HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

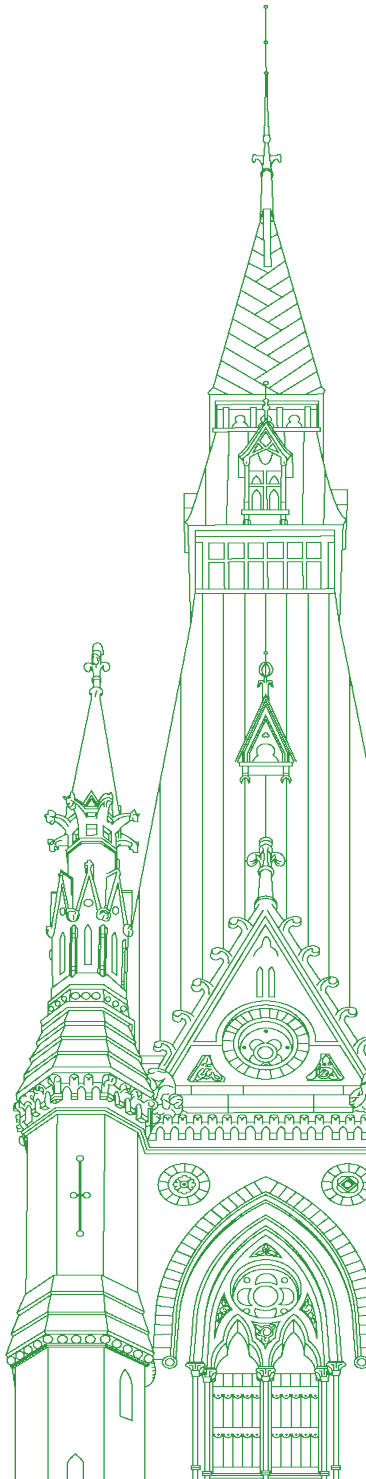
43rd PARLIAMENT, 2nd SESSION

Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 043

Thursday, June 17, 2021



Chair: Mr. Bob Bratina

Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

Thursday, June 17, 2021

● (1105)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Bob Bratina (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.)): Members of the committee, I see that we have quorum. Accordingly, I call this meeting to order.

We will start by acknowledging that in Ottawa, we meet on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin people.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted on April 29, 2021, the committee is meeting to study the sex trafficking of indigenous peoples.

To ensure an orderly meeting, participants may speak and listen in the official language of their choice. At the bottom of your screen—this is important—you will see a globe. By clicking on that globe, you can select either “English” or “French”. When you are speaking, though, you won't have to change back and forth. If you are fluently bilingual, I applaud you, but you need to have the speaker selected on the globe. Speak slowly and clearly, please. When you're not speaking, your microphone should be on mute.

With us today for two hours are several expert witnesses. We have Coralee McGuire-Cyrette, executive director, Ontario Native Women's Association. Appearing as individuals, we have Courtney Sky, research fellow at the Yellowhead Institute, and Cherry Smiley, Ph.D. candidate at Concordia University. We also await Chris Stark, author and researcher.

Witnesses, we typically begin with your presentations of about six minutes, followed by rounds of questioning.

Ms. McGuire-Cyrette, would you like to start, please?

Welcome to the committee. Please go ahead. You have six minutes.

Ms. Coralee McGuire-Cyrette (Executive Director, Ontario Native Women's Association): Good morning, Chair and committee members. My name is Coralee McGuire-Cyrette. I am the executive director of the Ontario Native Women's Association.

This year marks ONWA's 50th anniversary, making us the oldest and largest indigenous women's organization in Canada. With a mandate to address violence against indigenous women, ONWA works on such key safety issues as human trafficking, missing and murdered indigenous women and girls, and child welfare.

Before I begin, I want to acknowledge the bravery, wisdom and leadership of all survivors on this issue, as they are the experts. ONWA has been working with survivors for many years. This experience forms the basis of our recommendations. Survivors and knowledge-holders have reminded us that motherhood is the oldest profession, and this is what we must reclaim in our work.

I'll be framing my presentation today based on three key points. While I do not have the time today to explore them in depth, it's imperative that they are kept in mind while we continue.

First, in 2019 the United Nations released guidelines on combatting child sexual exploitation. They state that a child under the age of 18 can never consent to any form of their own sale, sexual exploitation or sexual abuse, and any presumed consent of a child to exploitative or sexual acts should be considered “null and void”. Additionally, article 35 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that the government has a responsibility to ensure that children are not abducted, sold or trafficked. ONWA advocates that both principles must, without exception, be adhered to.

Second, the impact of colonization has caused the fabric of strong, self-sustaining indigenous communities to be eroded. Indigenous trauma, together with more recent constructs, has fostered conditions of normalized violence towards indigenous women and girls. Direct links have been drawn between the rates of violence that indigenous women continue to face today and the paternalistic policies emerging from colonization. This systemic discrimination has not been addressed adequately in Canada. This leaves indigenous women and girls at a heightened vulnerability to experience victimization, including human trafficking.

Article 18 of the UNDRIP affirms that “Indigenous peoples have the right to participate in decision-making in matters...through representatives chosen by themselves” and to “maintain and develop their own...institutions”. From this, ONWA asserts that it is fundamental that indigenous women have the capacity to participate in a wide range of leadership efforts to support our communities, including leading the prevention, intervention and response to issues that we face.

Third, the COVID-19 pandemic has deepened pre-existing inequalities. By virtue of our gender and our race, we are, as indigenous women and girls, disproportionately experiencing the consequences of COVID-19. This results in an increased risk of indigenous women and girls being targeted for human trafficking, as well as worsening the situation for those already in trafficking situations. The pandemic has underscored that solutions to human trafficking must be part of an equitable COVID-19 recovery plan.

In 2017 we engaged with over 3,360 community members and service providers, including 250 indigenous human trafficking survivors. The storytelling that was heard resulted in the creation of a strategy, titled “Journey to Safe Spaces”, to address this issue.

Survivors taught us what trauma-informed care is and what systems need to be changed. Their intentions were clear. They wanted to protect other indigenous women and girls from trafficking. We also learned that there are often systemic failures that subject indigenous women and children to risk. The relationship between child welfare and human trafficking is complex. In our engagements with survivors, we heard many stories. In some instances, the abuse was not identified by any service provider, and children experienced horrific childhood exploitation. In other instances, sexual exploitation began after child welfare became involved.

Children must be protected from exploitation—period. This will involve systems working together to protect and ensure the safety of our children.

Our report provides clear recommendations for change. All changes must be underpinned by the fact that indigenous women have human rights. The recommendations from survivors provided the basis for our courage for change program, which provides the only long-term, intensive case management and support. Our program supported 176 indigenous women and girls to safely exit human trafficking from 2017 to 2019. Last year, in 2020, we saw a 37% increase in exits.

Before I conclude, I'll highlight five essential recommendations, many of which can be found in ONWA's “Reconciliation with Indigenous Women”. In this report, we recommend actions that are very specific and targeted to end human trafficking while supporting survivors. The missing and murdered indigenous women and girls national action plan does not include our report's recommendations sufficiently.

First, collaborative mechanisms must be put in place to allow for provincial and national data collection on the human trafficking of indigenous women that protects the privacy of survivors who access services with data collected by the legal reform.

Second, sustainable programs and services that address human trafficking survivor-specific needs, including wraparound support and 24-hour services for human trafficking in cities all across the country, must be implemented.

● (1110)

Third, specialized trauma-informed services for survivors who appear in court must be created. When charges are laid against a trafficker, survivor safety must be prioritized throughout the legal process.

Fourth, the federal government needs to clear the records of survivors of any criminal offences for prostitution-related offences and with debt forgiveness for student loans.

Fifth, additional funding is urgently required to address human trafficking well beyond the provision of funds for education-related activities only. This is to include comprehensive human trafficking exiting supports, such as mental health and addictions services, housing, specialized long-term healing and supportive services.

