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Chair: Ms. Marilyn Gladu



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• (1115)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC)): Welcome to the 13th meeting of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women.

Thank you for joining us on our study of impacts on women who live in rural communities.

This is just a reminder that before speaking, I will recognize you by name. You can click on the microphone icon to activate your mike. All comments should be addressed through the chair. When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly for the translators. When you're not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

Today we have with us, from the Direct Sellers Association of Canada, Peter Maddox, president. From the Grape Growers of Ontario, we have Debbie Zimmerman, chief executive officer.

They'll each have five minutes to bring opening remarks and then we'll go into rounds of questions.

Mr. Maddox, we'll start with you for five minutes.

Mr. Peter Maddox (President, Direct Sellers Association of Canada): Thank you to the chair and the committee for giving me this opportunity to speak today.

My name is Peter Maddox and I'm the president of the Direct Sellers Association of Canada. The DSA is a national association which was founded in 1954. We have over 70 company and supplier members across Canada. Our members include well-known and respected brands such as Mary Kay cosmetics, Pampered Chef cookware, PartyLite candles, Avon cosmetics, USANA Health Sciences and Cutco knives.

In Canada the direct selling sales channel annually accounts for an estimated \$3.5 billion in retail sales, creates \$1.31 billion in tax contributions and contributes \$1.21 billion in personal revenue to the over one million Canadians who participate as independent sales consultants. Women make up 82% of independent sales consultants and 31% live in rural areas, compared to around 19% of the overall Canadian population.

Direct selling has deep roots in rural Canada. Just last week I was speaking with the general manager of Mary Kay Canada, who spoke proudly about how many of her consultants in rural Newfoundland have seen sales growth and earned vital income during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The success of our member companies and their independent sales consultants in rural Canada over many decades has been due in part to the ways that direct selling helps women overcome challenges created by living outside of large urban centres. These challenges have been often intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and include, first, a lack of access to traditional bricks and mortar retail. When large retailers are not present in communities, direct sellers provide quick access to a wide range of products, as well as high levels of personal and local customer service.

Second, there is lack of employment and earning opportunities for women. While direct selling doesn't replace larger employers, it can provide vital additional income to assist in economic stability for individuals and families. This has been particularly relevant as the pandemic has created new challenges, such as home schooling.

Finally, women can face difficulties in maintaining strong networks due to geographic and social isolation. Products and services sold through the direct sales channel often require some level of personal demonstration, traditionally via sales party events, but more recently through virtual group events on Facebook Live and other digital platforms. This continues to connect people and proves healthy for mental and social well-being.

Due to the challenges faced by women in rural Canada and the opportunity that the direct selling channel presents, DSA Canada submits the following recommendations.

First is around broadband Internet access and digital literacy. The lack of reliable, affordable Internet has been on full display for many communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, many people have been thrust into a world reliant on being digitally savvy for the first time. Without universal access to high-speed communication technology and the requisite skills to make use of it, the direct selling businesses of thousands of independent sales consultants are negatively impacted. This in turn impacts the general economic well-being of rural communities.

The time for action is now. While the government has introduced a rapid response stream under the universal broadband fund, more dollars are needed now to rapidly connect Canadians and provide greater economic opportunities for those in underserved communities. The federal government should also explore new opportunities to provide digital literacy programs to ensure that Canadians, including those in rural and older populations, are able to actively participate in the digital revolution.

Second, we ask that the government continue to consider non-traditional employment relationships and earnings opportunities when developing policies and programs. During the initial rollout of the CERB, it quickly became obvious that it was developed with traditional employer-employee relationships in mind, without considering people like freelancers, seasonal workers and our own independent sales consultants. These roles are often filled by women and those in rural Canada. To the government's credit, after conversations with numerous groups, including ours, the CERB program was modified to overcome some of its early limitations.

We hope that in future, the development of support programs can be viewed through a lens that considers all Canadians and employment types, particularly those in non-traditional roles. DSA Canada has significant knowledge that can assist in understanding the full spectrum of Canadian workers.

The direct selling industry plays an important, but often unsung, role in the growth of the Canadian economy. We look forward to continuing to work with the federal government to ensure that this mutually beneficial relationship continues.

Thank you, and I welcome your questions.

• (1120)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Ms. Zimmerman for five minutes.

Ms. Debbie Zimmerman (Chief Executive Officer, Grape Growers of Ontario): Thank you. Good morning, everyone. I'm delighted to be here today.

I want to start out by saying that this subject often feels like Groundhog Day. I hope the irony is not lost on anyone, recognizing today is just that, with the groundhog actually seeing its shadow. It feels like the same conversation with little change.

There's long been a wage and employment gap between men and women in Canada. I draw your attention to a recent article in the *Globe and Mail*. It's a wonderful story on the power gap. It was well researched over two years. I urge you to read it.

The Niagara region is no exception, where women have fewer employment opportunities, because, oddly enough, the retail sector, which is the top employer in the Niagara region, employs more women who are paid less for the same work than their male counterparts.

The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has served to really exacerbate these gaps, particularly in Niagara. As Canada looks forward to an economic recovery after a broad-based vaccination for the public, the federal government must consider these inequities and realize that women are already being left behind.

I'd like you to consider some of these very basic facts. Before the pandemic, women in Niagara were already paid drastically less than their male counterparts across most sectors of the economy. In 2015, the most recent year, this kind of data is available. We can see the pay gap in action and the source is StatsCan, for your review.

In sales, for example, the median income for men was \$57,000 and \$28,000 for women. In trades and transportation it was \$54,000 for men and \$37,000 for women. In business and finance, men earned \$56,000, while women earned \$45,000. The trend is the same in education, government, social services and health care. The average salary in Niagara is \$38,000 for men and \$27,000 for women.

This is not just a fairness issue, although it is one, and not just an issue of gender bias. This is a critical social issue, where the gender gap plays an important role in poverty, and the pandemic has obviously highlighted this for many women.

In the part of Niagara where I live, which is semi-rural—I'll call it west Niagara—women make up a full 57% of those living on or below the income cut-off for families of four. This data is using what I'll say is an example of west Niagara or west Lincoln. In addition, women face the change and challenge of access to broadband Internet. That was mentioned as a huge concern. The other problem we have, obviously, being in rural Ontario, is transit and social supports.

For context, for a family of four, the low-income cut-off in this region is \$30,000 and \$16,000 for a single person. Keep in mind, the context of women being paid less than men. Even at these meagre wage levels, women are more likely than men to head the household of a single-parent home, and more than likely to be the primary caregiver for children and elderly parents alike. Contextually, this means there's a large number of women living on or below the poverty line who have to care for children, grandchildren and parents.

What has the COVID-19 pandemic done to the situation? It has made that gap wider and the situation of women worse. If you look at Niagara back in February 2020, in the early days of the pandemic, according to StatsCan, the employment rate was 56% for men and 54.5% for women. As the pandemic rolled on and the economic crisis deepened, the gap grew even wider. In March the rate was 54% for men and 50% for women. In April it was 51% for men and 46% for women. In May it was 49% for men and only 43% for women.

The economic rebound happened slightly over the summer, but mostly for men. In June and July the employment rate was 50.5% and 53.3% for men, respectively, but remained at 43% for women.

• (1125)

By September the rate for men had climbed to 55%, but for women it was only 49%. In other words, as jobs are coming back, they are coming back in fewer numbers for women and rather more for men. These trends have been—

The Chair: I'm sorry. You're out of time. We'll have to cover the rest in our questions.

Ms. Debbie Zimmerman: Thank you.

The Chair: We're going into our first round of questions. Each person will have six minutes. To help you stay on track, when there is one minute left you will get this card.

We will start with Ms. Sahota for six minutes.

Ms. Jag Sahota (Calgary Skyview, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Witnesses, thank you to both of you for your time and your presentations. You both touched on broadband access today. My questions will be in regard to that.

The House of Commons Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology noted in its April 2018 report on broadband connectivity in rural Canada that broadband service is significantly less available in rural areas than in urban areas. The committee suggested that this digital divide prevents Canadians in rural and remote areas from participating in the digital economy and exacerbates the challenges those areas already face.

