non-profits to investigations of gender-related programming practices in popular social media platforms and in mobile phone apps designed to prevent sexual violence.

One issue I've encountered relates to terminology. Many terms in this area, as you know, have histories, and this baggage enters the room when we use the term. For some, “violence against women” evokes the deep-seated racism, ableism, heterosexism, and cissexism that taint early iterations of the women's movement. For others, “gender-based violence” can be problematic because it has been employed by some as a way of neutralizing the differences between men's and women's experiences of sexual violence.

In my research with non-profits, I've heard that some organizations prefer to avoid umbrella terms altogether. Instead, they narrowly focus on what they are doing at that particular moment. It may be transmisogyny one day and consent the next. This approach is seen as more genuine and honest since it has the capacity to focus on the intersections arising out of a particular situation while resisting the impulse to include everything within one label, thus obscuring the specific ways in which power operates.

As we know, violence against young women and girls occurs in settings that blend off-line and online elements, but when we focus on technology as part of this mixture, it's important to ask questions about design, in addition to questions about how people are using technologies. Still, we have to be clear that technology itself is not a cause of the violence that people experience. That's what we would call “technological determinism”, whereby technology is taken out of a social context, seemingly appearing out of thin air, and blamed for society's ills. At the same time, it's possible to focus on technological development and design since these processes aren't simply technical but are social too.

My research interests centre around questions of design and begin with the premise that technology is not neutral. I explore values and norms that become embedded in technology by designers, programmers, stakeholders, and other actors in processes of technological development.

I think particularly interesting and important for the committee's study are the ways in which technological design is a social and political act that has recursive consequences for society; that is, design decisions can, often inadvertently, solidify social relations. For example, of the 215 mobile phone applications designed to prevent sexual violence that my colleague Amy Hasinoff and I examined, the vast majority reinforce prevalent rape myths by placing the responsibility for preventing sexual violence on the victim. Only four apps out of that 215 target perpetrators, and there is an assumption that strangers are the most likely perpetrators.

Since technological design and development processes are never just technical or social, they're a viable target for policy intervention. There are a number of issues here to discuss.

First, software has many layers. Some are more visible to us as users. Think of Facebook and its blue-and-white interface. Then there are others, such as the database where Facebook collects information about each user. I have argued that software has the capacity to conceal the ways in which it enacts violence. Think about the changes to Facebook's user interface in 2014. Suddenly, people were able to identify beyond the traditional categories of “men” and “women”. They could be two-spirit, genderqueer, gender questioning, etc.

In my study, I discovered there was a difference between the progressive moves that the company made on the surface of the software, moves that worked towards dismantling oppressive conceptions of gender as binary—that there are only men and women in the world—versus the decisions they made in deeper layers of the software, layers inaccessible to most of us. To accommodate this modification they made on the surface, programmers developed a way for the software to translate these non-binary genders into a binary categorization system by focusing only on the pronoun that a user selects.

We know that people with non-binary genders experience disproportionate levels of discrimination and violence. A 2014 study from the Canadian Labour Congress, cited by the ongoing federal strategy on gender-based violence, notes that rates of intimate partner violence for transgender participants are almost twice as high as those for women and men: 64.9% lifetime prevalence rates were recorded. We also know, from the U.S. context, that transgender women of colour are targets of violence at even higher rates than their white counterparts, making up most of the murders committed against transgender people.

While the act of misgendering someone is often experienced as violence in and of itself, it's also symptomatic of the broader social systems that contribute to transphobia. What I'd like us all to consider, then, is the ways in which programming practices can be violent by reproducing and calcifying dominant regimes of gender control. Concealing this violence, by, for instance, storing that gender as “female” for someone in the database who has indicated on the surface that they are gender queer but happen to prefer the pronoun “she”, is a cause for concern, particularly when that gendered information does not simply remain in the database but is accessed by other sets of users like advertisers and marketers. So while social pressure may have led to the surface, superficial modification, it was a corporate logic that motivated Facebook to design their software in a way that misgenders users.

We're also witnessing mergers between different social media platforms, such as when Facebook picks up Instagram. This has led to an exchange of data between different platforms, so one platform doesn't even have to collect identifiers any more if it can access them from another platform. Digital delegation means being asked to sign up for Instagram through Facebook, and your Facebook information is used to do that. With my colleague Oliver Haimson, I have examined popular social media platforms to determine both how gender has been programmed into user interfaces and how gender has been programmed into spaces designed for advertisers, the advertising portals. We argue that social media platforms have become intermediaries in a bigger ecosystem that includes advertising and web analytics companies.

As a result, though, social media platforms get entrusted with a lot of control over how gender and other identifiers are categorized, and these design decisions are shaping how the public and the advertising industry understand identity. These systems they are building are like another layer of society that could promote progressive social change but instead is reifying inequalities.

I want to try to translate this into two quick points. First, the technology sector is well known for its lack of diversity, and that impacts who is making things and who designers think the user is. It's not only about adding women to the sector and stirring. Funding education that targets engineering and other related disciplines, that is informed by feminist, queer, race, and even disabilities studies lenses, is needed to open up the design process. Finally, incentives for the technology sector to support social change objectives in their design and ongoing development of technologies could also be helpful.

Thank you.

● (1550)

The Chair: Excellent. Thanks very much.

I was remiss earlier on in not informing the committee that we have a new member of our committee. Welcome to Marc Serré. We look forward to engaging you in delightful conversation over this next session.

Mr. Marc Serré (Nickel Belt, Lib.): Thank you.

The Chair: Welcome as well to Filomena, who is joining us today, and Garnett Genuis, who is with us.

We'll begin our questioning with my Liberal colleagues, starting with Ms. Nassif.

Oh, wait, I'm wrong. I have to let Valerie speak first. I'm sorry. I'm out of practice, you see, over the summer.

Valerie, you have 10 minutes and you can begin. Thanks.

Dr. Valerie Steeves (Associate Professor, Department of Criminology, University of Ottawa, As an Individual): Thank you very much for the invitation. It's a privilege to be here, and I'm delighted that you're undertaking this study. I'm really curious to see what comes out of it and quite encouraged by the process itself.

For the past 20 years, a large part of my research agenda has been looking at how kids use network technologies, how they experience them, and what their perspectives about those uses and experiences are. It's really grounded in my belief that good policy should be founded on a solid understanding of those lived experiences, because I think the policies we're trying to enact are designed to provide young people with the support they need to successfully navigate the network world.

When I was thinking of what I could contribute in my 10 minutes before we get to questions, three things came to mind, and I think these are three things that the girls and young women whom I've spoken to over the last 20 years would want you to know, or would want you to take into consideration.

The first one is surveillance isn't a solution to cyber-violence or cyber-harassment; in fact, surveillance makes things worse for them, makes it harder for them to navigate through this online world. Unfortunately, if you look back at how we've responded to a lot of these policy questions, surveillance has been a standard response.

My research partner Jane Bailey and I, a number of years ago, started a review of all of the interventions before Parliament whenever kids and technology were mentioned. So starting right back from the information superhighway forward—if any of you are old enough to remember as I do—we started with this really strong narrative that kids are savvy, natural technology users, and that they're innovators and they're going to create wealth.

The lesson we draw from that is not to regulate the technology, because that will shut down innovation. But at the same time as we were advancing through this policy arc over the past 20 years or so, we started to talk about kids as being "at risk". Kids were at risk of seeing offensive content; they could see pornography online. The solution was to put them under surveillance to make sure they wouldn't.

Then we talked about kids being at risk because they've naive. They get out into these technological platforms, and they don't really understand the bad things that can happen to them. The solution was to put them under surveillance.