In closing, I encourage the committee to review our “Reconciliation with Indigenous Women” report and our “Journey to Safe Spaces” strategy in full, as they provide a road map to keep indigenous women and girls safe from human trafficking and to the supports needed to rebuild their lives.

Meegwetch.

The Chair: Ms. McGuire-Cyrette, thank you so much for your presentation.

Next we'll go to Ms. Skye from the Yellowhead Institute.

Please go ahead, for up to six minutes.

● (1115)

Ms. Courtney Skye (Research Fellow, Yellowhead Institute, As an Individual): Good morning, committee. Thank you so much for having me here.

My name is Courtney Skye. I'm a research fellow with the Yellowhead Institute, and I am Mohawk Turtle Clan from Six Nations of the Grand River territory.

I want to acknowledge the Algonquin territory, where many of you are sitting, and welcome you virtually to the Haudenosaunee territory, the homeland of my ancestors and our allies.

I want to share Cora's words in acknowledging the families and the women and people who experienced sex exploitation and the reason we're here to gather and discuss today.

My research centres around ending violence and the intersection between ending violence against indigenous women and girls and leadership and governance. I have a particular interest in research around Haudenosaunee governance and invigorating and revitalizing the traditional governance systems that are inherent with indigenous laws and practices. That includes looking at research and multinational approaches.

My work around human trafficking extends back to when I was a policy analyst with the Ontario public service, working on child welfare reform through working with indigenous women's organizations across Ontario and Canada, and then working internationally with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, which looks at multijurisdictional responses and policy frameworks that address all forms of human trafficking. I have a particular interest especially in the interjurisdictional issues that often impact both the legislative changes and the policy changes required to end multiple forms of trafficking.

I think it's important in this conversation to remember that there is a spectrum. While we're here to talk about sex exploitation and trafficking, it's important to remember that there are spectrums of this conversation that often get conflated or misconstrued, both in challenging the legitimacy of sex work as work and also in the many different forms of trafficking that indigenous people may experience, whether it's trafficking for forced labour, trafficking for adoption or other forms of trafficking that are known to be experienced by people who experience the multiple forms of barriers that indigenous people face.

I'm happy to meet with the committee and talk about these issues. If there are any particular topics or areas that would be useful to your study, I am here and anxious to have those conversations.

As always, I want to be mindful of some of the issues that Cora raised as well around some of the failures to implement foundational human rights frameworks that are necessary to address the reason why indigenous women are more vulnerable to different forms of violence, but also that we look towards indigenous communities themselves, their human rights frameworks and their own inherent laws and jurisdictions. They need to be revitalized to address some of the underlying issues that raise a concern around the specific population that we're here to talk about today.

Thank you so much for having me.

The Chair: It's a pleasure to have you here.

I'm going to remind you to have that microphone a little closer when we get to the questions and answers.

I heard you fine. It was a very good presentation. Thank you for that.

We'll go to our Concordia candidate, Cherry Smiley.

Ms. Smiley, please go ahead for up to six minutes.

Ms. Cherry Smiley (Ph.D. Candidate, Concordia University, As an Individual): Thank you for inviting me to speak on this topic and thank you for studying this very difficult issue.

My name is Cherry Smiley. I'm from the Nlaka'pamux Nation in B.C. and the Navajo Nation in the southwestern United States. I'm currently a Ph.D. candidate at Concordia University, where my research works to help end male violence against indigenous women and girls in Canada, including prostitution. I'm the founder of Women's Studies Online, a decolonizing educational platform for research, education and action.

As part of my doctoral project, I did field work in Canada and New Zealand on prostitution. Before beginning the Ph.D. program, I worked at a rape crisis centre and transition house for battered women and their children.

There is, of course, a lot to say. I know that my friends here today, and the others who've spoken before this committee, have given a solid overview of the dire circumstances of indigenous women and girls in Canada related to sexual exploitation.

I will address two topics today. First, I'm going to talk about the difference between sex trafficking, prostitution and sex work. Secondly, I'm going to talk about issues when it comes to doing research on sex trafficking. I'll conclude by making some recommendations.

Language matters. This issue is a controversial and political one. The term “sex work” implies that some women are obligated to provide “sexual services” to men for money. This is not a term I use and I hope most others don't use this term here either.

Janine Benedet has described the difference between prostitution and sex trafficking as follows: Sex trafficking always involves a third party—a trafficker, a pimp or a brothel owner—while prostitution can, but doesn't necessarily involve a third party.

Prostitution and sex trafficking are more similar than they are different. The impacts on women bought and sold are the same. The men who purchase sex acts from these women and girls are the same. The men don't care how she got there.

Secondly, sex work researchers try to make a distinction between chosen sex work and forced sex trafficking. This isn't a realistic or helpful way to look at the issue. What it ends up doing, actually, is harming victims.

Sex work researchers have adopted a very anti-woman and anti-feminist theory of sex trafficking that narrowly constructs a false perfect victim. It is a woman who, for example, may not speak English or who is kept locked to a bed in chains. There is absolutely no doubt that women are sexually exploited in this way. I've met women who have been exploited in that way. In the same way that patriarchy has constructed a false narrative of the perfect rape victim who fights off her rapist in just the right way, or the perfect battered woman who, of course, never goes back to her battering husband, few women, if any, would fit the definition of the perfect sex trafficking victim.

Does this mean that women haven't been sex trafficked? No, it doesn't. This means, actually, that there's a profound and, I would argue, deliberate lack of understanding about male violence against women and a lack of feminist research being conducted on this issue today.

We've already seen what's happened in New Zealand. A lack of understanding about male violence against women has resulted in the decriminalization of men who pimp and buy women. In turn, this means that women who don't very obviously and distinctly label themselves as trafficking victims and accept whatever help comes their way aren't trafficking victims.

Trafficking doesn't exist in New Zealand, according to the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective. This is an outright lie. Sex trafficking absolutely does exist in New Zealand, only the police have less ability to investigate potential cases of trafficking. Cases of sex trafficking are reclassified as family violence, for example, to bolster false claims that decriminalizing men who pimp and purchase sex acts helps women in prostitution. Women and girls who are in prostitution and who have been sex trafficked have no support services available to them. There are no exiting services in New Zealand. Services for women who have been assaulted by men in New Zealand aren't equipped to work with women who have been sex trafficked or prostituted, because they don't understand prostitution as a form of male violence. It's simply a job like any other.

I'll conclude by saying that sex trafficking and prostitution are linked. One of my recommendations, like that of Diane Redsky, is that we keep and improve on the Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act.

● (1120)

Buying sex must remain illegal, and women must not be punished for their prostitution. If PCEPA is repealed, we as a country say that it's okay to purchase that group of women in prostitution over there but not this group of trafficked women over here, and that's just completely unacceptable.

We also need a guaranteed livable income. We saw how quickly the government recognized the economic impact of the pandemic on Canadians and acted accordingly. A guaranteed livable income recognizes the economic impacts of patriarchy on women in Canada and acts accordingly. Women must have more economic options that don't include sucking dicks for 10 bucks.

The third recommendation I'll make is that, while culturally relevant services are essential, what's more essential is that non-indigenous organizations and indigenous organizations have a feminist understanding of the impacts of colonization on indigenous women and girls. There's a whole body of knowledge out there that feminists have created on male violence against women, and this is where we need to start.

Feminism is the only theory, practice and social-political movement that always prioritizes women and girls, and we need to learn about this and put into practice a feminist understanding of sex trafficking and prostitution. Without this understanding, it's too easy to blame and shame women and girls for their prostitution and too easy to let men off the hook for their unacceptable behaviour.

Without this feminist foundation, even culturally relevant services won't be of much service to sex-trafficked women and girls. As my friend Fay Blaney mentioned the other day, we need core funding for autonomous indigenous women's organizations so that we can do this work and do it more easily than we do now—on shoestring budgets or, in my case and in the case of many other women, with no budget at all.