This question is for both of you. How does the digital divide exclude individuals living in rural areas from the digital economy?

Mr. Peter Maddox: I'm happy to go first, if that's okay.

Historically, the direct selling industry was people either going door to door selling things or selling things via home parties, those sorts of things. Over the last 10 to 20 years it's definitely evolved into more of a digital business. That obviously has sped up very quickly due to COVID-19. Basically, for all of our member companies now, doing home parties is not a thing. They're doing all their selling...whether it's apps or desktops. They're taking and sending orders, doing customer service, tracking orders. If they don't have access to good and affordable Internet, then that basically takes away that opportunity from most people.

I live in Toronto and I have enough trouble with Internet on a lot of days. I can only imagine what it's like if you're still on dial-up or on a lower level of Internet. I was speaking to a rep from Avon earlier this week. She works in a lot of indigenous communities in B.C. She said it's basically impossible to do business there both from an order-taking perspective but also in terms of payments because they do all of them now through digital banking, and even that becomes very hard. It's definitely a challenge, and much more so in rural areas and for people in the community who are older and still want to make some income through something like direct selling but do not have the requisite digital skills to be able to do that.

I think there's a huge opportunity in terms of economic activity being lost. It needs to be seen as an investment rather than a cost.

Ms. Debbie Zimmerman: I think it's fundamental. If you look at rural Canada and the access to a broadband network, you see it's not available in most communities. I think it's changing. Add the complexity of the pandemic on top of this, where single-parent families are usually headed by women. They're trying to now manage their children for home-schooling as well.

I think what's important is that it's an economic opportunity through retraining. Those opportunities can lift women from where they are, seen as being at an impoverished level, and moving them up to getting some further education. It's a huge opportunity if we take it as a country, not as an individual province. I think it needs that broader direction from a federal strategy rather than a provincial strategy, because it's quite piecemeal right now across the province of Ontario for access to broadband.

In particular, I would say it's not an issue just for women; it's a family issue, especially as you have children who are schooled at home right now.

• (1130)

Ms. Jag Sahota: To build on that, Ms. Zimmerman, perhaps you could provide some thoughts on my next question.

How, if at all, does the digital divide affect progress towards gender equality in Canada and in rural areas in particular?

Ms. Debbie Zimmerman: I touched on it. It's that access to education. When you can't do the traditional type of education by being in a classroom, the opportunity is there to do that working around other things. In particular, if you're having to work and then come home, you're less likely to be going back out to school. I think that type of education is no longer going to be the norm. There will be more online learning. I think that dynamic will change women's lives forever, if they get that opportunity to access good, basic education.

Ms. Jag Sahota: Is there a gender gap in the digital divide? You both hinted at that. Women run these businesses from home, so there seems to be. I'm wondering if you can build on that a bit.

Mr. Peter Maddox: For us, definitely. As I mentioned, our sellers are 82% women, and that's largely who we deal with in the market we're working with. In Canada, the weight of home responsibilities overwhelmingly falls on women. They have all these other things that need to happen during the day, whether that's home teaching, household chores, or other jobs they're doing. They may be doing two or three jobs to make ends meet. Direct selling might be part of that. To find time to access digital literacy training or to research broadband Internet and the best way for them to connect is just incredibly complicated.

There are some programs by province right now for digital literacy, and I think they're very important, but it's very scattergun. It's hard to go online and find one in your region that teaches. I suspect we would like the federal government to develop a portal where someone can find what's in their region. I don't think there's a need for the federal—

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

Mr. Peter Maddox: Okay.

The Chair: Now we're going to Ms. Zahid for six minutes.

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to both the witnesses for appearing before the committee today. My first question will be for Mr. Maddox.

As you know, our government has made investing in rural broadband a key priority, launching a \$1.75-billion universal broadband fund with the goal of connecting 98% of Canadians to high-speed Internet by 2026, and all Canadians by 2030. We have certainly seen during our virtual Parliament how challenging it can be for our rural and remote colleagues to participate.

Could you please discuss how important reliable broadband access is to the direct sellers you represent, many of whom are women, and how it's crucial to enabling women to gain this independent income source?

Mr. Peter Maddox: It's basically their business. If they can't access the Internet, then their businesses decline significantly because that is how they do their business.

I want to point out that our member companies themselves do a lot of this training with their consultants. When someone signs up as a direct selling consultant, it's a very low investment for them, but the company still wants them to succeed, so they do a lot of digital training that's very specific to direct selling. They teach them how to use social media to promote themselves and to promote their products, and how to do things like Facebook Live. But once again, that's very difficult without access to the tools to be able to do that. As we've seen, even for an institution as grand as the Parliament of Canada, there are sometimes issues in how we all connect. You can only imagine if you're in the Northwest Territories and you're trying to connect with people over quite a large region, and they have all sorts of different Internet connectivities. It creates difficulties. As I mentioned before, it takes away an economic opportunity that should be for all.

• (1135)

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Yes. Now the advertisement will be done mostly through social media campaigns. I think that will also be very crucial in what and how they can sell, so that's important.

Ms. Zimmerman, how important is broadband access to your growers when it comes to production, marketing, selling and other aspects of their business? Can you comment on that also?

Ms. Debbie Zimmerman: It's a critical component of what we do because much of our work is done in a very technical way. We collect data for our production, for our growers, so it's very important. We don't have access. We're just starting to get high-speed Internet in Niagara, believe it or not, but it's spotty at best, and we're

trying to rectify that for a number of reasons. We need to, as a regional government, just because of the way we operate. Our regional government and our communities need to be doing that.

I want to touch on something that hasn't been mentioned. Why I specifically focused on the gender gap, particularly for women, is that the access to services is so critical. It can and has to be other things besides broadband network. There have to be the social supports, which is child care. Women need to have access to that to be able to take that next step. We don't have a good strategy yet. I don't believe there is a national strategy for child care that has been well implemented over time, and it's something we should be looking at for the future, as well.

I'm not saying the federal government should be responsible for everything, but it should have an integrated partnership with the provincial government to ensure that women have that chance to move up the ladder when they have an opportunity, but a lot of these things are holding them back.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you, Ms. Zimmerman. I know we have gender gaps in many industries.

I have a question for both of you.

Are either of you able to speak to the numbers of visible minority women in your industry? Do you encourage their participation, and are they facing any unique or distinct challenges compared to their peers?

We can maybe start with Mr. Maddox and then go to Ms. Zimmerman.

Mr. Peter Maddox: I'd be happy to answer that.

With our industry, obviously from a purely commercial sense, the more consumers we have and the more sellers we have, the more the industry succeeds. Our member companies, particularly I would say over the last 10 years, have made a very great effort to be inclusive, to encourage people from various immigrant communities or visible minorities to join in with their sales plans.

Sometimes, for cosmetics company, for example, that's as simple as adding some cosmetics that suit different ethnicities. That's very important for them. Particularly, for some of our companies in B.C., they do a lot of work in the Chinese community in Cantonese and Mandarin to appeal to that community.

It's definitely been, as I mentioned, from a commercial perspective, something that's very important, and that's reflected in the companies themselves—the home offices. Traditionally with a lot of our companies, even though they marketed to women, they were run by men. We see more and more that now they're mostly run by women. I visit those companies, and I also see that they're very diverse.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: I'm running out of time, so maybe Ms. Zimmerman can also comment.

Mr. Peter Maddox: I apologize.

The Chair: You're actually out of time.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Larouche, you have six minutes.

Ms. Andréanne Larouche (Shefford, BQ): My sincere thanks to the two witnesses for coming here today.

Ms. Zimmerman and Mr. Maddox, you confirm that the crisis has aggravated the problems of poverty among women. That confirms to me that the economic recovery must be feminist, in the sense that measures will have to be specifically targeted to women in order to get them out of the precarious financial situation in which the pandemic has placed them.

Internet access is the subject of debate at a number of committees here at the moment, such as the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology. You both raised the issue.