Lastly, especially once we started talking about behaviours like sexting, we started to talk about kids being at risk because kids are badly behaved, so we have to put them under surveillance because we need to protect them from their own choices.

Now, from the kids' points of view this just doesn't work. From their point of view, the main problem with surveillance is that the lesson of surveillance is that adults don't trust them. They don't trust them to use their judgment; they don't trust them to make mistakes and learn from them. What they glean from this is that they can't trust adults. We've rolled out surveillance through schools and through public libraries. We're encouraging parents all the time to make sure they have their kid's Facebook password and rifle through their accounts. All of these strategies, which were designed I think in a well-intentioned way to help children, have backfired, because they have eroded the relationships of trust that are at the heart of our being able to help kids confront cyber-harassment and cyber-misogyny when they occur. I have all sorts of research findings to support this, stories of kids saying "just when this terrible thing happened to me, I couldn't go to my teacher, because then I knew the cops would be called in, and I can't trust adults not to go crazy, because they don't understand my life."

I think that's a really important lesson. Surveillance isn't a solution. Surveillance really complicates things and makes it harder for girls and young women to cope with cyber-harassment and misogyny.

I think the second thing that they would like to say, and this really resonates with Rena's comments about design, is that the problem isn't them; the problem is the environment, and we adults are the ones who are responsible for the design of that environment.

Kids, for example, often complain that adults force them to use network technologies, and they really resent it. So, again, if you think about how we often talk about kids, we say they're natural; they're savvy; they love technology; they're online all the time. Doing research over the last 20 years with kids all across the country, we have heard very different stories. We've heard that technology actually often causes them a lot of problems.

For example, I was talking to a group of youth in Toronto just this past weekend at the CCLA, and the first question they asked was, "How can we tell our school to stop forcing Microsoft tablets on us? Now, I have to do all of my science work in class on this darn tablet, and I don't like it." They felt it was a bad way to learn. They're actually right. All sorts of research indicates that computing technology actually reduces learning outcomes, but what they were worried about was that the commercial design of that technology made disclosure the default. As soon as they used it, they had no control over the information they inputed into that tool.

● (1555)

They knew that this information then made them more visible to their peers and to their teachers in ways that they are uncomfortable with. It's the lack of privacy they experience in network spaces that makes it harder for them to navigate through all of the cyber-misogyny and the harassment that exist in those spaces, and it actually sets them up for conflict with peers.

They also find that the lack of privacy built into the environment means that they are held to account for every mistake they make. It's harder for them to figure out what is and what isn't acceptable behaviour. It tends to magnify bad behaviours and silence good behaviours in really strange ways. That's the second thing. The problem is the environment. Look at the design.

I think the third thing they would want to say is that if you're going to take these seriously, move away from surveillance as a knee-jerk response and critically analyze the environment. Then start examining the commercial agenda behind the technology and think about how that commercial agenda plays into and magnifies stereotyping cyber-harassment and cyber-violence.

When I sit down with kids, they bring up misogynist trolling. Slut shaming is a huge part of the problems they face online, along with threats of rape and other kinds of sexualized violence. When I ask where they think that's coming from, they very readily point the finger at mediatization. They say the online environment that they learn and play in, that they connect with their grandmother in, is wallpapered with gender stereotypes through ads, videos, and audio files that are everywhere. They know that's part of a commercial model where everything they do online is constantly collected about them and fed back into those images and intensifies the effect of those stereotypes.

Certainly the visual nature of the environment or the media makes it much harder for girls to resist those stereotypes. We live in an age of cheat days, where five days of the week you're supposed to not eat, and then two days of the week you're allowed to have meals, which is one of the things that is coming up in public schools among girls. The girls we've talked to tell us they try to conform, at least to some extent, to these very narrow stereotypical ways of performing gender. If they don't, they are subjected to incredibly harsh judgment from their peers, and that grows into conflict, which grows into harassment and threats.

When they find that it gets to the point where they need someone to help them and they go to adults, they are judged by the adults because they've broken the rules about disclosure: "Well, you shouldn't have posted that picture. What were you doing talking to your friend about that and using that language on the Internet?" Their argument is that the whole environment is designed to make them do that. All of the incentives in that environment are for them to disclose information, to portray a certain kind of femininity, to perform according to a particular kind of identity as a girl, whether they're a learner or hanging out with friends, or just trying to find out what the adult world is like.

Given Rena's comments about the importance of layers and how that database level is so key, and how software can conceal how we as a society enact violence, I think this problem is only going to be magnified by big data algorithms that sort kids into categories for commercial purposes. We already know that those algorithms intensify inequalities. They hide these biases and sources of inequality in the algorithm, and once they're there, it's very hard to hold anybody to account.

If we look at these three things that I think girls and young women would want me to say on their behalf, I think part of the solution has to be taking responsibility for creating public spaces that are not commercialized, places where kids can gather for social interaction, for learning, and for exploring the world.

Ironically, I think before we passed the Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act, the federal government actually demonstrated a lot of leadership in this regard. These were places like SchoolNet, and public access points for rural and impoverished populations. These initiatives were equality-driven and value-driven, and they were designed to promote a healthy networked public sphere. Once PIPEDA was passed, all of that funding was pulled.

I think as you listen to all of this different information and talk to different intervenors, I would urge you to keep in mind that the role of government is to create conditions that provide equal access to free speech and to support a public sphere where community norms are both articulated and respected in ways such that we hold each other to account for violence and discrimination.

● (1600)

Thank you.

The Chair: Excellent. Thanks very much.

We'll begin, then, with my Liberal colleague, Ms. Nassif.

● (1605)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Eva Nassif (Vimy, Lib.): Welcome back, everyone. I hope you have a good session.

My thanks to the witnesses for their presentations.

I would first like to turn to Ms. Bivens.

Based on your online comments, the monitoring practices for misogyny on social media are part of your interests and current projects. We hear a great deal about those female social media professionals or users who become the targets of misogynist behaviours and receive some of the most hateful comments that they have ever read or heard. Those behaviours are seen particularly on social media.

Just think of the recent Gamergate controversy. Many women have channels on Twitch or YouTube and they are all trying to participate in healthy social discussions online or they simply want to do something they love. Could you address this trend in particular? In fact, there is a strong link, though not exclusive, with women who try to break into fields, professions or recreational activities that are men's turf right now, such as the jobs of sports commentators and analysts, the video game industry or online gaming.

Do you think this trend has something to do with the current vitriol on social media when people try to overcome social and cultural obstacles?

My question has another part. Is this cyberviolence really different from other forms of harassment and intimidation, or is this simply a new medium that enables people to continue to perpetrate these crimes relatively easily under the cover of a degree of anonymity?

That's my first question. It is long.

[*English*]

Ms. Rena Bivens: I apologize; I didn't have the translation on from the very beginning of your question, but one thing I heard was about women getting into the design of video games and the design of technologies, and about the kinds of obstacles they might find when they're trying to participate in these careers.

Some research has found that obstacles they face include the demand to fit into this masculine culture and to take away some of their own feminine identity in order to do so. Some critiques on that have been about how many people have some feminine characteristics and some masculine characteristics. There's a spectrum there; it's not quite straightforward. But there is a heavily dominated culture, which people feel they have to fit into, if they are excluded from it from the beginning.

Mrs. Eva Nassif: The second part of my question was whether cyber-violence is really that different from other forms of harassment and intimidation or it is a new medium that enables people to perpetuate those crimes with relative ease and anonymity.