Last, patriarchy and what Adrienne Rich and Carole Pateman call the “male sex right” are the sources of harm in sex trafficking and in prostitution. In addition to preventative programs aimed at girls and women, we need preventative programs aimed at boys and men to stop them from sexualizing women and girls, feeling entitled to do so and exploiting them in the first place.

Sex trafficking and prostitution are issues of sex-based inequality. Men are overwhelmingly the buyers, and women and girls are overwhelmingly the sellers of sex acts, so we need to approach this issue using feminist theory.

My final recommendations are to stop watching porn and perhaps, for example, to propose that MPs and others in government pledge not to pay for sex acts from any women or girl, trafficked or not. Treating all women with respect is a reasonable requirement of leadership in Canada.

Thank you.

● (1125)

The Chair: Thanks very much.

Mr. Clerk, I don't see Chris Stark on the grid yet. If we can get a connection, we will work on it at the time, but right now we're going to move on to a round of questioning.

Witnesses, thank you for the excellent testimony.

Our first round is for six minutes each for Mr. Viersen, Mr. Powlowski, Madam Bérubé, and Rachel Blaney.

Arnold, please go ahead for six minutes.

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Thank you, witnesses, for being here today. I really appreciate your testimony.

Ms. Smiley, perhaps we could just dig into the situation in New Zealand a little bit more. That's really interesting. The situation in New Zealand is similar to Canada's in terms of having a similar kind of basis in law. I'm just wondering how changes in law in New Zealand have affected their first nations communities.

I know that Maori indigenous people account for a percentage of New Zealand's population that is about the same as the percentage within Canada's population of first nations, Inuit and Métis. The correlation is fairly similar, other than the fact that New Zealand is an island nation and not right next to the United States.

I'm just wondering if you can outline a little bit how laws have changed there and what the effect on the indigenous population has been.

Ms. Cherry Smiley: Sure.

I spent almost four months in New Zealand researching prostitution and the changes in the law they had there. They fully decriminalized. They decriminalized women in prostitution, but they also decriminalized the pimps, the men who sell women and the sex buyers.

The thing I noticed most in what I learned in New Zealand was that sex work does work if you're a man who wants to exploit women. It really doesn't work for women. I met with women who had tried five, six, seven times to leave prostitution and they couldn't, because there were no services that recognized the trauma of being in that circumstance day after day after day. You're being penetrated by however many men every day. That's your job. You do it, whether you feel like it or not.

Definitely Maori women have not benefited at all from the decriminalization laws there. There's ample evidence that you're seeing more Maori children or Maori girls entering into street prostitution at a younger age.

I know that there's a challenge coming. A Maori woman and an ally of hers are challenging the prostitution legislation, claiming that the prostitution legislation didn't consult with indigenous women before it was implemented—which they didn't.

In New Zealand, there's this cover.... There are so many people there who are afraid to say anything. They were afraid to speak with me. They were afraid that people were going to find out that they were critical of prostitution, or they had questions or doubts. It was incredibly difficult. You have the government. You have nonprofit organizations. You have women's organizations. Everybody has kind of come together and decided that sex work is work, so there are consequences for women who have doubts about that.

What we hear coming out of New Zealand is overwhelmingly positive, but the reality is not that at all.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Switching to Ms. McGuire-Cyrette, the national hotline for human trafficking victims has been up and running now for a couple of years.

Do you have any experience with it, and has it been achieving its stated goals?

● (1130)

Ms. Coralee McGuire-Cyrette: I don't know much about the hotline. I do know that it's beginning to collect data.

Really, the gap is if a trafficked woman or girl or child need to access services. That's the gap, all across Canada. There are no specialized services across Canada.

ONWA started up one of the first comprehensive exiting programs in Thunder Bay. When we began to do the work, we recognized, in Ontario, that there's a triangle of trafficking indigenous children and youth and women, from Thunder Bay to Toronto to Ottawa. That's the triangle, and that's just across the province.

Women call us all the time from other provinces, and there are no specialized services on the ground to help them. Nobody is reaching out to the youth to help them. The fact that children and youth have an expectation to keep themselves safe is a systemic failure in our communities and in our society.

I echo what my fellow leaders here are saying and speaking to. The violence against indigenous women and children has become so normalized that we need to have this conversation. Really, we need to make sure that this stays illegal, period.

Most trafficking victims are under the age of 18. Those who are over the age of 18 also need support, wherever they're at on the spectrum. There's no fine line between whether you're into prostitution or being trafficked. Each day it definitely does differentiate, but the main point is that we need to have supportive services. We have to change this here in Canada, and there is nothing on the ground.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

That brings us to time.

Mr. Powlowski, for six minutes. Go ahead.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): I'm going to direct my questions to my fellow Thunder Bayan or Thunder Bayite. We don't even know what to call ourselves, unlike Hamiltonians or Torontonians.

Cora, you mentioned the route for sex trafficking: Thunder Bay, Toronto, Ottawa. It leads me to think gangs, right away. How much of this is related to gangs? I know in Thunder Bay we have a lot of gangs: indigenous gangs, Toronto gangs and Ottawa gangs. How much does this problem all swirl around and involve the gangs?

Ms. Coralee McGuire-Cyrette: It's not as much as you would think. It's more around “violence knows no boundaries”. When there is organized criminalized activity involved, they don't have policies to follow or bureaucratic processes that they need to change in order to do different tactics. They're very organized. They read the news. I wouldn't doubt if some in organized crime are watching our testimonies here today in order to figure out the tactics and to come up with new strategies.

There is an organized crime aspect to it, definitely. With indigenous women and girls, there's also the history of colonization that also impacts. Indigenous women and girls have to negotiate their safety for their basic human rights to meet their basic needs. There really is a comprehensive oppression. We have to look at how we stop sexualizing our children and our youth. Where is the sexual violence programming in all of our communities?

If you look at a map of Ontario, and you see where there are sexual predators, it's across the entire province. The #MeToo movement actually stopped in indigenous communities, because it's not safe to talk about and to disclose sexual violence. That's one of the root causes of trafficking, from what we've seen with the women we're working with.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: You're saying it's organized crime, but not necessarily gangs.

Ms. Coralee McGuire-Cyrette: It's everything. When you look at why there are such high rates of trafficking, it's because there are so many different parts of it. It is organized crime. It is gangs. It's families. It's communities. Violence against indigenous women is happening from everyone in society. We have to stop that normalization of people approaching a young child on city transportation, who's just trying to get to and from home, and you have a perpetrator targeting children and youth online. It's one part organized, one part crime and one part our society.

● (1135)

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: How much does this problem also involve drugs, and getting people addicted to drugs, and therefore financially obligated to someone else?

Ms. Coralee McGuire-Cyrette: That's one part of the control. You get what are called "gifts with invisible strings." One part of control is around addiction. Here on the ground, in the city, barrier-free access to mental health and addiction services is very rare. I would say that across the country we're seeing that as another gap. The lack of instant, barrier-free access to the services that they need, including for addiction, makes it very difficult for us to help support exiting.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: The gift is to give someone drugs to get them hooked, and then to pay back they have to do something for whoever is using them. Is that how this works?

Ms. Coralee McGuire-Cyrette: That's one part. Another part is that here in the north there is no transportation. We have to look at transportation services. Women are being trafficked in order to get to a medical appointment, if they're from a northern community, to get into the city. That's another piece of this puzzle.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: This is quite a depressing topic, but I was interested that one of the things you suggested was debt forgiveness for student loans, which certainly suggests that at least some people are getting out of this kind of "work" and getting educated. Can you give us any good stories about people who have managed to transition out into a better life?