I'd first like to hear from Mr. Maddox and then from Ms. Zimmerman, if she has anything to add. Have either of you heard any mention of the value that would be added to the economy if the Internet was accessible in every part of the country? Have you estimated that?

What disparity does it create? Do you have any figures about it? What does it represent in economic value?

• (1140)

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Maddox: I do not have that information. Unfortunately, it's very hard to calculate. I would suspect, for our industry, it's in the hundreds of millions of dollars in terms of revenue, if not more. It is difficult to get that information.

What I would say, and I will reiterate my point from before, is that this needs to be seen as an investment, not an expense. It's infrastructure, the same as roads and airports and schools and hospitals are infrastructure and they're investments. I think broadband Internet needs to be seen in that same way.

Ms. Debbie Zimmerman: I'm sorry; I didn't get the full translation, but I appreciate the response that....

I had a sense that it was on the economics. My apologies for that.

Again, this broadband network for a country of our size is going to be challenging, but, quite frankly, it's necessary to keep pace with the rest of the world.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Okay.

Ms. Zimmerman, you seem to have broken through a kind of glass ceiling in your field as CEO of your organization. What does that mean for you?

You also talked a lot about the challenges that women in high-level positions are faced with, such as having more tasks to perform with a greater mental burden.

What could you say about that?

[*English*]

Ms. Debbie Zimmerman: Thank you for the question.

I have a lot of bumps on my head. When you're bumping up against the next rung, it's always a bit of a challenge to get to the next one.

It's probably taken me twice as long as any male to get to where I had to go. It's not that I mind that; I would probably just have had this career a lot earlier. However, it's not without sacrifices, for both family and many of the people in your world. You're doing dual duty quite often.

I don't regret. I don't look back. I just want to see change in the future, because we have this wonderful generation we need to set an example for. What disappoints me is that we have not made the progress that we should have made.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: The Secretary-General of the United Nations has deplored the fact that the pandemic could wipe out a number of gains, a number of years of improvement in terms of equality between men and women. So it is something we must focus on.

To wrap up—we could perhaps talk about this again a little later—I imagine that, in remote regions, the opportunities to get into business are a little less common. It is probably more difficult for people to establish themselves, especially because of the problems with the Internet and with transportation in the regions, which can be tougher.

My question is for both of you. Are some business models more appropriate for women? Do they allow them to develop their female entrepreneurial side a little more?

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Maddox: Was that question for me?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: The question goes to you and to Ms. Zimmerman, if she has something to add.

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Maddox: Absolutely.

The genesis of our industry is supporting women, going back a hundred years, at least, in selling makeup and those sorts of things. It has developed around the fact that typically this is not somebody's primary household income. It's something they do on the side. They make a little bit of extra money, whether that's to pay for a vacation or something small like that. A small amount of women do it full time, but it's largely part time.

The great thing about it is that it teaches transferrable skills. By being a direct seller and learning how to overcome some of the challenges it throws out, you're learning how to network, learning how to do accounts and learning how to take and submit orders. Those skills are transferrable to so many other professions and jobs out there. For instance, Karen Vecchio, who was previously on this committee, was a direct seller for PartyLite. I hope she won't mind me saying this, but she suggested that it was a really great step for her in getting her the confidence that led to her being in Parliament. I think that's an example of the power of our industry.

• (1145)

The Chair: That's your time.

Ms. Mathysen, you have six minutes.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses.

Mr. Maddox, of course we have talked about the significant impact that rural broadband has on women in your industry. I know that the movement to social media is key, especially now, but it is overall. While full coverage has been promised by 2030 by this government, it actually can happen much sooner than that. If we could do that in two or three years, which the industry has actually said they can do with the proper push from the federal government, how important would that be to your industry?

I would also like you to address another issue. Your members had campaigned for the inclusion under CERB to be able to earn the \$1,000-a-month minimum. You talked about how a lot of your members are supplementing their income through direct selling. However, there's a lot of talk right now about a universal basic income and how important that could be as a baseline. How would that also support a lot of your members going forward as we come into hard times or just overall?

Mr. Peter Maddox: On the first point, I like to think that broadband Internet should be a huge priority for the government, because it's not just about broadband Internet. It integrates with every part of the economy. It creates opportunities for learning. It creates opportunities for economic activity. I look at best practices from around the world on how it can be scaled up and scaled out very quickly, and there's no silver bullet. Some of it will be done by government, some of it will be done by commercial interests, some of it will be done by satellite and some of it will be done by hard lines. It's all those sorts of things. There's no one answer. The answers are out there, though, if you look at some other countries that have been quite successful at rolling out broadband Internet.

Your second question was around universal basic income. I think if people can be supported in education and just getting to a basic level of living, then it adds so much to their life. It's the same with CERB. There needs to be some sort of scale so that as you earn, perhaps what you get goes down. With CERB it was just one size fits all. Initially, it punished those who... Even if you were earning \$100, you couldn't get the \$2,000. Fortunately, that change was made.

Subsequently, whether it's EI or CERB or some sort of sign-up CERB, I think there needs to be a scalable part of it whereby people

aren't discouraged from earning. That's the last thing you want to do. You want to encourage economic activity. Whether that's universal basic income or some other mechanism, I think that's very important.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: For a lot of studies on universal basic income, of course, they lead to this ability to be freer, to take on that education, to take the time to expand what they do in the future and maybe change away from traditional workplaces to things they want to do to grow. I agree with you on that.

Ms. Zimmerman, you spoke a lot about what we need to do in terms of our recovery in the future. Of course, child care is key, as are things like the universal basic income and affordable housing. You talked a lot, too, about the disparity in the gender gap, the pay equity gap.

Could you talk more about how those programs are needed and the affordability, the accessibility and the universality of those across the board required to actually recover, not just for women but for everyone in our study, but specifically, of course, for women and rural women?

Ms. Debbie Zimmerman: I would say that starting with some of the basic tools that you need to climb out of poverty are those tools of assistance. A basic income is something that I know has been talked about for a long time, and I'm sure we'll have a lot of conversations on that in the future, but access to child care is critical. That's an important role that we can't undermine for parents, but it gives them that good child care. We see what happens when we don't have well-operated long-term care facilities for our seniors. You can see that if we don't... That has been so evident through this pandemic, where there's been a failure to apply the same basic rules to the publicly run facilities and the privately run.

Those are just some of the things that you need, access to those tools, and if it's part of a broader plan, I think everybody would welcome that.

Change is necessary.

• (1150)

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Yes. If there were something provided by the federal government, such as a child care act much like the Canada Health Act, with absolute accessibility and affordability, would that help?

Ms. Debbie Zimmerman: Well, you pointed to other countries. Look to the Scandinavian countries and how they deal with child care. There's no distinguishing factor between what you earn and your access to child care because you pay for it on your income tax. There are a lot of examples out there.

You have to take action. Like I said at the beginning, the end of my comments was going to be that I don't want to be here for another Groundhog Day, because we want to see change, right?

The Chair: That's very good. That's your time.

I think we have the time to do four minutes with the CPC and four minutes with the Liberals.

We'll go to Ms. Sahota for four minutes.

Ms. Jag Sahota: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Zimmerman, you were going to comment on the gender gap and Canada's digital divide and you were cut off—apologies for that—so I'm wondering if you would like to continue on with your answer.

Ms. Debbie Zimmerman: Thank you.

I know that the digital divide for women has been focused on today, but what I said earlier is that you can see the disparity when women don't have access to the tools they need. It's disturbing, because it's not just at the level where there's the pay inequity as well, at every level, and it's unfortunate that we don't take.... For jobs like yours, as MPs, you're all paid equally unless you have a different role within Parliament.

Why can't we apply some of those very basic fundamentals to other jobs that we have across the country? I think the tools are there. It's just that we need to start implementing it, and I really believe it is the federal government's responsibility as the central government to set those standards.

Ms. Jag Sahota: Thank you.

If we have any time left, I'm going to let MP Shin ask the next question.