Ms. Rena Bivens: I think it's an important question to ask. Many people critique the term cyber-violence as well and ask if it is something new or just more of the same. Certainly we know that off-line and online are blurred. I think you're aware of all these things.

We try to look at the technology and ask what specifically is new or different about it. Some people like to focus on the anonymous angle—you can be anonymous—but many of these platforms are encouraging people to be "authentic", as they call it, and to use their real names, etc. There's a lot of push-back on that as well.

I don't know how different it is in the off-line and the online environments. That's where I'd leave that.

Mrs. Eva Nassif: Do you think social media and the digital world itself is the only medium that can be used to curb this kind of behaviour? How, in your opinion, would the government best operate in these circumstances to curb cyber-violence?

I ask this question because children at age 10 and sometimes even younger have their own computers, tablets, or phones, which, unless monitored carefully by their parents, expose them to this kind of online treatment.

Ms. Rena Bivens: From what I'm hearing, you're asking about whether technology is the answer to try to resolve this problem, and about what we do when young people need to be surveilled because they have so much access.

I think what Valerie was saying speaks to a lot of that. They're losing our trust when we put them under so much surveillance, so I don't think that is the answer. That's not the way we should move. I think one big important issue here is about how we design these spaces. Valerie was speaking to this as well, and quite eloquently, in terms of trying to create spaces that don't pressure people to disclose everything and lose all of their privacy.

One scholar I admire a lot talks about how these networks are created in ways that are "leaky". They're actually called "promiscuous" networks. You never hear "monogamous network" being used. They're meant to capture everything and then use and store what they need. They're created to be leaky. That's how they've been created. So we can try to do better in terms of designing these systems in the ways that, from what we're hearing from the eQuality Project, for instance, young people are asking for.

● (1610)

The Chair: You have 30 seconds left.

Mrs. Eva Nassif: It's okay.

The Chair: All right.

We'll go to my Conservative colleagues, and we'll begin Ms. Vecchio.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Wonderful.

I'd like to thank you both for coming today. This will be an excellent discussion.

I'd like to start with you, Ms. Steeves. First of all, thank you for all the research you've done with the eGirls Project. That's phenomenal.

In one of your publications, you highlight the slippery slope for girls between private experimentation and public performance in online social media. How does this phenomenon play into the hypersexualization of women, as seen in traditional and social media? Is this public performance mindset becoming more prevalent or even accepted among young people? How do we stop this from manifesting?

Dr. Valerie Steeves: I'll preface this by picking up on one of the earlier questions. A lot of this is age-driven. If you look at human development, kids up to about 11 and 12 tend to form their sense of identity through their relationship with their family. Once they hit 12 or 13, things start to shift a bit, generally speaking. The usual path is that we're then trying to break away from the family, get out into the world, explore different identities, and find out who we want to be as an adult. It's fraught with difficulty and lots of mistakes.

To a certain extent, that's also a performativity. One of the reasons you see so many 13- to 22-year-old kids and young adults hyper-performing is that they are developmentally predisposed to try on different identities, get them out there, see what the reaction is, and then retreat into a private space to figure out if that works for them or not.

I think the thing you've raised is that when you do this in a commercialized surveillance space, then certain kinds of identities are privileged—hypersexualized identities, for example. With the eGirls data, and similarly with the work we've been doing on the eQuality Project as well, kids tell us that instead of finding a whole range of ways of being a girl in network spaces, there's just this very narrow hypersexualized identity that's available to them, and performing it is almost protective—i.e., "I have to have a friend on my friends list who does it, or I have to do a little bit of it, because if I don't, I'm trolled." Then they have to deal with all this incredible negativity.

I think it's interesting to see how the technology does interface with these very old stereotypical concerns around gender and problems of equality. Especially with the eGirls data, girls would tell us things like, "You know, when I'm at school, I don't feel pressure to have the makeup on and do the hair and all this type of thing, but I have friends who went online, just took pictures of the way they normally look, and got attacked immediately." They were told they were fat and they were told they were ugly.

It's very heterosexist; it's very normative; it's very gendered, and it's very misogynistic. When they're online, they're very careful about performing in a particular way.

As well, our data actually is drawn from a really diverse group of girls. I agree with Rena on everything she said about intersectionality. It's really important to understand how race plays out with gender and how socio-economic status plays out with gender, yet all of our diverse participants indicated that they had to negotiate with this. To go back to my opening comments, they point the finger at the media stereotypes that are embedded everywhere. It's easier for them to push against the stereotype in the real world. Once you're online, it's really hard.

● (1615)

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Thank you so much.

Ms. Bivens, thank you for joining us today. We've heard from previous witnesses about both real and exaggerated concerns over sexting. You have a chapter in your book called, “Quit Facebook, Don't Sext, and Other Futile Attempts to Protect Youth”.

What do you perceive to be the biggest misconception about sexting, and how do you protect youth from dangers such as online stalking or predators, without becoming futile?

Ms. Rena Bivens: I would say the biggest misconception about sexting would be that you can't take pleasure from it, and that only young people are doing it. There are people of all ages who take pleasure in sexting. I think that's one thing that we have to keep in mind, and we have to listen to the people who are doing the sexting. The question is how to do it so that it's not futile.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: How do we keep our children from being in danger? How do we make sure that our children remain safe and that they're not putting themselves in harm's way?

Ms. Rena Bivens: It's tricky. In the chapter you mentioned, I'm looking at particular advertising campaigns, and how it can be futile to just say, “Oh, don't do that.” I haven't done a lot of research talking with youth themselves, but I'm really curious about what would be dangerous and what we need to protect them from, because it feels as though often we are trying to protect children, trying to protect certain types of children. We think girls are the most at risk and you hear this about so many new technologies. When trains came out, people were worried that women's uteruses would fly out of them. When electricity came in, people thought men would be able to see women and young girls in their homes and then would break in.

These are normal reactions, I think, to new technologies, so I guess I would ask what dangers we're concerned about.

Mrs. Karen Vecchio: Fantastic.

Ms. Steeves, part of your work is teaching kids to spot online marketing strategies. What correlation do online marketing strategies have with the actual behaviour and protection of girls online, and how does online marketing adversely affect the girls? Could you share some more ideas on that?

Dr. Valerie Steeves: I might spin this in a bit of a different direction. More and more, kids are aware of these strategies. They know they're not in a private space, and they feel disempowered to do anything about it. I think the disconnect is between how they perceive privacy and protective initiatives and how we've legislated privacy and protective initiatives. The pivot of focus is on non-disclosure. Advocating non-disclosure is completely out of keeping with the way kids think about privacy. Their attitude is that putting something out there doesn't mean anyone should be able to look at it and judge them for it. If they put it out there for their friends, it's meant for their friends. It's not meant for a corporation.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to move to Ms. Malcolmson.

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, NDP): Thank you, Chair, and my thanks to both the witnesses.

I appreciate the work you're doing and the way you're able to convey it.

Ms. Steeves, I'm going to focus on you, because I'm going to try to go down the path of the justice and criminal system response when things go off the rails. You talked about the importance of equal access to free speech, which I appreciate. I'm interested in knowing what you've been seeing and hearing in your studies. When there are threats of rape online and we get to the point where there is an intervention, what's the response of the justice system? I appreciate what you are saying about parental judgment and the importance of being able to let go of that so that kids, girls, and young women can be protected. Are you optimistic about victims being able to get access to protection?

Dr. Valerie Steeves: I'm going to go back to the data. What we hear typically when kids raise these kinds of issues is that they hate the term cyber-bullying. They felt that the term cyber-bullying has really done them a disservice. What they say is, “Call it what it is; it's violence. Call it what it is; it's misogyny and racism.” There's a range of responses, and their concern is that we tend to use a police response all across that range of behaviours.