Ms. Coralee McGuire-Cyrette: Yes. Prior to the pandemic we started a ride-along with the Thunder Bay police. The part of the ride-along was actually directed to us from survivors. They said that we needed to build a relationship with all services in order to comprehensively address this. In our ride-along, we were actually able to connect with two children who had just gotten onto the streets during that time, and we safely exited them within days of their getting onto the streets. They are now safe.

We know in terms of the recovery time, the healing time, the sooner that we can help with exiting strategies, the sooner the women are able to reclaim their lives. That's the part that's missing here. We need those specialized programs and services, as Ms. Smiley had talked about, which don't exist. You can't just have regular victim services to do this work. They do not work. We need specialized programs and services.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Bérubé. You have six minutes.

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Ms. McGuire-Cyrette.

I'm going to continue along the same lines as Mr. Powlowski. You talked about colonization, systemic discrimination and support for communities.

According to your research, what can we do to better support communities in response to human trafficking?

[*English*]

Ms. Coralee McGuire-Cyrette: We need everything from policies to programs. We need to ensure that the legislation keeps this illegal. We need to protect women and children in our society. We need to say, as a society, as leaders, as Canada, as a community, that this violence is not acceptable, so we need political will and we need local will. We need communities to say, "How are we going to keep indigenous women safe in each of our communities?"

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: You also talked about the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Can you tell us more about those?

[*English*]

Ms. Coralee McGuire-Cyrette: Yes, during COVID-19 not every home was safe to be in, if you had a home. The level of violence increased against indigenous women and girls, and the level of violence in exploiting children and youth also increased during this time. The level of community safety response across Canada wasn't there. There is no safety plan for indigenous women and girls comprehensively across Canada. That's really where we're able to see in the pandemic, for instance, that drug trafficking of indigenous women increased. Because people didn't have access to the usual types of drugs that they use, you've seen an increase in overdoses and increases in deaths due to that.

Who has suffered as a result of that? It is the women and children, those currently being exploited, as well as those being recruited, especially online. When you're looking at online childhood exploitation, everybody's online during this pandemic. We're looking at increasing high-speed Internet to our indigenous communities. We need to build in safety protocols to ensure that, in regard to what they currently don't have access to and they're going to, we protect the children in those communities. We need to make sure that the cyber-services are protecting children.

● (1140)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: My question is for Ms. Smiley, from Concordia University.

You are doing your Ph.D. on violence against women and you created a platform. Can you tell us more about that?

[*English*]

Ms. Cherry Smiley: Yes, I'm just about finished my doctorate, so hopefully I'll be a doctor in the next couple of months, but the platform I founded was actually a response to my experiences in university, coming from an anti-violent frontline worker background, being involved in feminism for the last, I don't know, 15 years and realizing that, in universities, there more places to talk about all kinds of theories and intellectual exercises but fewer places to talk about the material conditions of women's lives.

I created this platform as a way to teach, basically, radical feminist theory so that we can learn from all that knowledge that we've created and we can build on it. We can reject it or we can decide that it's great. We can decide that we like this part and not that part, but we can actually learn that theory before we dismiss it as being irrelevant.

I think there's a lot of really good stuff in there that we can build on, as well as do research on issues of male violence related to indigenous women and to make sure that this research is looking specifically at male violence against indigenous women and girls. Of course, there are other types of violence, but this type of violence is incredibly....

Globally, it's everywhere. It's systemic, but it also has particular histories for indigenous women in Canada. Because of those particular histories, there are particular solutions that we need to be looking at. It's very much keeping the focus on this type of violence and going from there.

The Chair: Thanks, Ms. Smiley.

Your cat is providing a release from tension. It looks so happy there behind you.

Ms. Cherry Smiley: Yes, he's pretty chill.

The Chair: We'll go now to Rachel Blaney.

Rachel, you have six minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to all our witnesses today.

Ms. Skye, I'd like to come to you with my first question. You talked about this in your introduction to us, but could you be more specific about what makes indigenous women and girls more vulnerable to violence? How do those responses impact them and the communities around them?

Ms. Courtney Skye: Thank you for the question.

It's really important that we highlight the specific need to address the specific root causes of violence and colonial violence that indigenous women experience. If you look to some of the reports that have been developed around things like the homicide report that StatsCan produces, and you see a comparative study between aboriginal and non-aboriginal identified women within that study, you see, since 1980, a decrease in the overall number of women who have been killed, while the rate of violence against indigenous women has remained consistent across those years, and as a result, indigenous women represent an increased proportion of the victims.

That type of analysis or that type of information being made available really demonstrates that indigenous women experience different causes of violence and that the interventions that have been developed through feminist theory, through typical responses, haven't actually reached these populations, haven't supported them in the way that they need to be supported and haven't developed the same kind of access to services and supports that indigenous women require.

There are, of course, underlying human rights issues that underpin that. I appreciate that there is a need for a special response from government especially, to consider all the different populations that are impacted and all the different realities of people, to draw out strong policy responses that address, as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples says, the need for special measures in certain circumstances. However, we also have to remember that there's a broad experience related to this issue that needs to be addressed. Any type of widespread legislation or national legislation has to consider and be respectful of many different experiences.

● (1145)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I guess what we heard from other testimony is that there are challenges. Like what you just said, the services aren't quite reaching these communities, so what is the block to that? I'm wondering if you could also talk about the issues that exist between provinces and territories regarding interjurisdictional issues and how those supports might be fragmented for a trafficked person.

Ms. Courtney Skye: Yes, there are real service issues but also legal issues within the Canadian legal structure. Depending on where you live in Canada, different laws apply to you. There's an inherent unjustness in the experiences of Canadians where there are different legal frameworks and different legal recourses available to people, which are different province to province and city to city. That is a product of colonialism. What it also does is it creates a patchwork of services and service access, catchment areas and things like that, which create gaps. Also, there are disproportionate or inappropriate responses to people who may move or just have a need to have regular services and a base level of service from their government.

What happens is that we have certain cities, certain places, that do have more support than others and gaps in other parts of the country. This is why I was so interested in drawing responses or policy knowledge from other parts of the world, because there are jurisdictional issues and border issues that impact programming, laws and services in Canada.

I think we should be looking towards, when we're talking about national frameworks or federal frameworks, this understanding that there are root causes that need to be addressed. If we're concerned about vulnerabilities that result in exploitation, then we should be looking to things like guaranteed basic income, basic health services, a national dental care plan, accessible education and things that are going to make it systemically easier for people to access support and not be put in a situation where there's no other option for them but to submit to exploitation, if that's a concern of this committee.

We also need to have a really strong human-rights framework that upholds people's laws and case law around the right to sell sex.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: This is such a complex issue, and I really appreciate the part you're talking about in terms of basic human rights, but I feel like a lot of Canadians don't understand what people mean when they say indigenous people need basic human rights.

I'm just wondering if you could say what that means for you, Ms. Skye.

Ms. Courtney Skye: For the past year, I've been supporting the Haudenosaunee Confederacy chiefs council, which is the inherent governance structure of the Haudenosaunee people. We look to our laws, our creation stories and the things that make us distinct, and we look towards how our laws set down governance structures.

I look to this federal government, and they have promised a nation-to-nation relationship yet have almost entirely ignored our traditional governance structure the entire time they've been developing laws and policies.

We look towards what it means to have human rights. It means to live under our own laws, our own jurisdictions and our own cultural practices. Without having that kind of respect for what indigenous nations bring to the symphony that is humanity, we're not going to address the governance issues, the structures and the systemic issues that create vulnerability, that create disunity and that create the lack of social cohesion that exists in indigenous communities.

There are really high-level, broad philosophical questions that then begin to impact people's lives on a day-to-day basis, where indigenous women are denied their basic rights and human dignity. This is especially true for me, because I come from a matriarchal culture where our clan mothers, who are the stewards of our land, are continually denied their right to exercise our laws and governance in Canada.

Those are the kinds of human rights we're talking about here. We've fundamentally failed to entrench that type of true nation-to-nation relationship in policy and law, and unless that's going to be addressed, we're going to continue to see indigenous communities that don't have, or are denied, the ability to participate freely in our modern society.