Ms. Nelly Shin (Port Moody—Coquitlam, CPC): Thank you.

It's a quick question. I'll direct it to you, Mr. Maddox.

It was a pleasure to speak with you last week. Regarding the direct sellers, are there any business expenses that have been added on or have complicated things in terms of things that these women would need for their sales, things that have been truncated, maybe even things like the supply chain not being able to reach them with the products in rural areas? Are there any complications on the business end of things?

Mr. Peter Maddox: Supply chain has definitely been an issue, but that's been an issue for basically everybody in Canada, I think. A lot of our member companies are from the U.S. Some of them ship from within Canada but some ship from the U.S., so that creates difficulties.

On the flip side, I would say for our industry, because people are looking to support their friends and family in business, because people can't go to brick-and-mortar retail, and because people are looking for ways to look after their health—a lot of our members sell nutritional supplements and those sorts of things—it has been a reasonably positive time from the aspect of sales by our business during the pandemic.

A lot of companies say we should move to digital, when they've been kicking the ground about it for years. They've been forced into it and so have other people. That's left a few people behind, but in the main, it's actually been—I hate to say a positive experience when talking about COVID but—a positive experience for a lot of our companies and members in that it has kind of forced them into the future a little bit.

Ms. Nelly Shin: Where are some places for sellers who aren't really Internet savvy to look to for training on that?

Mr. Peter Maddox: There are some private online trainers, but you have to pay for training like that.

As I mentioned, some of our member companies do their own digital training. In some provinces there are online programs through which people can access some level of digital training, but it's fairly generic.

As I mentioned earlier, it's a little bit of a mishmash and that's where I think the federal government can have a role in consolidating even a web page of links to places to go to get training. That would be an excellent start.

• (1155)

The Chair: Excellent.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serré, the last four minutes are yours.

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

[*English*]

Thank you so much to the witnesses especially for the two points on broadband and child care.

I want to go back to you, Mr. Maddox, and to your members.

Please advocate to your members for broadband to go back to their municipalities and go back to the private sector. Obviously broadband is private sector-driven in Canada. It's the investments of the private sector that will drive it, but we need to push the private sector to be investing in rural areas.

I mention that because by doing that, the area will then be eligible for some of the federal programs. I know all of us here have mentioned broadband, which has been mentioned since the 1990s. Of all federal governments, provincial governments, and even minority governments in which the opposition had input on the budgets, no one has made broadband a priority with dollars except our government in budget 2019. We added the \$1.7 billion, which, with the private sector and provinces, will look like about \$6 billion. There are already a lot of communities that have been funded over the last 60 days, so we have to continue advocating on that element. Please continue to do that.

On child care, I will turn to Madam Zimmerman.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Zimmerman, you mentioned a national strategy and the issues that exist between the federal government and the provinces. You mentioned other countries that are federations.

Can you make any specific recommendations to this committee, to tell us how the federal government could work collaboratively with the provinces to provide parents with a solid, high-quality program of childcare assistance?

[English]

Ms. Debbie Zimmerman: You've asked me to comment on your provincial-federal relations, and I'm not sure I can fix those for you.

I would say there are Scandinavian countries that have some good models around child care. They may not have the same make-up between the federal and provincial governments. To take it a step further, I would say that we have differences even in our own country between Quebec and the rest of the provinces in terms of child care. We have distinct differences in the delivery models. I think there are some really good models out there that could be looked at and that we could broaden.

I agree with your thinking on broadband. It is through the private sector and there has been great success with the federal infrastructure program that's offered and is available. I think that's very encouraging.

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you.

If there are any recommendations, please submit them to the national child care panel that's looking at specific recommendations.

Mr. Zimmerman, when you talked about the 31% of women sales consultants being in rural areas compared to 19% of the population overall, when we look at caregiving and parental leave and some of the investments that our government has made, have some of those federal programs helped your members in being able to expand their businesses?

Can you make a few recommendations to enhance them?

Ms. Debbie Zimmerman: Are you talking to me or Peter?

Mr. Marc Serré: Peter and then you.

Mr. Peter Maddox: Every move that helps women in our industry in terms of whether.... I don't know the specifics of the rollout of programs across the provinces, but if women have more time to focus on their businesses because they're not focusing on their kids or other things, then, yes, obviously their businesses succeed. Those are very positive steps for our industry.

Mr. Marc Serré: Ms. Zimmerman.

Ms. Debbie Zimmerman: I would say that the opportunities available for women, because there is such a challenge for them to be able to manoeuvre with these constraints, both financial and not having access to good child care, especially in our region.... I mean, it's spotty at best. Even though we're 12 municipalities within a regional government and we have social services supports, it's still not the best. However, I think it's an opportunity to take a look at it to see how we can come up with some better ideas on how to get access to good child care, not just—

• (1200)

The Chair: Excellent.

Ms. Debbie Zimmerman: Thank you.

The Chair: That's all the time we have for this panel today.

I want to thank you, Mr. Maddox and Ms. Zimmerman, for your testimonies today.

We are going to turn our attention to the second panel on challenges faced by women living in rural communities. We will suspend while we do our sound checks.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for being with us today.

We have today, as individuals, Lorie Johanson and Wendy Rewerts.

Then, from the Central Alberta Victim & Witness Support Society, we have Louise Rellis, administrative and client support.

Each of you will have five minutes to address the committee. Then we'll go into rounds of questions.

We will begin with Lorie for five minutes.

Ms. Lorie Johanson (As an Individual): Thank you, Madam Chair.

It has always been a privilege of mine to be able to live and farm in Alberta, but for the last few years it hasn't been so great since rural crime has really ramped up in our area and our province. I have to say that it's been mentally draining and exhausting to be living and dealing with this, as I've been a victim multiple times. Other members of my family have been as well.

It's terrifying for me to realize that I'm not safe in my own home, yard and country. Like I said, it's exhausting. Our sense of safety and well-being has been taken away by the criminals who think it is their right and entitlement to come into our house, our yard and our property and take whatever they want. The thing that really frustrates me is that a lot of the time they're saying it's their right to be able to do this, but it's not their right to take those things away from me.

The one thing that really bothers me—and it's a question I ask people quite often—is this: How do we get back to where we feel safe in our country, yards, homes and communities? Right now, that doesn't happen.

Sorry.

The Chair: No, that's fine.

Very good.

We'll go then to Ms. Rewerts for five minutes.

Ms. Wendy Rewerts (As an Individual): I totally agree with the last statement. It's exactly what I'm going to be saying. Mine's written out here.

My name is Wendy Rewerts. I'm from Cut Knife, Saskatchewan, a rural community situated in north-central Saskatchewan. I have lived in Saskatchewan all of my life. I'm married and have two sons who are married. They have given us four wonderful grandsons. Together we operate a 15,000 acre grain farm.

Over the years, life in rural areas has become more difficult. Rural crime is the biggest community issue with which we are dealing. It is now a daily worry as to whether we will be able to sleep through the night without someone coming into our yards to see what they can steal. Theft of vehicles, machinery, tools and electronics is a constant worry. Police response time is anywhere from one hour to two days.

Usually these thefts take place after midnight when the RCMP are out on patrol, are alone in the police vehicle and are not allowed to pursue a suspicious vehicle. When we have had to call 911, the dispatchers have no concept of rural areas. We use a legal land description as an address. They have no clue what we're talking about. They want a street address, but we don't live at a street address. Then they want the nature of the issue. When we state that a suspicious vehicle is in our yard, they respond by asking, "How do you know it is suspicious?" This is all taking valuable time away from any chance of catching the culprits. By the time we actually have RCMP notified, the thief is long gone. Should we attempt to follow or confront the thief, we are considered the criminals.

We should have the right to protect our own property. On four different occasions it has been the same vehicle in our yard and no one has been able to stop it. This is to the point of being terrorized.

Many of these criminals are now carrying guns, knives, machetes and who knows what else. This is very unnerving when during busy farm seasons, the women are home alone long into the night. We are nervous when a vehicle drives by slowly, wondering if it is just going by, looking to see if anyone is home, or is it just an innocent person driving by.