I'm going to give you a very quick example. Two young women, 13 years of age, are best friends in Toronto. One goes on vacation for March break; one doesn't. They're back at school and they're texting each other and one of them says on a social media platform, “Ha, ha, I'm darker than you”, and they're both sent to the principal's office and accused of racist bullying because they're both Jamaican-Canadian and both happen to be black. They look at that and they say, “That is not cyber-bullying; that's stupid. That was my best friend who got a tan.” Often the school response is tied into bringing in the police officer who works at the school, blah, blah, blah.

They feel there's this whole range of behaviours, with uncivil discourse in the middle, and then serious risks or threats of violence and rape. On the one end they feel we overuse the criminal response, and on the other end they feel we underuse the criminal response. I teach criminal law and I still can't figure out why the police don't think that a rape threat is criminal harassment, because it sure looks like it to me.

It reminds me of years ago when we were trying to respond to domestic violence differently. One of the things we did was to work with police officers and say, “No, actually, you have to respond to that. Nobody gets a free bye with that.” I don't think we've used the tools we have in place very well, and I think we would make progress if we created initiatives that helped us talk with police in particular about how criminal harassment and uttering threats apply to the kinds of trolling comments we see in cyberspace.

● (1620)

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson: Are you seeing both an under-reporting of online violence to young women and girls and also a low rate of police response?

Dr. Valerie Steeves: I have no data about police response or a low rate of police response. I can tell you that when they talk about these incidents, typically they tend to blame themselves.

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson: Police do.

Dr. Valerie Steeves: No, the girls do.

If there's a situation in a school where someone's really attacked and they're getting threats of physical violence and this type of thing, they may tend to blame themselves and say, “Well, you know, I'm just going to go off-line. I'm going to leave that space, because I didn't perform well and now I'm suffering the consequences”. They tend to internalize it.

I don't even think we've got to the point where there's under-reporting. Kids talk about the issues they need help with, but they don't use the same language we do. When we talk about rape threats, I would look at some of the things they describe and think, “Wow, that's a rape threat” they'll go, “No, no, that's just the kind of discourse that I've...”. That's common, and they don't question it.

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson: These complaints are not necessarily getting into the hands of police at all, so they can't be dealt with in the same way the criminal justice system would deal with true violence.

Dr. Valerie Steeves: Yes. I think part of that is also a lack of trust that, if something does go that route, it will be dealt with in a sensitive way. One of the things kids say to us a lot is, “I don't want to tell a teacher because that means the police will be involved, and if the police are involved, I'm going to lose control over the resolution.” Again, think of that arc. We tend to use heavy hammers for coming in and helping kids deal with these situations where they need a certain amount of control over the resolution itself and the definition of the problem.

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson: Are you seeing regional differences in your research on province to province or rural to urban?

Dr. Valerie Steeves: Regionally, I'm drawing on the Young Canadians in a Wired World research project. We tend to go out west, central Canada, and Quebec to get a sense, and then the survey is all across the country. We haven't really found any significant regional differences around cyber-bullying or gender stereotyping and that type of thing, so no.

One of the things we did in eGirls was to work with rural research participants and urban participants because we wanted to get a sense of whether the old saw that nobody has privacy in a small town was true. The biggest difference was that rural girls felt that city girls had different experiences and more freedom and weren't so constrained by stereotypes. When we looked at the data itself, they said the exact same thing, so we didn't find a lot of difference. Again, it goes back to one of the ways that the technology shapes the social problem we're facing; it's homogenized it to a certain extent, because so much of this happens in social media and it's a shared social space for all of them.

● (1625)

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson: That's your time.

The Chair: Now we're going to go to my colleague, Ms. Tassi.

Ms. Filomena Tassi (Hamilton West—Ancaster—Dundas, Lib.): Thank you, ladies, for your presence today and for all the work you're doing in this area. It's so important.

My background is that I have worked as a chaplain in a high school for 20 years, and so I've witnessed first-hand the devastation this causes to young girls. I have to say I'm horrified at the level and the number of occasions and the things that are said. It's shocking.

I would like to ask a couple of questions with respect to the research you have done. I'll start with you, Ms. Steeves.

You talk about creating non-commercialized spaces as an example, and I agree with you on that. One of the things we've done is to take kids on a mission trip to the Dominican Republic where they live and work with the poor with no phones, no technology, nothing. It's amazing what happens with those students in that environment. When your reflections at night are eyeball to eyeball, as opposed to being with someone who is who knows where and is texting on the fly, it's amazing.

Can you give examples in this difficult, complicated world of how you would create those non-commercialized spaces? I'm speaking about educational settings, mostly at the high school level.

Dr. Valerie Steeves: I think the reason we need a national strategy for this is precisely because it's going to involve money. We used to create resources that were shared by schools, and those platforms would support communications for education. In other words, schools used to own their own email accounts. Schools used to own their own technology. We've moved away from that model, and we're now privatizing all of that.

There was a big debate in the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, which is where I am, over Gmail accounts for kids. There was never a discussion about why my kids couldn't use their own email accounts that I purchased for them. The school just said, "no, that's it. We've consented for everybody. You're all going to have Gmail accounts. We're going to require that".

It's similar with things like Turnitin. We're worried about plagiarism, so we're going to make everybody register for Turnitin.

The first time one of my kids was told they had to register for Turnitin, I emailed the school and said, "Have you read their privacy policy? They collect all this data and keep it, and you're associating it with my child's name. I don't consent to this." I never heard back. That's the platform they are using, and there's no acknowledgement that it's a commercial platform.

To a certain extent, I'd like to turn back that process and stop commercializing the school, because the school is a place where children should be able to gather and learn with privacy in a non-commercialized environment.

Ms. Filomena Tassi: The other issue I found that was difficult, and you mentioned it with respect to the trust factor, is that students would come to me because I was the chaplain there. I was a counsellor, or a student advocate, and they would tell things to me they knew would be confidential unless their safety was at stake. The bottom line was that they felt comfortable coming to me, but I knew there would be a lot of students who would bear things, some who would end up taking their own lives because it was so devastating they couldn't deal with it themselves.

How do you balance the trust factor in the relationships with parents—which I get, because they don't want the parent overseeing and watching everything they do—with the safety of the young person? Do you have any input or ideas with respect to how to know when young people are suffering this, or mechanisms we could build in to get help for them, so they can get the help before it's too late?

Dr. Valerie Steeves: We have years of experience through counselling and teaching, and all these professionals in place who actually have social relationships with these kids. We have parents who are seeking help for kids who are having mental health issues as well. It seems to me that's where your solution is going to be. Again, a technological fix is often very awkward and interferes with those relationships.

I was talking to Rena before we started about Safer Schools Together, a new Canadian company. About 126 school boards across the country have bought services from this company. They give the name of every kid in the school, and then a robot program goes out and grabs anything that this child has posted on the Internet and uses algorithms to find out whether or not they're at risk of mental health.

One of the things they're using in England to determine this is whether they've posted emo rock lyrics on social media, which every 13-year-old does at least 12 times a day. It generates a report for the principal and the police. That can't replace those rich experiences and relationships that you describe. Those are where the solutions are.

Typically, when you look at kids at risk for any form of violence, there have been multiple reports to CAS, and there have been multiple attempts to intervene. We're not failing these children because we don't know who they are; we're failing them because we don't have enough money in mental support for kids. We're failing them because we don't take any of their concerns seriously. We throw them out there on the Internet and expect them to navigate this commercialized space all on their own. It seems to me that the technology to that is irrelevant. It's the relationships that matter.