● (1150)

The Chair: Thanks very much.

We're going now to a five-minute round of questioning. We have Mr. Melillo, Mr. Battiste, Madame Bérubé, Ms. Blaney, Mr. Schmale and Adam van Koeverden.

Eric Melillo, would you please go ahead for five minutes?

Mr. Eric Melillo (Kenora, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to say thank you to all of our witnesses who have joined us today and who already have given us so much to think about. I appreciate how honest and open everyone has been in talking about such an important and difficult issue—and the many issues, I should say, around this.

I'll start my questions with you, Ms. McGuire-Cyrette. You mentioned the missing and murdered indigenous women and girls action plan in your opening remarks. I'm from the riding of Kenora, just beside Thunder Bay, and unfortunately this is an issue that is deeply personal for a lot of people in my riding. I don't have the exact figures in front of me, but I have previously cited in the House and in other work that somewhere near half of the identified cases over the past eight years were in the Kenora region alone. It's a very important issue to many in my riding.

You mentioned, if I'm not mistaken, that in your view the action plan seemed to miss some key recommendations and missed the mark a bit. I know that you were pressed for time and weren't able to go into a lot of detail, so if you're able to, I'd appreciate it if you could expand on some of your thoughts on that.

Ms. Coralee McGuire-Cyrette: Yes, definitely. Thank you.

We were looking for the national action plan to speak to indigenous women's safety. That's really what we're speaking about here. There is no investment in indigenous women's safety here in Canada—very limited.

When you're looking at the interconnection between human trafficking and missing and murdered indigenous women and girls, the data tells you that for a large percentage of missing persons cases there's a high degree of probability that they could be trafficking cases. When you're looking at missing children and youth and you're looking at the interconnection between child welfare, missing and murdered indigenous women and girls and human trafficking, there is an intersectionality that goes on there.

What we were looking for from the national inquiry and the national action plan was that data that I believe Courtney spoke to around.... There are the homicide reports. We know for the coroners' reports, for instance, that they've given us their knowledge and recommendations around the fact that, I believe, it was that approximately half of the cases were domestic. The piece with that, which is really important to note, is that those were preventable deaths by having services and programs and having safety plans.

What we were looking for was really to tell the story around “how did the woman die and who killed her?”, that one part of the story, in order to have stronger policies to make sure that it doesn't happen again. The same thing is happening with human trafficking of indigenous women and girls. The root causes go back to colonization. Here in Canada, we sold indigenous children. The selling of indigenous people has a history of colonization here, and it has continued on to today into what we now call human trafficking.

That's part of the issue that we're really looking at. There are two major components where a high level of healing is needed. Indigenous women-specific healing is needed because, as Ms. Smiley spoke to, we're talking about indigenous-specific issues. When we focus on everyone, we focus on no one. When we're talking about safety issues like human trafficking and the missing and murdered, indigenous women's experience in those issues is very unique and, therefore, we need unique solutions.

● (1155)

Mr. Eric Melillo: Thank you very much for that.

I also want to pick up a bit on a similar topic. You've already mentioned in your conversation with Marcus some of the transportation gaps in the north. Many of the communities in my riding are remote communities that are serviced by Thunder Bay, Sioux Lookout or Winnipeg, and many indigenous people, and many indigenous women specifically, of course, have to leave for basic medical care, for job opportunities, for school and for a number of things. Obviously, that puts them in a more vulnerable situation.

I'm not sure how much time you'll have to respond, but if you can talk a bit more about that as well, I'd appreciate it.

Ms. Coralee McGuire-Cyrette: Yes. Thank you.

Something we learned from the national inquiry, from survivors, was for example, when you're looking at the Highway of Tears, when you're looking at Barbara Kentner here locally in Thunder Bay, what it's telling us is that it's not safe to be an indigenous women walking. It's telling us about the lack of safety. With transportation and the Greyhound system, those issues there.... There are no safe systems for transportation across Canada. We need to look at how we are going to address that so that we have safe transportation. That's something that is concrete that we can address. When you are looking at Kenora and that district, what's the safe transportation to get to and from larger centres for medical appointments, for instance? It's not there. It doesn't exist—never mind getting across Canada.

When you're looking at having to hitchhike or at having to be trafficked in order to get to a medical appointment, that's just not acceptable. That's part of that human right to access basic services. We need infrastructure. Safe transportation will address violence against indigenous women.

The Chair: Thanks very much for the reply.

Mr. Battiste, would you please go ahead for five minutes?

Mr. Jaime Battiste (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Yes.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for their testimony.

I'm coming to you from the Eskasoni reserve, a Mi'kmaq community. We have a community of about 5,000.

I don't want to paint all situations with the same brush because I know it varies, but one of the thoughts and one of the things that is noticed by indigenous leadership is that there is a lot of intergenerational trauma that exists currently in our communities from residential schools. This often leads to bad situations at home, and that often leads to people fleeing their home situations. Often, addictions are seen as the main cause of people getting into positions where sexual exploitation is possible.

I know there's more to the story, but is addiction too commonly used as the reason for sexual exploitation? Tell me a little bit about how the basic income guarantee would deter that if addictions are a problem.

Also—just because I know I may only get one question—with regard to funding autonomous women's organizations, which organizations are we looking at funding? Should we be funding the national women's organizations? Are we looking at funding the French centres or the rural support? In my community, we have the Jane Paul Indigenous Women's Resource Centre, which is set up in an urban location. What is the best, most efficient use of the money—the $2.2 billion—that we're putting towards missing and murdered indigenous women?

I want to start off with Ms. Smiley and then go to Ms. Skye, if I can.

● (1200)

Ms. Cherry Smiley: It's an important point you're making about these kinds of connections between addictions and sexual exploitation. What happens a lot is that women are shamed and blamed in both of those circumstances. Engaging in addictions, perhaps as a coping mechanism; maybe because they started smoking crack when they were 10, because it's very normalized and they've grown up around it; drug dealing—these types of things are happening. It is very tied to sexual exploitation so it is true that some women turn to prostitution, of course, because they're in this cycle of addiction. It's also true—I think Cora mentioned earlier—that drugs are often used as a way to placate women, so the pimp will get her addicted to heroin or whatever so that it's easier to control her and make her continue in prostitution.

Women are blamed and shamed for their prostitution, and they're blamed and shamed for their addictions. That's where the connection lies.

When we're talking about services, harm reduction services have a place, of course, but what we see now is that you can go to a safe injection site and stick a needle in your arm in 10 minutes, but you have to wait two or three weeks to go to detox. I think it's so incredibly important that we actually have these services available so that people have what they need when they need it, and that these services are women only. We've heard lots of stories of women actually being targeted by men when they're in detox or recovery houses and being targeted again there for sexual exploitation.

In terms of the organizations that need to be funded, I really think autonomous women's organizations are so important. When you're part of a larger organization that's essentially male-dominated, there's value there for sure, but you are controlled in some ways. There is less ability to speak out on, for example, issues of #MeToo, like Cora was saying.

It's really important that these organizations are autonomous women's organizations. You could do that nationally, regionally, provincially. I think there's a lot of really amazing women doing a lot of really amazing work. The more we have, the more discussions we can have and the better solutions we can come up with.

The Chair: Thanks.

Mr. Battiste, that's your time, but I know you have another segment coming up shortly, so perhaps Ms. McGuire-Cyrette can respond at a later time.

To keep our cycle of questions in order, we'll go to Madame Bérubé now for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Ms. McGuire-Cyrette.

You talked about the relationship with child welfare. Do you know whether child welfare agencies have taken steps to tighten up requirements, to prevent indigenous children in the system from being recruited into the sex industry?