The police feel that as long as we have insurance, that is all that is necessary. We now know of people who have had so many insurance claims due to vehicle theft and property theft, they no longer are able to carry insurance. They are considered high risk at no fault of their own.

Our hands are tied. We choose to live in the country because of our farming profession. We do not choose to live here and be terrorized by gun-wielding thieves. This is not a gun issue; it's a crime issue.

If, by chance, the thief is caught and faces charges, the person is either covered under the Young Offenders Act or released, waits to appear before the court, gets a slap on the hand, promises to never do it again and goes home, just to do it all over again.

Living in fear only adds to the sleepless nights, stress and fear of being the victim again. We are law-abiding, taxpaying citizens who are fed up with the lack of support we get from the RCMP and the legal system.

I don't consider where we live as being remote, but it is rural Saskatchewan. We don't have the population of Ontario or other densely populated areas. My nearest neighbour is at least five to six kilometres away. Our nearest detachment is 35 kilometres away. The nearest hospital is 35 kilometres away.

These are some of the issues affecting me and other women living in rural areas of this country. I appreciate the time you have given me to voice my concerns that are having serious consequences on our general and mental health.

Thank you.

● (1205)

The Chair: We will go to Ms. Rellis for five minutes.

Ms. Louise Rellis (Administrative and Client Support, Central Alberta Victim and Witness Support Society): Madam Chair, vice-chairs and committee members, thank you for the invite to speak today on the challenges women in rural communities face.

I am representing Central Alberta Victim & Witness Support Society. We're a non-profit society providing direct support, information and referrals to victims of crime and tragedy. We are housed at the Blackfalds RCMP Detachment. Our organization serves a rural population in central Alberta, including large portions of Red Deer County and Lacombe County, an extensive geography of 2,000 kilometres.

Between August 2019 and August 2020, we provided 2,046 hours of direct victim support, 453 hours of court support, supported 1,226 victims, of whom 361 were victims of bodily emotional trauma due to family violence, and 290 were victims of rural crime, where we are seeing an increase in guns being the weapon of choice. These are our two largest file components.

The more common challenges we see women in our rural communities face are access to shelters and counselling, affordable and accessible child care, affordable housing, affordable transportation, access to food, sustainable and dependable Wi-Fi and Internet infrastructure, and assuredness of their safety at home. Although the current pandemic has increased the organization's capacity to reach more clients by going virtual, the Wi-Fi and Internet infrastructure is not there to support this demand in rural communities. Our vulnerable population often does not have data packages on their cell-phones to enable typical Zoom calls.

Some women in rural communities, and I quote, “feel stigmatized about being a redneck, and not feeling comfortable accessing resources in the city”. It takes a lot of courage to reach out and ask for help. Too often they do not have a choice of where they go to access supports, for example, the food bank. If they need to access the food bank, it has to be a local food bank that services their area, whether it works for them or not.

The vulnerable women in our rural communities are often victimized further when trying to access emergency shelters, for example. They are expected to uproot their lives, after already being traumatized and many times assaulted, to travel to whichever urban centre has the available bed. This has been a huge factor in getting vulnerable women and children out of domestic violence situations. No regard is taken for them in their personal lives and relationships. It is purely a case of, if you need to access an emergency shelter, you must access the one you are sent to by Alberta Works in an urban centre.

Those in rural communities have additional barriers in accessing services only available in urban centres, such as government offices, courthouses or specialized medical services. Many do not have transportation available to enable access, and all services predominantly are only open regular hours.

Rural crime is another major concern for women in our communities. They do not feel safe in their homes and struggle with more and more anxiety when their partners are gone to work or they are home alone in the evenings or nighttime. Their mental health is suffering. Too often, funding and services are routed to larger towns and cities and nothing is available for struggling families in rural Alberta. Many urban organizations receive funding for outreach programs to support those in rural communities, but many times the rural population must travel to those urban centres to access and they are often not adaptable to different challenges in their communities.

There is an inequitable distribution of funding. Rural communities need to build their capacity to support their community members. We need to stop victimizing victims further. Funding needs to be equitable between urban and rural communities. Take, for example, victim service units. Our rural unit is capped at \$150,000 per annum, funded by Justice and the Solicitor General, but up to eight urban victim service units receive double that amount. We cover a larger geographic area and we respond to all calls requesting support. Some urban communities have specialized response teams available, for example, a domestic violence response team and sexual violence response team. Those victim service units don't respond to those calls, domestic or sexual violence, in an urban centre.

The messaging this is portraying to rural women is that they are not valued the same as their urban counterparts. They must endure more challenges to access resources while also having to leave their community to do so. By connecting with the women in our community when they are victims of crime, we assist them in bridging the gap from hurt to hope while strengthening their relationships with our community members and their belief that they are protected, they are seen, they are heard and they are valued. We are often the only connection they have.

We would strongly recommend keeping funds for rural communities in those rural communities themselves. Build their strengths where they are needed most and help them feel safe in their own homes.

Thank you.

• (1210)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to begin our rounds of questioning, six minutes each, starting with Blaine Calkins.

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Red Deer—Lacombe, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses.

Your story is one I've heard dozens and dozens of times in the last number of years. In 2017, Alberta MPs released a report, “Toward a Safer Alberta”, dealing specifically with rural crime, and things don't seem to have gotten any better.

I'll start off with a question for Lorie and Wendy.

Would you say it's local people doing the crimes that you're witnessing and that are affecting your communities, or is it people you don't know or are largely unaware of coming into your areas?

• (1215)

Ms. Lorie Johanson: I submitted a document that basically said the same thing that Mrs. Rewerts said. Because we're stuck between Edmonton and Calgary, we get them from Edmonton and Calgary, and we get them from Red Deer as well. I live about 10 minutes west of Red Deer, so quite often when these guys are on the move, they're coming from Edmonton or from Calgary to Edmonton. They chase them out of Edmonton and they chase them out of Sylvan Lake, and they wind up in my area.

Ms. Wendy Rewerts: I totally agree with what she's saying. It's not always local ones. We're about an hour east of the Alberta border, so you share your criminals with us. Sometimes they cross the border.

A lot of ours as well are coming out of the gangs, out of Lloydminster and North Battleford. I could name more places, but I don't want to be pinpointing names or anything like that. The gangs are the problem right now. They are intimidating the police, and the police don't seem to have the authority they used to have.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: The lack of respect for the police and the rule of law.... It sounds like what's happening is organized crime has figured out—and this is what we've heard numerous times as MPs—that if they go into the rural areas, the response times and RCMP presence.... It's just so much easier.

They've actually set up shops in certain rural communities. They've acquired property, doing chop shops, meth labs and so on. Because of the sparse population that we have in rural areas, instead of having these things set up in a city where you have thousands of homes in the area, you have a handful of homes in the area of some of these organized crime spots in rural Alberta or rural Canada, and you get terrorized over and over again. Would you agree with that statement?

Ms. Wendy Rewerts: Most definitely.

Ms. Lorie Johanson: Yes, I would.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: There are lots of socio-economic issues that can be discussed around this, but one thing that is available to me as a legislator is changing legislation. Would you say there's widespread support in rural areas for changes to the Criminal Code that would result in slowing down or ending the revolving door, as we like to call it, or catch and release, depending on your preferred phrase?

These people are repeat offenders, are they not? You're seeing the same people over and over again, coming back to your communities. You can, in some communities, know them by name. You know that when they're in jail you'll have peace for a little while, and when they're back out you know that you have to be on your guard. As strong women in your communities and in your families, would you support stronger sentences for repeat offenders?

Ms. Wendy Rewerts: Yes, that would help a lot, because it's very true. When you know one has gone into jail for some time, you can breathe a sigh of relief because that one isn't out on the road right now. However, they seem to replace them with someone else who's quite available.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: That's frustrating.

Louise, thank you very much for bringing a wide breadth of issues before the committee today, but I will ask you about rural crime, specifically in central Alberta.