Often when people say, "What can parents do? What is the most protective thing I can do? You don't want me to spy on my kid, but what should I do? I'm terrified." Many parents are. Have dinner with your kids. That is the single most important protective factor, having dinner with your family at night, not in the car on the way to soccer, but actually sitting down.

We need to get off the technological wagon and remember that we have all sorts of experience in dealing with these kinds of problems. What we really need to talk about is where we're putting our resources, into building those technologies, so we can innovate and create wealth, or into providing mental health services for kids, so they can grow and thrive.

● (1630)

Ms. Filomena Tassi: I have a quick question for Ms. Bivens.

In terms of helping change the design, because that's where the problem lies in the software, how do you do that?

Ms. Rena Bivens: We need to change how people are thinking about design, right, and open up that design process. One thing in the literature is a concept called i-design. You design for yourself almost. If most of the designers are white able-bodied men, for instance, then they're going to design for people like that. If they're adults, they're not designing for children.

I'd echo what Valerie is saying. It's brilliant. Technology isn't just some easy fix. We can't look at it that way; however, a lot of technology is there. We can build it better. We can make it different. Depending on what the specific problem is, then yes, we need more mental health counsellors, maybe even peer-to-peer counselling, more talking with people.

The Chair: Thank you both very much for coming. That was amazing. If there are things that, based on the questions, you'd like to send to the committee, I'd invite you to send those comments to the clerk.

Thank you again for joining us.

We're going to suspend for two minutes while we get ready for our second panel.

● (1630)

(Pause)

● (1635)

The Chair: We're back for our second panel.

We're really pleased to have two, I would say, intelligent witnesses with us today. From Battered Women's Support Services in B.C., we have Angela Marie McDougall, executive director; and Rona Amiri, violence prevention coordinator.

By video conference, we have Dee Dooley, youth programs coordinator at the YWCA Halifax location. She's also a recipient of the 2015 Governor General's Award in Commemoration of the Persons Case.

Welcome to all of you and thank you for coming.

We're going to start with 10-minute opening statements.

We'll begin with Angela Marie MacDougall.

Ms. Angela MacDougall (Executive Director, Battered Women's Support Services): Thank you very much for the introduction, and good afternoon, everyone.

Thank you so much to the committee for this opportunity to speak with you this afternoon. It is truly an honour to be here in the beautiful Algonquin territory. We have travelled from Coast Salish territory, where it's just as sunny as here, and we're so glad to be joining you today.

We're really glad to be having this conversation around violence against young women and girls, and talking about cyber-violence against women. We are very interested in this conversation and this work, in part because as an organization we have committed to the work on any violence against women.

I took a moment to revisit the Royal Commission on the Status of Women of Canada, and to think of where we are in 2016, and think about where cyber-violence against women fits into the effort toward addressing women's equality in Canada.

In thinking about cyber-violence against women and girls we, of course, want to recognize and understand the relationship of violence against women generally, how it is ubiquitous, and an epidemic, and endemic, and enshrined, we think, in the very making of Canada as a nation. In unravelling the matter of cyber-violence against women and the implications and manifestations for young women and girls, we then think about it in terms of one thread of multiple threads, that are woven together, and that speak, in a very real way, to the extent to which girls and women can have equality in Canada.

As we heard earlier today, but also in other sessions that the committee has had, we are talking about the Internet. I like to think about the Internet as yet another environment, a new frontier if you will, in which we are certainly experiencing tremendous opportunities for awareness-raising, for connection, for information, for engagement, for community, and for expression. It is also a place where certain problematic aspects of human behaviour are flourishing. It's a challenge for us when we are thinking about how to address cyber-violence against women, recognizing that we are still in a big way wanting to address violence against women in the broader sense. It's always a caution to separate out this thread without looking at the context, and to hold that context.

We have spent some time, certainly at Battered Women's Support Services, looking at media literacy and recognizing the role of media literacy, in terms of advertising and print and news, and the relationship to media, and we want to support young people in having some critical analysis. Through some work we were doing around media literacy work, we ended up speaking with many women, young women, who wanted to talk about their experiences of cyber-violence. We ended up doing some research with women who were accessing our services around cyber-violence against women, and the ways in which they were experiencing violence online, and then also the way that abusive partners were using the online environment to perpetrate more harassment and to inhibit their sense of themselves.

In Vancouver, unfortunately, we've had a rash of sexual assaults by strangers, a number of random sexual assaults that have happened. It has created this level of fear in women throughout the city, and it gives us some very good information about how violence against women and the very nature of it subjugate women as a gender, and create the sense of not being safe in the public environment. That is certainly a piece that we cannot discount in terms of the online environment. When we are seeking to address violence against women, a critical component is recognizing that this is an environment in which these behaviours are flourishing.

● (1640)

There is always an effort, of course, to look at the rule of law and law enforcement when we're talking about these kinds of behaviours. We like to think more broadly in terms of addressing some of these problems, and we don't think we should be focusing all of our efforts on the law. We should be very careful about how much we put on the line to look for community-based responses.

We have some very important and, I think, promising practices that are looking at how to support young people regarding how to navigate this environment, how to bring an element of respect to relationships, how to provide support for survivors, and also how to teach boys and men their responsibility to moderate not only their own behaviour but the behaviour of their peers.

I'd like to turn it over now to my colleague Rona Amiri, who will talk about some of that work.

Ms. Rona Amiri (Violence Prevention Coordinator, Battered Women's Support Services): Thank you.

The three areas we think are the most promising in terms of practice are our core training for men to end violence, our community engagement, and our programs for youth to end violence. Our men ending violence core training is basically core training that's been designed for men, specifically to provide men with sufficient knowledge and analysis around gender violence so that they're able to be positive male leaders within the community.

We also critique well-known men who are doing this work. It's important to make sure they're staying on track and they are getting evaluations from women's organizations and women who are doing this work.

Through our community engagement program, basically we engage different communities like the Downtown Eastside in Vancouver and different first nations communities. This is kind of a long-term engagement with a process that includes training, raising awareness, prevention, and intervention.

Lastly, I'd just like to speak to our youth ending violence program, because that is the program that I coordinate. Youth ending violence is basically a violence prevention program. It's peer-led, so youth facilitate workshops for youth on dating violence, gender violence, and cyber-violence. Activities are hands-on. We do group work. They do a lot of learning of definitions and that kind of stuff. This is really important because often, I think it was mentioned earlier, the term bullying is used for gender violence, so it's important to have that gendered analysis.

I speak to teachers when I go into schools, and we know there are very gender-neutral programs right now around dating violence. When we go in there, they thank us because we have some experts who can speak to the topic and it's not just their responsibility. We're looking at gender, which is very important, of course.

I've also had times in workshops when young women have come up to us at the end and said they were experiencing cyber-violence online and they didn't know that wasn't okay or that they could talk to somebody about what was going on. Following that, we were able to provide them with services or connect them with battered women's support services—of course we have a lot of front-line services—as well as connect them with teachers or counsellors in their school so that they were able to know that this is an issue and there are things they can do to stop it or prevent it.

That's been my experience.

● (1645)

The Chair: Thank you very much. That was wonderful.

We're going to go over to Dee Dooley.

You have 10 minutes, and you can start.

Ms. Dee Dooley (Youth Programs Coordinator, YWCA Halifax): Thank you.

Good afternoon, Madam Chair, honourable committee members, and my brilliant colleagues from the Battered Women's Support Services.

Thank you so much for this invitation to address the Standing Committee on the Status of Women and to discuss an issue that's both deeply personal and professionally concerning, that is, cyber-violence against women and girls.