[*English*]

Ms. Coralee McGuire-Cyrette: That's due to a current gap in policy right now in the child welfare legislation, which is typically about looking at the parents, actually looking at the mother specifically, so that's a discriminatory policy. I won't be able to touch on that too much here today—how the files are opened on the mother regardless of who victimizes the child—but here in Ontario, we did recently get some new legislation that looks at tightening up those restrictions and being able to charge perpetrators under the Child and Family Services Act.

The reason that is so critical and important is that then you already have an act that's there to protect and you can charge perpetrators very easily through the system and then the child welfare system is taking care of it. You're not having to rely on children to do testimony and to go through courts of law in order to prove the violence that's happened to them.

Here is an opportunity for us to really look at what child welfare reform really looks like, and a missing component that never really gets brought up is mothers, mothers and parents and fathers and the role there. We're always talking about the jurisdiction over children, yet the original jurisdiction is with the parents. The TRC recommendations on this are that we need to look at how we begin to re-parent.

Getting parenting programs to support parents with their children is a really preventative component there, but definitely within the systems, we need to look at where child welfare has a role and responsibility to play. It's not the only role. We need systems to work together. You need police, child welfare and social services to work together to keep the child safe.

● (1205)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Rachel Blaney, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much, Chair.

Ms. Skye, I want to come back to you. You talked in your presentation about the importance of governance systems, and you just gave an excellent answer on human rights and how those are connected.

Could you talk about governance systems and how they impact the trafficking of persons? You also talked about the trafficking of adoption. I'm just wondering if you could talk about the governance systems, the undermining of those governance systems, and how it relates to the human trafficking today.

Ms. Courtney Skye: This is really important because I think that Canada has really lapsed and not been advancing strong policy around many different forms of trafficking. Oftentimes other jurisdictions in the world have had to enact policy in reaction to Canada's not having strong policy program services legislation, because women from this country are being found in other parts of the world. International organizations have started to have a little bit more well-developed policies or programs.

The Chair: Courtney, could you lift your mike up?

Ms. Courtney Skye: Yes, thank you.

I think it's important to remember. That's why I became involved with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, because they look at many different forms of trafficking and whether it's people who are being trafficked across borders for the purposes of terrorism or children being trafficked for the purposes of adoption. People might consider the child welfare system, as it exists in Canada, which has seen indigenous children continue to be adopted by non-indigenous families and removed from their communities, with that being the only way that they can be placed into what's deemed as an appropriate family, as a form of trafficking. There is also how trafficking has impacted Canada and child trafficking. Specifically, Canada for a long time maintained a program called "home children," where children from Europe were brought to Canada to populate Canada and specifically to populate western provinces in order to bolster the Canadian population, the settler population here. Actually, about 12% of Canadians are descendants from this program.

We need to think about what those historical contextual pieces are, but also the way that their legacy continues to form and shape the policies that we have today, because there's a direct policy law line to that from the legislation that was developed by Canada in the 1800s through the 1920s, which were inherently racist and discriminatory towards indigenous people, with the legacies of the Gradual Civilization Act and such.

● (1210)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Schmale. are you ready for your five minutes? Please go ahead.

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): I most certainly am. Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, for being here today. It is a difficult study, but we appreciate your contributions.

I wanted to talk more about some of the content that was mentioned earlier. I'm going to direct my first batch of questions to Ms. Skye and Ms. Smiley, if I could. I'll let you two decide who would like to go first.

A lot of the conversation that both of you mentioned was in regard to the universal basic income or guaranteed income or whatever you want to call it. To my knowledge, the only country in the world to have that is Iran and that's paid for through subsidies and sales of oil and gas.

Have either of you looked at other potential solutions, such as economic activity and opportunity in some of these communities, rather than a direct payment?

Ms. Courtney Skye: I can start with that.

It's become a misnomer that economic development actually leads to liberation. It actually doesn't. What makes the biggest difference in mobilizing and creating lasting or systemic change for people, and women generally, is political mobilization. That's the catalyst social change draws from in communities, especially within indigenous communities.

Making small investments, the "teaching someone how to fish" kind of examples, don't actually address any of the systemic issues that create multiple barriers to allowing people to work or be self-reliant. We're talking about broad, systemic changes and making space for women and their decision-making, leadership and governance. That is what actually creates lasting social change and creates safety for people. That's what works if you're trying to advance that.

It can't just be limited to socio-economic investments. It has to go much beyond that. Otherwise, it's just solving a small problem perhaps with one family or however many people you can get into a program with small service numbers or one worker limited to so many clients.

Without broader systemic changes, we're not actually going to be able to meet many people's needs and that's what we're trying to do here. We're trying to talk about lifting and supporting all people, which is why something like guaranteed minimum incomes and that kind of thing—providing a safety net—is really important. As a society, we're a very wealthy country where we believe in the value of every person. Every person is valuable and every person deserves dignity regardless of their circumstances.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Wouldn't that ensure the maximum opportunity for all? Would that not help?

Ms. Courtney Skye: You can't just look at it from today moving forward. It has to be contextualized historically.

I'll give you another example from my territory. We had funds as a nation—investments and Indian trust dollars—which is in the Yellowhead report "Cash Back". Our community had around $12 million in 1840. The federal government redirected that fund into a trust for us. Trustees appointed by the Crown misspent about 40% of that trust fund.

By the early 1900s, that entire trust fund was almost depleted to do things like build Osgoode Hall, Toronto City Hall or bridges and infrastructure. It didn't actually go to our community for our investment and our prosperity. It was exploited from the Crown.

We have many generations of people who were not able to have control of their financial resources, who now exist in a state of chronic poverty because Canada used our money to build infrastructure that serves the settler population and doesn't benefit the indigenous population.

Now we have people experiencing poverty who have not been able to participate in the economy and were never able to get the economic prosperity that comes from all of the wealth that was generated over the past years in the industrial era. That's why we need to move forward with thinking about that.

● (1215)

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I get that government is the problem. I believe that "Ottawa knows best" is causing a lot of these problems. I understand that.

I'm saying that if we're creating opportunity for all and the ability to climb the ladder no matter where you are or where you're from, it's ensuring a foundation that allows people to do that. That is kind of the cause of poverty—the fact that in some of these communities "Ottawa knows best"—but we want to ensure that there is equal opportunity for all and that these opportunities are available.

The Chair: That brings us to time, but perhaps you can pick that up, because we have more opportunities coming along.

Adam van Koeverden, you're up for five minutes.

Mr. Adam van Koeverden (Milton, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I really want to thank you, witnesses, today for your extraordinary testimony, but beyond that, your extraordinary work, your research, your community service and your advocacy. It's really extraordinary.

I had a question about disaggregated data, but before I get to the question, I feel as though I have an obligation to highlight or at least address some of the fallacious comments regarding universal basic income that my honourable colleague just put forth. Iran is not the only country in the world with a universal basic income. Countries like Spain, France and Brazil have one, and so does Alaska. Alaska's permanent fund has alleviated extreme poverty almost entirely in Alaska, and versions of a universal basic income have been shown around the world to be extremely effective measures at doing exactly what our witnesses today have pointed out. On behalf of the committee, I apologize for that misleading statement, because it's not at all true.

My question today is about disaggregated data and how on the Parliamentary Black Caucus, we've committed to gathering more disaggregated data. While that might not have much to do with our business here on indigenous and northern affairs, I do think it's related to our ability to make decisions. We really can't change what we don't measure.

My question today is whether any of the witnesses—perhaps Ms. Skye, because, I believe, Ms. Skye brought it up first—can share with the committee their perspective on what is working and what's not in terms of collecting disaggregated data, specific data, and can provide some advice on how our government and other governments in Canada can do a better job of collecting and using this data to address some of these very sensitive issues.

Ms. Courtney Skye: If there's one thing I believe in, it's drawing strong policy from good data. It's critically important to know the populations you're working with. I echo what some of my colleagues on the panel here have said. In all of my work with indigenous women and people who've experienced violence, they want to know that we're actually ending violence. They want to know that women are actually being made safer, and if we don't have the data to back that up and show it, we're not actually going to deliver on the commitment that women and communities want and expect from their leadership. We have to be able to prove it.