In the time you've been in your role, what have you seen insofar as overall trends are concerned when it comes to rural crime and the need for victim services, particularly for women in the rural community? I know it was mentioned, but I grew up on a farm, and there were many times during harvest or other busy times when dad and I would be out doing something and mom was home alone for

lots of time. Are we seeing a disproportionate effect on women in rural areas?

Ms. Louise Rellis: Yes, definitely, Blaine.

Last year, for rural crime out of our units and files, we saw a 700% increase in the supports we had to give in our community.

Those suspects know exactly when to hit the rural community. They know the farmers. They know when the men are out working. The women are often at home. Women are predominantly the caretakers at home and they're on their own. They have fear when on their own. Guns, as I have mentioned, are increasingly becoming the weapons of choice. We are seeing quite a few machetes, too, but it has been guns that are the increasingly the weapon of choice. The theft of vehicles between one farm to another....

The mental health of our constituents in our rural communities is heartbreaking. When you're speaking, especially to a mom—because she is at home with the kids—she is not just worried about somebody coming, breaking in and taking something. She is worried about her kids' safety. She is worried about her kids being in the wrong place at the wrong time. If they are unfortunately walking out the back door to walk to the garage or the shed or wherever that is, it's an ongoing fear that's building and building, especially with COVID.

Unfortunately, with COVID and with the justice system, too many cases are being.... How can I say this? It's not to say it's run out of court, but because the courthouses are on a reduced capacity, we are seeing so many files not being pursued. It is those repeat offenders who are back. They are repeatedly offending because they know it's—

• (1220)

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

Ms. Louise Rellis: Sorry. Okay.

The Chair: Now we're going to Ms. Hutchings for six minutes. At the one-minute mark, you'll see the yellow card.

Ms. Gudie Hutchings (Long Range Mountains, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

To the witnesses, thank you so much for being here today.

I am an MP from rural Newfoundland. I represent the west coast of Newfoundland and my riding is as big as Switzerland, though it's maybe not as big as those of some who are on this call. I hear the same stories that you do.

In my riding I have nine RCMP detachments and one of the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary. In Newfoundland and Labrador, the RCMP services are contracted by the province, so the province says that they want them to go here and there and do this and that. I hear the same story every day. It's three or four hours between each of the detachments.

In my land mass I have four women's shelters, so it's the same thing.

We are working on a national action plan.

I just want to start with a couple of things first.

Louise, with the incredible work you do in your organization, have you ever applied for federal funding for your society?

Ms. Louise Rellis: In our society the funding goes through our executive director. She applies for all of our funding, so I can't speak to knowing what funding is applied for exactly, other than that Justice and Solicitor General funds our core organization.

Ms. Gudie Hutchings: Funds have been allocated, especially since COVID-19. There were \$100 million put in emergency response to go to shelters—to over 1,500 organizations—to help them do this important work during the pandemic.

I am going to look off-line and get back to you, or someone will, to find out if you have or haven't and where you need to apply.

Ms. Louise Rellis: Thank you very much.

Ms. Gudie Hutchings: It's my pleasure, my friend.

What I am hearing here I am also hearing in rural Newfoundland, although maybe not to that extent. The RCMP and the authorities tell me that a lot of the crime is based on drugs. It's becoming more and more rampant in the rural areas. The thefts are people stealing to get the funds for drugs and all that.

Would you tell me that you have a terrible drug problem as well in the rural part of the country where you live?

That question is for all of you.

Ms. Louise Rellis: Not to blame it all on COVID, but the drug issue does seem to be increasing. I think it's across the board.

For rural communities it's because it is so easy...in and out. Unfortunately, copper is a high commodity now, too. We're seeing a lot of our industrial areas hit for copper thefts, because once they go to sell it, they don't need to prove it's theirs.

That's another issue that is probably for another day and another conversation, but proof should be requested on selling copper. If there were some kind of legislation implemented for that, it would make it a lot harder for them to get rid of it when they have to prove that it's actually theirs and not stolen.

A lot of it, while it is drugs and gangs.... That's not to say it's all drugs, but it is definitely an ongoing issue, unfortunately.

Ms. Gudie Hutchings: Lorie and Wendy, I forget now which one of you sent that moving document for us to read. I live in rural Newfoundland. I live pretty well 15 minutes from anywhere, and you made me lock my door last night because I was...wow, that can happen anywhere.

When we speak about women in rural areas, how different is it for women in geographic isolation? I'm looking for your answer now. How does that affect the ability of women living in rural areas to access emergency and support services? You mentioned how the RCMP and the police services are so far away, but are there other things as well?

When we talk about connectivity, one thing we've heard in some of the other testimony.... I love to tell this story, and my colleagues

have heard it from me before. My mother always put a quarter in my backpack, long before the days of cellphones, so that if needed, I would have a quarter to make a phone call. Well, we don't have phone booths anymore, so in our work on connecting the country, do we need to have, in communities, areas where women in need, looking for protection, have a community Internet connection that's safe and secure, be it in a town library, a town hall, a women's shelter? Is that important for women in your area?

I'll go to all of you on that.

• (1225)

Ms. Lorie Johanson: I would say yes. The point I'd like to get across, or one of them—and I've had this discussion with Blaine as well—is everybody seems to think that if you're a long way away from a police detachment, you have problems with that. Well, I'm not far away. I'm only four kilometres from my police detachment and quite often we don't get a response out of them.

There needs to be better communication all around for everything, because we really have nowhere to go, nowhere to turn, other than our MPs or our MLAs.

Ms. Wendy Rewerts: I could add to that.

Our cell service in rural Saskatchewan is absolutely horrible. At our farm it's not uncommon to go an hour or more with absolutely no cell service whatsoever. If you're actually at the house, you probably will have a bit of cell service that you can rely on, but it's not reliable at all. If you go five kilometres from our yard, there's no cell service at all.

Ms. Gudie Hutchings: As you may or may not have heard, we're working on a national—

The Chair: Sorry, Gudie, but that's your time.

Ms. Gudie Hutchings: I didn't even get the one-minute warning. Oh, my Lord.

The Chair: No, it came and went.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Larouche, the floor is yours for six minutes.

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Time really does go by very quickly when we have good witnesses with us.

Ms. Rellis, Ms. Rewerts, Ms. Johanson, thank you very much for the testimony you have given us today.

In the constituency of Shefford, which I represent, we can see that the reality is not the same in a larger town located in the centre, as in smaller communities that surround it.

You really caught my attention. Ms. Rellis, you believe that funding for shelters or assistance groups in rural areas is not the same as for those in urban areas. Could you tell us more about those funding disparities?

[English]

Ms. Louise Rellis: Our unit is capped at \$150,000 per annum. That is regardless of how extensively our files have grown over the last number of years.

We are very limited in how we can offer direct support under our mandate until victims' own support systems kick in, so we rely a lot on Alberta Works for our victims when it comes to accessing shelters.

Shelters available to our victims when they ring is where they have to go. We don't even have the capacity to take them. We can get them a taxi, transportation, again through Alberta Works.

That aspect of the funding is.... We have women in rural communities with their kids. Their lives are in the rural communities. The kids go to school there. If they're trying to leave a domestic violence situation, they might go to Calgary, if they live in Lacombe County. That's uprooting everything. That's revictimizing them when they're already going through something that's so traumatic. They're already at a heightened level of anxiety and stress and everything.

To try to streamline the funding, make it equitable, what can we build within communities so that we can help those victims when they need it most and not revictimize them by pulling them away? Yes, their home life is not a safe place because of the domestic violence, but where can we take them that it is not tearing them away from absolutely everything they know?

[Translation]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: You said that you have also noticed an increase in demand. Can we really say that the pandemic has caused much more distress in households? In some cases, there has been a marked increase in cases of domestic violence and referrals to children's aid. In other cases, the opposite is true. In some places, the calls have stopped, perhaps because being locked down with one's aggressor around the clock makes it difficult to report them. I imagine you have noticed some things along those lines.

Am I correct in saying that there has been an increase in cases of domestic violence and that the crisis has also been the trigger in situations where that was not normally the case?