I remember quite clearly the shift to online and social media-based communication and the rise of the Internet. When I was in sixth grade, ICQ and MSN Messenger became the norm in communication with friends and peers. As well, this opened up a whole new world of access. It also became a platform to widely share rumours, gossip, and hateful comments with such a large audience.

When I was in grade 10, LiveJournal rose in popularity. This platform allowed for increased expression through online journaling and blogging and a place to connect with people with similar interests across the globe, but it also opened the door to public bullying, increased judgment, and intimidation. In the first year of my undergraduate degree, Facebook was launched. Facebook offered a space to connect with peers, share photos, and keep in touch with friends in different places around the world, but Facebook continues to lead to increased breaches of privacy and the failure to take reports of harassment and violence seriously.

The Internet and social media present a very complicated landscape for young people to navigate. While advances in technology offer extended opportunities to engage with the world, a whole new realm of tools to perpetuate and cover up violence are at the fingertips of every single one of its users.

Cyber-violence and cyber-misogyny are pervasive issues in the technologically advanced culture we live in, but to be quite clear, the patriarchal surveillance of women and girls took place long before the Internet and social media facilitated its ease. Not only do women, trans people, and other marginalized genders live in fear in their homes, workplaces, public spaces, schools, and the institutions meant to protect them, educate them, heal them and deliver justice, now they—we—live in fear in cyberspace too.

Cyberspace is increasingly where people work, shop, connect with each other, play, and learn, and violence and oppression can and do happen there quite often. Much of the violence that happens online is sexualized and rooted in misogynistic gender norms, racism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, and colonial violence. Not surprisingly, cyber violence is often directed to and experienced specifically within the spaces that are created by these populations to speak out against and share their experiences of violence and oppression and social justice advocacy.

My understanding of cyber-violence and cyber-misogyny comes from my work as youth programs coordinator at YWCA Halifax and my involvement with YWCA Canada's Project Shift advisory team. Through this role, I manage Safety NET, a provincial strategy to address cyber-violence against young women and girls. We spoke to over 200 young people and 20 service providers across the province to learn directly from them what violence looks like when it happens online, how we can better support survivors of online violence, and how we can contribute to lasting systemic change.

In the aftermath of Saint Mary's University's rape chants going viral, Dalhousie school of dentistry's “Gentlemen's Club”, and the assault and subsequent death of Rehtaeh Parsons, cyber-violence is a particularly pressing issue for us to address in our region.

Although cyber-violence, particularly against women and girls, is a pervasive problem, it is not well understood by the general public, service providers, and policy-makers. I'm so pleased to share what we have learned from our Safety NET project and promising practices that can help prevent and address online gender-based violence as identified primarily by youth.

I will preface this by saying that radical ideas lead to radical change. To truly address online violence and all forms of gender-based violence, we need to work towards cultural shifts that will fundamentally change the way that we see and the value that is placed on women, trans people, and other marginalized genders.

● (1650)

We need a sustained and long-term investment and true engagement from all stakeholders, including a willingness to change systems that aren't working.

I feel so hopeful that we are on the right track with the federal strategy to address gender-based violence that was launched this summer, and through this committee's study on violence in the lives of women and girls.

Four key recommendations came through the Safety NET needs assessment:

The number one thing that was identified in the province was the need for youth-led cyber-violence education and community programming. This means truly valuing the experiences and perspectives of youth, and young women specifically, and centring these voices in community-based grassroots programming, as well as talking explicitly about the systemic issues that drive cyber-violence.

In my opinion, much of cyber-violence education is failing specifically because it does not do these things. Young people need the space to discuss and learn among themselves, and teach each other about staying safe online while still actively engaging in the culture and all it has to offer. Public education, awareness, and research about what cyber-violence is specifically, its prevalence, its impacts, and its consequences were also identified as key needs.

Both youth and community partners spoke of the need to work with key stakeholders, especially in justice and education, to develop trauma-informed systems of responses for survivors of cyber-violence. In particular, victim-blaming responses and reactions that advocate for simply disengaging from technology and social media should be avoided because they cause so much harm.

Last, governments and community organizations should work with social media and media-based outlets to develop guidelines and protocols that offer better protection for users. Sustained advocacy that develops buy-in from these companies is a necessary component to building safer online communities.

Again, many thanks for the invitation to engage in this conversation with you about cyber-violence. I look forward to our discussion, and I very much appreciate that online violence is being recognized in such a formal way as an inhibitor to equity for women and girls.

I will end my comments with the sentiment that while the Internet may be an instrument used to maintain and facilitate oppressive violence, it is also a tool that can help us fight against it and advocate for a safer and more empowering world for women and girls in all of their intersecting identities.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Dooley. That was excellent.

We are going to begin our round of questioning with my Liberal friend, Ms. Damoff.

Ms. Pam Damoff (Oakville North—Burlington, Lib.): Thank you. I am going to share my time with Ms. Ludwig.

Thanks to all the witnesses for coming out today and sharing their information.

Ms. Amiri, you have written about how hypersexualization of young women contributes to violence against women. I wonder if you can share some of that information with us, if you don't mind.

Ms. Rona Amiri: Absolutely.

We know that objectification of girls and women can cause violence against them. Once someone is turned into an object, it is easier to be violent towards them. When girls are seen as objectified or hypersexualized, it is much easier to be violent towards them. Part of what we talk about in our workshops is unpacking the media literacy that Angela was speaking to earlier and understanding what that looks like, what it means, and how girls can feel empowered to be sexual without being objectified.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Is that education just with girls, or with girls and boys?

Ms. Rona Amiri: Our groups are mixed-gender. There are boys and girls in the room. The peer facilitators are also mixed-gender.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you.

To our friend in Halifax, Ms. Dooley, I wonder if you could share what tactics you recommend for moderating or mitigating cyber-violence towards young women and girls. When we as a committee are looking at what tactics we could use, do you have any suggestions for us that you've seen work well?

● (1655)

Ms. Dee Dooley: As I mentioned before, the number one thing that came directly from youth recommendations is the need for community-based education. At least in Nova Scotia, there is curriculum that addresses cyber-violence, but a community-based approach is something that they identify as really necessary for their learning. I think creating a safe space that's free of shame is really important. So much of the education that they're receiving around cyber-violence is telling them not to engage with social media and that their behaviours are the problem. I think it's really important to address that the problem is systemic and it's not individual.

I think the root causes need to be addressed. I think this government has done an amazing job on that. I had the privilege of attending some of the consultations this summer, and I think there's a real effort to address the systemic causes of violence. I think that would be a really important tactic. I think long-term and sustainable funding is another thing. As someone who is writing a lot of grant applications for our organization and working with a lot of community partners in similar situations, I know that long-term and sustainable funding is a huge issue.

Our Safety NET project is a two-year project through which we're able to address that issue for a limited time, but what happens after that? Unless we're able to find more funding, we're leaving the youth we're supporting without access to community supports after the project is done.

I think those two things are key issues that many not-for-profits struggle with, not just related to cyber-violence but in all forms of their work addressing oppression.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you.

I'll turn it over to my colleague.

Ms. Karen Ludwig (New Brunswick Southwest, Lib.): Thank you all for an excellent presentation including the ones that we had earlier. Altogether, this is certainly very comprehensive.

Ms. Dooley, my first question is to you. You talked about the systemic challenges around cyber-bullying. I identified three areas and maybe you can help me see if I am heading in the right direction. One is school policies. We tend to have school policies that are one size fits all. If a student comes forward to report cyber-bullying or bullying in the classroom, there is generally one way that the school is accountable and responsible for responding.