I think it's really important that we look at and challenge the way that data is collected and the way it's reported, because especially with the work of the national inquiry, we found that there were a ton of gaps in information in terms of being able to identify whether or not someone was Inuit, whether someone was Métis, whether or not their data was being collected, whether or not their nationality was being properly recorded, whether or not white-passing or Black-presenting indigenous people are having their identities properly assessed, and whether or not there's been an effort to correct misinformation around people's identities, specifically around things like the way that Indian status is assumed to be patriarchal.

For people like my nation, which is matriarchal, we say that my status card says this but I'm actually this, because the way the federal government administers Indian status is completely patriarchal and doesn't include matrilineal descendancies. I'm enrolled under my paternal grandfather, as opposed to my maternal grandmother, the way it should be according to my culture.

Also there is the question of whether we are doing the work to respect people and their gender, and whether we are doing the work to identify trans people and their accurate gender, which is something that's completely lost in many of the forms, and a challenge that has been levied against some of the StatsCan data and the police-reported data around people who have been victimized. They don't actually have confirmation whether or not a person's gender identity has been accurately captured, and whether or not trans women are being accurately assessed and counted.

All of those things need to be addressed, but it starts with having a consistent expectation around, especially, how the police are reporting data, and standards and regulations around how they are assessing and directed on how to collect that data.

● (1220)

Mr. Adam van Koeverden: Thank you, Ms. Skye.

Perhaps I could get a quick reflection on a universal basic income from whoever would like to do that.

Ms. Cherry Smiley: I hear what you're saying about how it has been successful in other places. I know there have been studies done and experiments with universal basic income in Manitoba. There have been some recently in the States.

If we think about what I heard a man refer to as economic opportunity maximization, he was talking about prostitution, that indigenous women should be maximizing their economic opportunities by selling their bodies. That's where we end up if we're like, well, everybody should just be able to go and make the most money they can. If we're looking at that in a very narrow way, it just doesn't reflect our reality.

Either way, women are the ones who end up paying the price for that, so universal basic income does really provide a way to address that unlevel playing field. Even if we think about the gender pay gap that we currently still have, the universal basic income provides a way to help alleviate that.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

As we progress towards one o'clock, for our witnesses joining us today, I want to say how proud I am that we have been working hard as a committee on the issues that are brought forward on behalf of the people who are affected by those issues. It works that the committee members ask questions and the witnesses give answers.

I would caution members to avoid any interplay between the committee members, because we want to ensure that all we have in mind is listening carefully to the testimony of our witnesses, the people who are coming to visit us and their answers, and then moving towards recommendations.

That said, Mr. Viersen is up next, for a five-minute intervention.

Arnold, please go ahead.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks for the admonition there. I appreciate that.

I'll go back to Ms. Smiley.

I appreciate your testimony. One of the things you talked about is a defence of our current PCEPA bill. Could you expand on that a little more?

Ms. Cherry Smiley: It's absolutely necessary that we keep that legislation. We can keep it and we can try to improve it. Of course, there's lots of room for improvement there, but the fundamental message the legislation sends is that it is not okay for men to purchase sex acts from women.

I would respectfully disagree with my friend here, Courtney. There is no right to sell sex, because there's no right to buy sex. That's not a fundamental human right.

If we get rid of this PCEPA bill, it really does open the door for traffickers, for pimps, for brothel owners. They come in and they set up shop. If you're are not targeting the demand for paid sex acts, you're not really going to get anywhere substantial, because there will always be women in the current circumstances in which we live who are poor enough and desperate enough and who just have very few choices available to them, so they will make the best of their circumstance. A lot of times we talk about meeting women where they're at, and that's fantastic, but we need to meet women where they're at and not leave them there. That's the second part.

The PCEPA bill is incredibly important in sending that message. If you're saying that you like to suck all the dicks, fine, but putting that aside, men do not have a right to expect sex from women and girls on demand and they don't have an entitlement to that simply because they have the financial ability to pay for it.

It's really important that we start there. We can move our way out and work with women, of course, where they are at. That's also why it's so important that we have a feminist understanding. If we look at battered women, for example, so often women will leave and go back, and they leave and go back, or I could think of women who are in the hospital with their throat slit open by their husband, saying “I don't want him to get in trouble, though. He really loves me.”

How do we understand these types of sentiments, because they don't really make sense? If we have a feminist understanding of male violence and how it impacts women, both materially in our conditions but also psychologically in the messages we're getting day in and day out, it's so important that we look at the root cause. The root cause of sex trafficking is the male demand for paid sex acts, so we need to start there and make sure we target that, because the men really don't care. They don't care if she has been trafficked or not. They don't care if she's underage or not. They don't care if she likes her job or not. They really don't care, so we really need to start there.

● (1225)

Mr. Arnold Viersen: I know that the average trafficking victim raises or is worth about $320,000 a year. There's a lot of money in the sex trafficking world. How do we get that money out of the system? How do we end that demand? That's the big question.

Do you have any comments around that?

Ms. Cherry Smiley: It is a big question. I think there are a lot of moving parts, but we absolutely cannot legalize and sanction that industry. It will not get the money out of the industry if we decide, okay, we'll just make it legal and fully decriminalize it, with brothels everywhere, as they do in New Zealand. Organized crime is very tied up in that, and it's a little bit easier for them now. They can function legally. They're businessmen. They're not pimps anymore. They're brothel owners. They have business associations like other businesses do. It has become that much easier for them to function and to move that money around.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: The PCEPA bill was based on—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Arnold. We're at five minutes.

There will be more opportunities coming. It's such an important conversation, and I wish we could go on and on, but we will follow along with our agenda.

Jaime Battiste, you have five minutes.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Thank you.

I'm hearing loud and clear that decriminalizing prostitution is not part of the solution. What are your thoughts around decriminalizing drug offences and treating addictions like a health problem and not a criminal problem? What are your thoughts around that? Can you give me a sense of whether this is part of the solution?

Anyone can chime in, please.

Ms. Courtney Skye: I definitely agree with decriminalizing and treating addictions like a health issue. That's absolutely necessary. I also think, too, if we understand that people come to be exploited because they're made vulnerable by our systems and structures, then we have to turn to those systems and structures and understand what exactly about them creates that vulnerability. Going back to ONWA's submission around the need for housing, the need for economic stability and the need to have good access to health care services, especially to address drug issues, that should be the priority here. We're talking about creating systemic change.

I hear what you're saying around the need to respond to people who are addicted with dignity and respect, prioritizing them and viewing them as people who have value in our communities, whether or not they're using and whether or not they're choosing to use different types of drugs that are more addictive.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Would anyone else like to chime in? If not, I have another question.

Ms. Cherry Smiley: If we're thinking about drug use and addiction, one thing that we often advocate for is the Nordic model of prostitution policy. It's three-pronged. You decriminalize those who are prostituted and you criminalize the sex buyers and the pimps. There's a public education campaign. There are also robust social services to support people and to support the community.

You could kind of apply that to drugs as well. You have a population of people who are suffering from all kinds of different things. There are all kinds of issues going on there that make certain people more vulnerable to being trapped in addiction. Then you have the drug dealers who come in and exploit that vulnerability for profit.

I definitely think people should not be criminalized at all for drug use. I don't think that's a crime. I think that's a response to the conditions of our lives and the oppressions we deal with. There is a difference, again, between those who are in an active addiction and those who are exploiting and profiting from those people's vulnerabilities.

● (1230)

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Okay.

Finally, we have $2.2 billion in the national action plan to end systemic racism and violence against women. What organizations do we need to fund to help women who are vulnerable right now? Just quickly, what's the most efficient use of those dollars?

Ms. Coralee McGuire-Cyrette: I can jump in there if that's okay.