• (1230)

[English]

Ms. Louise Rellis: To be honest, from our perspective, we actually feel a lot of the victims are not contacting us. With the restrictions in place, with so many people out of work, the victims are stuck at home. As you said, they're in isolation or quarantine with their aggressors. They can't contact us. They can't reach out. They can't get that message out there.

We are definitely seeing an increase in calls looking for support, but not wanting charges laid. We're seeing an increase in mental health issues. We are trying our best in our capacity to support them with our recommendations on next steps.

We're seeing that across the board with regard to the rural crime issue and an increase in those files. In our conversations with community members, they're not reporting because they don't see the point. They're not getting the supports they need in their rural communities.

I'm recommending to everyone everywhere to report it. We need to know what's happening. We need to know where it's happening. We need to know how frequently. We are increasingly getting the message that there's no point because there's nothing being done about it.

[Translation]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Loneliness and distress are causing those women to be even more isolated. So, when they are caught in a rural setting, I imagine it takes them longer to seek out assistance.

[English]

Ms. Louise Rellis: They do, but it's taking them longer. They're talking themselves out of reaching out. They're not seeing the support they need in their rural communities, so they say, "What's the point? They can't do anything for me here. I'm not going to get the help I need."

When we do reach out to them, we have so many barriers that we have to try to knock away to build their confidence, and let them know we're here for them in whatever capacity we can help. We are trying to strip away the barriers they have built up as a defence mechanism, as well as their feelings that they're not worth it, because they are not seeing the supports available in their communities.

The Chair: Very good.

We'll go to Ms. Mathysen for six minutes.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Ms. Rellis, I'm truly always moved by the incredible work done by organizations like yours. That hopelessness, that despair, that feeling of not having options and choices is the exact opposite of where we need to be in terms of those supports for women. I'm so grateful for the work you do.

I want to build a bit on what Ms. Hutchings was talking about in terms of that funding. You don't receive federal funding. I would be so grateful to her and her office to know what supports you need, and to see where you need to go for some of that federal funding, if possible.

You also talked about being capped. Why are you capped? I don't understand that.

Ms. Louise Rellis: From my understanding, and as I said, our executive director deals with the funding aspects, so she would have more information on that, but up to two years ago, all victim service units were capped at \$150,000 as a funding grant. It was—

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Provincially.

Ms. Louise Rellis: Yes.

We were continually told that they were trying to access the victims of crime funding. That was changed to what our belief was that victim service units could actually access that funding when it got reconfigured. Two years ago, urban centres were granted twice the amount. They were given \$300,000, while all the other rural units were still capped at that \$150,000 mark.

I have been with the unit five years, and in my role and position with the unit—I started as a volunteer advocate before my position—unfortunately, I have seen the files increase phenomenally. It shocks me as a community member that we're still capped at the same funding amount.

• (1235)

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: As with a lot of the organizations that you work with, I think that you're in the same boat. You rely upon individual donations—

Ms. Louise Rellis: Yes.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: —from fundraisers and so on. That, of course, has been impacted, like so many, by COVID. You're unable to run typical fundraisers.

I assume you've heard that as well from a lot of the organizations that you rely upon—

Ms. Louise Rellis: Yes, I have.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: —or that you work in partnership with.

One of the things that I've been pushing for is—that do receive federal funding or any sort of government support—that there is a fundamental shift away from that project base to a core operational funding model, so that you don't have to shift so much.

Would you be in support of those sorts of solutions? Do you see how that would help? Give examples of how that would help your organization.

Ms. Louise Rellis: Yes, for sure.

I feel that in an equitable funding distribution going out to the rural communities, to those organizations.... Even looking at the history of our budgeting and our funding applications and how much they have grown, our operational cost is greater than what we receive in funding. Looking at that and how much that has built over the years is a clear example of our not getting enough to support the victims we need to support.

The costs of everything have increased all across the board over time. In that sense, the funding should match the increase in costs.

If we knew that we had the core funding to do what our core units can do and then we can have access to the programs, it would be showing the value of what we do as a unit. We are first respon-

ders. We get calls to.... I'm sure you can all imagine what we get called to at times.

However, we are not seeing the worth in what we do. We are seeing, "Okay, you do important work, but you're not worth being paid what your value is." Seeing that is disheartening, you could say, that you have to fight to get what your worth is.

It's not for yourself. It's not personal gain. It's to get out to those people in the communities, and the rural communities especially, to say, "We're here. We've got you. We're not sending you to an urban centre. We're not sending you 50 kilometres somewhere else. We have you right here where you're needed."

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: To shift a little bit, a colleague of mine introduced a private member's bill that would help address domestic violence, which, of course, you also help with and see a great deal of. It would help in terms of making controlling or coercive conduct in those intimate relationships a criminal offence.

In your experience, would you agree that police often lack the ability to intervene in domestic violence cases until it's too late, until something physical has happened?

This type of legislation is something that the federal ombudsman for victims of crime has supported.

Would you and your organization be supportive of this type of legislation? What do you think would specifically help if this type of legislation was enacted?

Ms. Louise Rellis: I, for sure, see that it's something we would get behind.

Touching on officers and domestic violence—and this is in no way to diminish their role or their capacity, and it's human too—they see the hard stuff daily. When they're called to domestic violence and the victim is not openly saying what happened, won't give a statement, they're tied; there's only so much they can do.

It's not to say that they're diminishing the importance in that role. However, when they've seen those accidents where someone is on the side of the road, those workplace accidents, where they've seen a tragic situation and then they're coming to a home where the victim looks okay, she says she's okay and is not making a statement, well, there's not much they can do.

The bruising is on her body. It's not visible. While there's the fear in her voice "help me", trying to break that barrier is just.... The officers don't see that because they have seen so much worse.

Even re-educating and trying to build the capacity, for sure....

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: I keep shifting—

The Chair: I'm sorry. That's the end of your time.

We're going to the second round of questions now, and we'll start with Blaine Calkins for five minutes.

• (1240)

Mr. Blaine Calkins: My goodness, it's my first day at this committee in years and I'm getting all the time. I appreciate that Madam Chair.

I want to go back to Lorie and Wendy.

You both indicated clearly that you've been victimized numerous times; you don't feel safe. If you were to talk to your friends and neighbours in your respective communities, would they have similar experiences to yours? Have they all been victimized as well?

If you took a 10-mile swath all around you in a rural area, what would you say that percentage is? Would you say that most people have been, for lack of a better term, hit by now?

Ms. Lorie Johanson: Thank you for bringing that back.

Yes, because we help run our rural crime watch association, quite often the first email that comes from the RCMP comes to us. Because we're so close, if we took a 10-mile radius, you would have very few people who have not been hit by rural crime at least once. Quite a few people have been hit more often.

Ms. Wendy Rewerts: It's the same in Saskatchewan in our area. In a 10-mile radius, I would say 80% of the residents have been victimized, not only once but on numerous occasions, vehicles being stolen out of their yards and that sort of thing. It's for sure several times.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Roughly and anecdotally, we're looking at an 80% and up victimization rate in your neighbourhood. I'm talking about recently, not 25 years ago.

When I grew up on the farm, I think the biggest threat we had was that maybe someone would pull up to the gas tank—the purple gas—and fill up a car. Very little stuff went missing. That's not the case at all anymore, is it?

Ms. Wendy Rewerts: No. We have security cameras inside the shop building and outside in the yard. We've had video of these culprits coming in, but they're wearing masks or they have their hoods up. They're smart enough to have their backs to where they see the cameras. Therefore, it's of no use to the police when we show it to them. They can't identify anybody.

Ms. Lorie Johanson: As I said in my statement, in our case the first time they came in the house, they just took menial things. However, when they were in the second time and the third time, they were after the big stuff as well as our guns that we use to put down cattle.

They're not just after the fuel anymore. We have had that as well. The second time they were in, they were after the fuel, but they were also standing there with cigarettes, so we're not quite sure how that would have worked out had they gotten the nozzle off the tank.