Two, you had mentioned curriculum and certainly again, that is typically centralized and not individualized curriculum.

The last area is one I would like to discuss with all of you, and that is budgeting. I know it really doesn't seem to fit in. I'm wondering whether you see that often it is easy to get a line put into a budget for technology in a school curriculum, which I know from being in education for almost twenty-five years, whereas there is no money or very little money put in for mental health or for the general health of students.

I'm wondering if Ms. Dooley could respond to that first, followed by her colleagues here.

Ms. Dee Dooley: Thank you for bringing that up. I think budgeting is actually very closely connected to all of the work we're doing, and I think it has to do with priorities. When policy is being developed and implemented, what are the priorities? Why is allocating funding for technology more important than funding for mental health supports? I think we need to be engaging in a conversation with all the people who are involved, particularly youth. They'll be the first to tell me and you what they need, and I think that, again, that has to do with priorities and with listening to the people who are directly impacted, students in schools and youth who are without the supports they need.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: A recent article in *The Globe and Mail* called “Where to find school bullies? Not where you might expect” actually focused on the background of students. It said, for example, that a study showed conclusively that “more immigrant-heavy schools have a lot less bullying, as reported by students, teachers and parents—especially if more than 20 per cent of the students are foreign-born.”

I live in the east, so I know that we don't have a lot of diversification, but certainly in a city like Vancouver, have you heard anything about ethnicity, race, or background in relation to cyber-bullying or bullying?

● (1700)

Ms. Angela MacDougall: There is always a challenge for us in naming this, but the part around the way that we're stratified as people in Canada is a factor in how violence is then perpetuated and also the impact; there is a stratification around race. That article doesn't surprise me in what we're seeing with immigrant communities. There is a perception, of course, that immigrant communities have more violence and more violence against women. It's not a surprise to me to hear that is not what's being identified now through this article. I think we are dealing with a lot of myths about where the violence is, where the problem behaviours are. There are some very racist underpinnings with that, and this goes back to the making of Canada as a nation. Being colonized by England and France gave us some very clear ideas about the stratification of where people are and how they are viewed.

I like this analysis—

The Chair: I'm sorry, that's more than your time.

Ms. Karen Ludwig: Thank you.

The Chair: We're going over to Ms. Harder.

You can continue the answer if you choose to.

Ms. Rachael Harder (Lethbridge, CPC): My questions have to do more with the legal and the legislative side of things. My background is sociology but at the end of the day we're here as legislators, so that's what I'm going to focus on, if you don't mind.

When I read through the report by your organization on cyber-violence, one of the things you outlined was the need for legal reforms. There is a quote here, “There isn't even a criminal definition of cyber-stalking, the way there is in other countries”. The report goes on to say “this lack of inclusion in the laws has inhibited women's ability to appeal to law enforcement for protection from cyber-violence”.

These statements got me thinking. In your estimation, what legal changes need to take place to empower women to come forward with their stories and to find the legal help they need to have their situations taken care of, to have justice?

Ms. Angela MacDougall: There is value in naming the problem and putting things into the law, and then the challenge is always that it's one thing to write things down and it's another thing to have them implemented and to see them meted out in justice for the woman or girl who makes that report. I know the piece that's so important around the law. We are really challenged in addressing issues of violence against women, and the legal system is still not, in a general sense, able to respond to most instances of violence against women. We see that certainly with sexual violence.

Yes, we absolutely have to have it in law. The challenge then is receiving the reports and investigating and then having a measure of justice through that process. We have to think about it in all aspects. We've had recent cases around sexual violence. We know it is highly under-reported. At our organization young women are experiencing sexual violence in their dating relationships. They're not reporting that to the police, and so even though there is legislation that covers that, it's not being reported.

It's one thing to have things written down in law. It's another thing to have reports taken and to see a meaningful investigation and to have some measure of justice through that process.

Ms. Rachael Harder: Am I understanding you correctly then that we would be better off to be very specific in our terminology rather than using general terminology in the laws that preside over these things?

Ms. Angela MacDougall: I think it would be good to actually name cyber-violence as having legal implications.

Ms. Rachael Harder: Again in the report a recommendation was given, and I'll just read the quote:

> After examining the potential in cybercrime laws, privacy laws and child pornography laws, they conclude that including cyber-violence within violence against women laws would be the most effective direction for legal reform to take.

This is exactly what you're saying right now. I am wondering if you could expand on this a little, just because it was, I believe, an essential part of the report and what came out.

● (1705)

Ms. Angela MacDougall: Certainly. That really came from the participants in the research.

It's about wanting to have your story heard and validated, and to have a measure of justice carried out by an authority figure. When we're dealing with this type of violence, it's an issue of a power imbalance and silencing. It is very validating to have the sense that an authority figure, such as the law or police, believe you and follow through. That recommendation came directly from the participants. Their desire was to have a recognition in law of their experiences, or at least to have an opportunity to access the legal system and for some measure of justice to be served.

Ms. Rachael Harder: Thank you.

Dee, I'd be interested in bringing you in on this conversation with regard to legal wording or terminology. Could you comment on that at all? What is your perspective?

Ms. Dee Dooley: Yes, absolutely. I agree with everything my colleague said. You may be aware that Nova Scotia did try passing legislation to address cyber-violence within the last few years but it was overturned. I think validating women's experiences of online harassment as violence is important.

What happened with that law is that women's experiences of violence were placed lower on a hierarchy than men's right to free speech. I think we really should be clear in the law about what cyber-violence is, the specific manifestations it takes, and how it impacts different communities, so that we can avoid that conflict in the future.

While free speech is important for many reasons, there is a line. At some point it becomes hate speech, which is already in the Criminal Code. It might be great to highlight the ways that cyber-violence and hate speech work together and impact women and girls.

The Chair: We go to Ms. Malcolmson for seven minutes.

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson: Thanks, Chair.

Thanks to both of your organizations on the coasts. You're doing amazing work on the ground that we're really going to benefit from. I applaud, too, your participation in the “Blueprint for Canada’s National Action Plan on Violence Against Women and Girls”. There"s a strong New Democratic Party commitment to push for a national approach.

I'll ask either of you about the underlying causes of violence, which in this case is expressed as cyber-misogyny. I'm interested in your perspective on the network of supports across the whole country, those that get at the root causes of violence—poverty, affordable housing, and so on—as well as the responses, which tend to be provincial. How can we tie those together in the absence of a national approach?

Ms. Dee Dooley: Something I learned this summer through my presence at the consultations on gender-based violence is that there are eight to ten ministries, whether federal or provincial, that include addressing violence against women in their mandate, but there's never an opportunity for them to come together. I think that is a key action that needs to happen. I think that working together and making sure that individuals, communities, and organizations aren't falling through the cracks in terms of the services that they're offering is really important.

I also think, as I've mentioned, that addressing the root causes of violence is vital to our strategies for moving forward. I think that the women's movement and women's organizations have been at the forefront of this work for decades. At least in Halifax and Nova Scotia, there's a strong network of women's organizations working together with limited funding and limited resources, but we're still making sure the work is happening, and we're pushing the agenda to be able to address the root causes of systemic violence within both our provincial and our federal work. I think those two things are going to move that forward.

● (1710)

Ms. Angela MacDougall: Just to echo Ms. Dooley's comments, in Vancouver and in the province of British Columbia, we have a vibrant network of women's organizations as well as community-based organizations that are doing victims service work, and we are also often working across provinces. The web is there. I think we need a national strategy, or work towards a national strategy, in order to continue leveraging these vibrant networks that exist already, and to create opportunities for us to share our promising practices and to share our approaches. The organizations we network with are doing all kinds of incredible change-making work, in training, service provision, and systemic and legal advocacy, and amazing things are happening.