We find in this area it's more your big things. It's your quads. We use those every day to move our cattle and stuff and to work with our cattle. Here, it's a little of everything, but mainly they're after

our guns and the ammunition for those guns. Ours were hidden in our shop. They had to work in there if they wanted to find it, and they managed to get it.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Isn't that something?

Ms. Lorie Johanson: Yes.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: As a general consensus in your community, notwithstanding my encouragement to report all crimes, what are the barriers to reporting crimes? Are people just throwing up their hands and saying, "What's the point?" How much do you think goes unreported in your area, anecdotally?

Ms. Lorie Johanson: In our area it's a lot. It's the same comment: Nothing gets done, so why bother?

Ms. Wendy Rewerts: It used to be that the first thing you did was call for assistance from the RCMP. However, now it's to the point where people are saying, "What's the point?" It's a waste of time to be sitting on the phone trying to get through to somebody, and the response time is so long.

Mr. Blaine Calkins: You're telling me that very few people are reporting, and Louise has already suggested that there's a 700% increase, which is reported. This tells me that the number of the increases in rural crime must be astronomical. Would you agree with that sentiment?

Ms. Lorie Johanson: Yes.

Ms. Wendy Rewerts: Yes.

It used to be that you hoped for a big snowstorm so the roads were bad; the back roads would be blocked off and they didn't have access to shoot across a field. Now they're coming with four-by-four vehicles and they can plow through those snowbanks. Time of year or time of day doesn't matter to them anymore.

• (1245)

The Chair: All right. That's your time.

We're going to Ms. Dhillon for five minutes.

Ms. Anju Dhillon (Dorval—Lachine—LaSalle, Lib.): Thank you to our witnesses for being here today and giving such important testimony.

Ms. Rellis, to pick up on what you said before, that even when the officers show up at the homes of domestic violence victims, they are not able to have them file a report. Have the officers spoken to you as to whether they've noticed if it's been worse since the pandemic began?

As we all know, and we've heard in testimony, during the pandemic domestic violence has become worse because the perpetrator is in the house with the victim. Is the victim very reticent to give her report because he's there in the background?

Ms. Louise Rellis: Even in the detachment we've seen that conversations with our officers have grown. They do recognize the victims are home with their aggressors so they're coming to us and saying, "We were called to this house and she's not making a statement. She doesn't want to press charges, but we feel there's something going on." They are reaching out, in a sense, when they have the time to. It's not to say that they don't always see the importance, but if they're being called to a more severe situation, it's not that they forget about that client but it's pushed to the back of their mind because they have a Criminal Code situation that they're handling.

We are seeing an increase in those referrals from the officers. We are seeing an increase, for sure, in conversations where it is the women at home and we're seeing an increase in the youth who are suffering from this as well. We have youths at home with mom and with dad, or whoever the aggressor is, and they're stuck in that. Oftentimes, yes, it is the mom who we have to reach out to, but oftentimes the youths are still left there in that home, in that environment, with nobody reaching out to them. As much as we try, our capacity is only so much.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Thank you for that.

I'm going to ask two questions at the same time and also ask, in case we run out of time, if all three witnesses can send their recommendations to ensure that rural issues are reflected in our national action plan.

I'll start with asking you what some of the most innovative and effective ways are that you have seen communities come together in the interests of preventing gender-based violence and supporting survivors and their families.

As you know, throughout the pandemic, the increased reports of domestic violence have been referred to as the pandemic within the pandemic. Our government recognized immediately that we needed to provide additional supports for the organizations that deliver these essential services to women who are fleeing violence. The \$100 million in emergency aid has supported over 100 organizations across Canada. Minister Monsef remains committed with her provincial and territorial partners to deliver a national action plan to end gender-based violence.

What would be your recommendations so that the needs of women in rural communities are reflected in this national action plan?

Thank you so much.

Ms. Louise Rellis: For me, I feel we need an equitable distribution of funding between urban and rural centres. If funding is funnelled more into the urban centres to build the capacities there.... We need more officers. We need more patrols. We need way more officers than we have in our detachments to cover the area.

It always shocks me, the geographic area that our small detachment with our 10-plus officers has to cover on a 24-7 basis. To get from one end to the other.... I think we need to get more officers out there, get boots on the ground, build the conversations within the communities and bring those victims together. We need to say, "We hear you. What can we do for you?" What capacity can we build here, because we have the services. Instead of funneling it to outreach programs in the urban centre, funnel that funding to the rural community.

• (1250)

The Chair: Very good. That's your time.

The Chair: Now we'll go to Madam Larouche for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Anju Dhillon: Okay.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Rellis, I would like to carry on and go back to the obstacles and the defence mechanisms you talked about earlier.

The cases in remote areas are different. In what respect are those cases more difficult? How can you explain that there are more cases in remote areas? Is there a difference in education? Is it because of the lack of housing? What are the disparities that give rise to more cases in rural settings than in urban settings?

[*English*]

Ms. Louise Rellis: Higher cases of rural crime? Is that it?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Are there more cases in remote regions than in urban settings? Could difficulties in education and housing make the problems worse?

[*English*]

Ms. Louise Rellis: In a lot of cases, it is a lack of access. Rural communities have a vast area outside of urban. It's not so much a lack of education—although we have seen, historically, that those in rural communities are less likely to go on to post-secondary education—as it is the barriers that they are faced with when they do try to reach out to services.

Unfortunately, for some reason, different organizations have different geographic areas that they cover, so sometimes one resident in Lacombe County, for example, might reach out to a particular organization, but because of where they are located on a map, that organization does not represent them and they are forwarded on to another.

It's just an increase of barriers, and it's increasing steps that they have to take. A lot of times it's more frustrating and adding more stress to them, they feel, than just putting up with it.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Access to some services is more difficult in remote regions. There is a difference between the health-care available to women in a rural setting and the care provided in an urban setting. It may be because the hospital is further away.

Ms. Johanson may have an opinion on that. She briefly mentioned the hospital.

Can you tell us about the problems of access to healthcare?

[*English*]

The Chair: Unfortunately, that's your time.

We'll go now to Ms. Mathysen for two and half minutes.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Thank you so much.

One of the things that was brought up was the lack of, when you are a victim of crime, access to the proper insurance. Insurance cuts you right off.

While my riding is entirely urban, I grew up in a very rural area. We were targeted because of our... You're off the beaten path; it's not seen as much. We were targeted a few times. It was very frustrating because even though my parents did absolutely everything they needed to do in terms of coverage, alarms and everything, the insurance company still threatened to cut them off.

I know that this is entirely provincial, but would you agree there should be greater regulatory changes or things that must be done for the insurance companies to ensure that they can't do that to further victimize people in rural areas?

Ms. Lorie Johanson: I would say yes. It was stated before that we can't stop a lot of these things that are happening to us. We have no way to stop them. Short of dealing with them so that they're not walking off our property again, we don't have a way to deal with it. If we don't have insurance, then we're on the hook all the time for whatever they're stealing, destroying or whatever. There has to be something that comes along that line.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Do you have anything to add?

Ms. Wendy Rewerts: I'm just going to say that if they take a large item, say a vehicle, it is worth your while to put in a claim and deal with the insurance company. However, a lot of them, when it's tools and that, are smaller items, and your deductible minimum is going to be \$2,500. When it's smaller stuff, those things just go by the wayside. Okay, yes, you were vandalized last night, and they took odd tools and things like that, especially off of a piece of equipment or something; they'll go through the tool box on it and clean it out. Well, you're not even sure what was in there for one thing, so unless you can justify paying the deductible, you don't even use the insurance because that goes against your claim record.

• (1255)

The Chair: That's your time, Ms. Mathysen, and actually, that's the end of our panel time today.

I want to thank the witnesses for giving us a snapshot of what's happening in our nation on rural crime and what women in rural areas are experiencing.

Committee members, we'll be seeing you on Thursday to talk about pay equity and finish our report on the impacts of COVID-19 on women.

Is it the will of the committee to adjourn?

Okay. Thanks so much, and have a great day.

The meeting is adjourned.

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