We have the solutions, actually, operating right now. We just need to find ways to scale those up, which, at the end of the day, means trusting the women's organizations that have been doing the work for over 40 years, and using all of us as a resource in such a way that we will both work individually and network and build those networks to be very strong.

We have the solutions. We are doing them in amazing ways already. We need the support to scale those.

Ms. Sheila Malcolmson: Thanks.

Can you tell me a little bit more about your experience again? We have this great east and west coast and we know how strongly you work among the provinces. Can you tell us a little bit about the experience that victims of violence might have in different regions with regard to police responses or school responses? I'm just trying to get a sense of whether you are going to get equal access to protection and justice no matter where you were born in the country.

Ms. Angela MacDougall: I could talk about the police piece right now. We still have a lot to do in terms of working with members of police services across the country. I think municipal police are, in many ways, doing some very interesting work around issues of violence against women and cyber-violence, and that they're hearing from community groups. A challenge of course, is our national police force. I think the RCMP has some challenges, in part because it is a national force, so I would like to separate out the two entities and to recognize that there are some differences there.

I don't know if you want to talk about that school piece.

Ms. Rona Amiri: You can go ahead.

Ms. Angela MacDougall: The other part, I think, is with respect to those girls and young women who are experiencing harm online and also in dating relationships that can then become online aspects of cyber-violence. We want to continue sending that message. I think someone earlier talked about the policies and the challenge with the policy. It is a tough one. We certainly experienced that. Teachers get on a path with the duty-to-report kind of aspects. Of course, nobody's saying those aren't important. I'm always very conscious about those, because if we're going to be relational and if we're focusing strictly on getting to the end game, which is duty to report, then we miss a whole bunch of stuff in-between. What about that girl and what about her community in terms of the youth community at the school, and what about really taking away so much of her power?

That's the part we are dealing with, certainly with dating violence, because we are working with young women who are experiencing dating violence, and then also there are the ways in which the violence has now moved into the online environment. It continues to be a real challenge. Even in our workshops, we really are challenged by teachers who are struggling themselves with trying to understand this issue. Sometimes they insert themselves into the conversation in a way that isn't helpful, but we work with that.

The Chair: We go now to Mr. Fraser for our final seven minutes.

● (1715)

Mr. Sean Fraser (Central Nova, Lib.): Thanks very much. I will be yielding a few minutes to my colleague here.

Thank you to our witnesses. It's excellent that you're here. I very much enjoyed your testimony.

Ms. Dooley, it's good to see you again. I met you briefly at the Governor General's residence when you were here.

I grew up not that long ago but nevertheless in a generation that really made it difficult for young men and boys to show support for feminism, for women's rights. It was not a masculine thing to do, and it was not the cool thing to do.

I was very fascinated, Rona, by your description of the men ending violence program. Is there a way that we could boost public buy-in or tools the federal government has to perhaps make this a more accessible thing for young men and boys?

Ms. Angela MacDougall: I've been doing a lot of the work with the men piece, and it's been actually really encouraging. Yes, we want that. We want to have that conversation in a particular way. We've been able to work with community organizations who have sent all of their male staff to do training. It's been quite fabulous in that way, because we have between two and four days, depending on what's available, and we're able to get into some very important things around male culture, male socialization, and gender socialization, as well as some really important stuff around media literacy and looking at the role of men.

It's a personal experience. There's an exploration of their own social development and their own relationships. We talk about pornography and get a sense of different aspects around media. It's powerful. It's been very effective. We really like that way of working. It's not a quick fix. It's not hashtag. It's not one man coming out and speaking. It is a longer and deeper engagement. We've seen great results so far.

Mr. Sean Fraser: Excellent.

Ms. Dooley, on the role that victim blaming has in our society, is this a problem that may not be particular to young women and girls but that might perhaps be more prevalent when you're dealing with young women and girls?

Anecdotally, I know there was a terrible development in my own community of people sharing private images, without consent, with a map to the communities that women lived in. The public response has been that this is a terrible thing and that the perpetrator is really blameworthy, whereas when something similar happens in a junior high school, there are excuses made for young men, such as, “Oh boys will be boys. They don't know what they're doing, and you shouldn't have put that picture up in the first place.”

Do you find that victim blaming is more prevalent when it comes to young women and girls?

Ms. Dee Dooley: In terms of cyber-violence, that might be the case. Victim blaming is such a prevalent issue for women and girls who are experiencing any form of violence. I do know of older women and seniors who have been victim blamed for their experiences of cyber-violence and non-consensual sharing of images. It really has to do with controlling the sexuality of women and girls. For young women and girls, that might be more highlighted because of their age.

Victim blaming is a common experience for women and girls no matter their age, but it's definitely highlighted and accentuated for young women and girls. That's definitely something I've seen in my work. My work is primarily with young women, those 18 and under. Everyone who comes to me for support around issues of cyber-violence has experienced victim blaming in some way, shape, or form, and very closely tied to the controlling of their sexuality and notions of age, impurity, and shame.

Mr. Sean Fraser: How much time is left?

The Chair: You have two and half a minutes.

Mr. Sean Fraser: I will yield my time to Mr. Serré.

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you, Mr. Fraser.

Thank you for the presentations. I have two questions and I'm not sure if you have time to answer but perhaps you could later.

In a study involving about 36 countries, Canada had the ninth-highest rate of bullying among 13-year-olds. Why do you think that is? Is it an issue of reporting or not reporting of incidents?

The other question is from an aboriginal perspective, with regard to aboriginals living in urban settings and the support that is needed for them there versus in a first nations community. What are some of the strategies around that?

● (1720)

Ms. Rona Amiri: That's a good question. Why is there bullying?

Mr. Marc Serré: Canada had the ninth-highest level.

Ms. Rona Amiri: I don't know. It's hard to say. I can't speak to general bullying, but I can speak to gendered violence, in terms of dating violence and violence against girls and women.

Again, as Angela mentioned earlier, Canada is a country that's built on these things. It has an impact on youth. When we're seeing gender stereotypes and things in the media or when youth watching pornography see violence in pornography, these things become normalized.

When youth are in classrooms, they think this is okay and this is normal behaviour. Young men may they feel they're entitled to girls' or women's bodies, that they have a right to have access to girls and women anytime, whether in school or online. I think that has a big impact. Again, it's about changing our larger ideas around gender and what's okay.

Ms. Angela MacDougall: With respect to indigenous people, and the relationship to urban versus to rural and reserve, I think it would be worth the committee having a specific conversation around violence against young women and girls and hearing witnesses from indigenous communities speak specifically to that, and the relationship to cyber-violence as well. A couple of our board members have been quite vocal, doing lots of work in B.C. around this issue, and thinking a lot about how exploitation and different issues for indigenous girls and women are at play. I think it's very important that we continue to create that space where indigenous people can speak about those experiences, and look for solutions in that way.

The Chair: This has come to an end much too quickly. This has been a terrific session, and I want to thank all of you for your participation.

I want to repeat what I said to our previous witnesses. If things have come to mind as a result of the questions you've heard, or information you want to provide to the committee, please refer it to the clerk, and we would love to hear from you.

Thank you again for coming, and thank you to the committee members.

On Monday, we will be having the Rehtaeh Parsons Society. Leah Parsons will be with us. We will also hear from the RCMP Centre for Youth Crime Prevention along with a couple of other witnesses, so it's going to be an interesting session, and I look forward to seeing you at that time.

The meeting is adjourned.

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