We need to not only do national indigenous organizations. I know that was a comment earlier, and I want to speak to it. We have to get the money into the communities where they'll do the community work best. When you're looking at autonomous indigenous organizations, the majority of them are not connected to any national indigenous organization. We need to have a balanced approach of the organizations that have a mandate to do indigenous women-specific work.

What is each agency's mandate? What are their priorities? You end up with mission drifts. We have to look at funding those organizations that have been doing the work, largely unfunded and unrecognized, for generations. That's where that comprehensive approach needs to come from. Autonomous indigenous women-specific organizations and agencies in Canada have been largely unfunded to date, and they need to be included in that funding model.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: I'm just wondering if I'm hearing you correctly. Just give a thumbs-up or thumbs-down. I'm looking at you on the screen. Are you saying that we need to fund the local and regional organizations, not the national ones? Is that what I'm hearing?

Ms. Coralee McGuire-Cyrette: I think you need to do both. You can't just do only one model, because otherwise you miss an entire, large urban indigenous population of organizations that have been doing this work but are not connected nationally.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Committee and witnesses, I understand that we're trying to connect with the missing witness, Chris Stark. If we do that, we'll finish this round of questioning. Then we'll allow the witness testimony and see how much time we have left.

In the meantime, Madame Bérubé, it's your turn, please, for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Earlier, we spoke about programs and services that can be provided to children survivors of exploitation and human trafficking.

What types of care and services should be available to those children, who have been so deeply affected?

[*English*]

Ms. Coralee McGuire-Cyrette: Is that for me? Okay, I can jump in there.

We need to take a holistic approach that includes the family, that includes the parents and that includes healing together, especially around childhood sexual exploitation. This is where culture plays in, as well as a two-eyed seeing approach, which means that we blend both mainstream services and practices and indigenous culture. We need to make sure that whatever the children need is provided—and not just for the child but for the whole family.

If we don't deal with the trauma in childhood, it carries on to mental health and addictions into adulthood. That holistic approach to healing the family unit from that experience is what's needed. We have to look at day treatment models where the family doesn't need to give up the children to go to addictions treatment services. We have to heal the whole family.

● (1235)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Tell us, if you would, about the situation of children who disappear and fall victim to human trafficking. Has the number of cases gone up in recent years or during the pandemic? Do you have any statistics?

[*English*]

Ms. Coralee McGuire-Cyrette: Yes, there are statistics showing the increase in demand. That's really what we're looking at. You have to decrease that demand. Here in Ontario, we finally started to build into anti-human-trafficking strategies and making it illegal. We have to enforce those laws.

Our statistics have greatly shown.... I do believe that this year we've seen a 37% increase in exits since 2020. The demand continues to increase, especially when you're looking at access to the Internet, the sexual apps, porn and all of those pieces that continue to increase. We're being so reactive to this issue. We need to be more proactive. We need to start shutting down.... This is where police services need to be equipped with cyber...childhood exploitation in order to prevent it with regard to that piece.

We need a holistic, systemic approach to address this issue.

The Chair: Thank you.

Rachel Blaney, please go ahead.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

Ms. Skye, I'm really struggling with understanding this divide that I've been hearing through testimony for the past several witnesses and days. We've heard testimony that there is a difference between sex work and human trafficking.

Adding the layer of the colonial history of Canada and its impacts on indigenous people, how do we balance a response? We're hearing two sides. How do they come together, or how do you work on these two approaches simultaneously?

Ms. Courtney Skye: I think that's really important. It's a huge struggle all right, because there are different people who have different experiences and different advocates and organizations that view how to best support women.

I think it's important to recognize, because there is an emerging dichotomy between the types of services people are willing to access. There's an increasing stigma around certain women's organizations and certain support networks that aren't necessarily accessible to women who are engaging in sex work and who are looking for oversight and regulation.

If we're looking at what kinds of policy approaches and regulation might exist around different types of places or industries where there's a suspicion that there is trafficking or exploitation existing within them—whether they be massage parlours, strip clubs or the like that are legal and operate under municipal regulations across Canada—we look towards strong regulation, we look towards sex workers as workers and ensure that they have workers' rights and stigma-free access to employment standards and employment supports that are accessible for workers. There should be ways that they connect and have barrier-free services and, if we do have a genuine interest in supporting women who have this experience, again, it comes back to the other supports and services that are necessary and that exist outside of making it less safe for other women to engage in sex work.

We're looking at things like basic income, accessible services and an increase in the number of shelter services across the country. Right now there are over 600 first nations in Canada that don't have access to a women's shelter and don't have women's shelters in their communities. Those are the kinds of solutions that need to be balanced with the kind of moral judgment that comes with discussing this topic.

● (1240)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Clerk, just before we go on, are we having any luck with our other witness?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Naaman Sugrue): Yes. She's in contact with IT. We're working to get her in, but it might take a few minutes, so I suggest we go to another questioner.

The Chair: Absolutely.

Mr. Viersen, you have five minutes. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: I'll give my time over to Mr. Vidal.

The Chair: Gary, go ahead.

Mr. Gary Vidal (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

On Tuesday we heard from Grand Chief Settee from Manitoba. He was talking about some of the rate differences between northern Manitoba and southern Manitoba.

I represent a riding that's in the north half of the province of Saskatchewan and has lots of remote and rural communities.

I'm going to open it up to any of the three of you, but I'm just curious if you would confirm what the grand chief told us about the rates being significantly higher for people from the northern or remote communities than they might be for southern communities. Is that information that you would agree with and back up?

Ms. Cherry Smiley: I don't know in terms of the exact numbers or quantity. Also, I don't know if that's even the most useful way to think about it. I think there are very unique barriers that people from more remote communities have, for sure, that are distinct from those in more urban centres.

In terms of the rates, I think it depends. We can think about reporting and how people are able to report or not. That's going to impact that. I don't know if it's worse or better depending on the location, and I don't think that's the best way to look at it. I think that it's an issue. I think there are a lot of cases, obviously, that are unsaid, and women will never speak about what's been done to them.

I think it's more focusing on the unique barriers that remote communities have as opposed to trying to quantify where things are worse or better.

Mr. Gary Vidal: I'm sorry. I want to interject here to let you know where I am going. I'll let the other witnesses jump in.

My point in focusing more on northern and remote...was that he also talked about some significant points of critical intervention, where there's an opportunity to intervene or interject at the right points in the journey as a preventative measure. That was more of the stage that I was trying to set.

Do any of you want to come back to this idea of some critical points of intervention that we could learn from, for a longer-term prevention measure, rather than necessarily quantifying? It wasn't my intent to talk about comparisons. It's more to find those points of intervention.

Ms. Coralee McGuire-Cyrette: I agree. That's a really good question.

What we're seeing is that there definitely are different northern realities and different interventions needed. I do agree. What we're seeing and hearing is that childhood sexual exploitation is happening so young, and we're not addressing it in our communities.

Sexual violence is a learnt behaviour from colonization. When we're looking at high rates of suicide and we're looking at it not being safe to disclose being sexually abused, in that we're blamed for that situation happening, where do we see that addressing sexual violence in our first nation communities? We need to begin there. If we want to get to the root cause and intervene early, we need services for children who are being exploited very young, at home, in those communities. That's one piece. We're seeing a huge gap. It does lead to trafficking later on in life as well, if you've been sexualized as a youth, going forward.

Mr. Gary Vidal: I'm going to jump in and pick up on that again, because you led me right down another path that I wanted to ask about. You talk about the very young children who are being exploited and whatnot. Bill C-92 is a move for first nations communities to take over their own child and family services. I'm sure you're very aware of that.

Could you speak to the benefit of children being able to be in the care of their own communities and having a culturally appropriate upbringing, and the impact of that longer term as well? What benefit might that have from a longer-term prevention perspective?

● (1245)

Ms. Coralee McGuire-Cyrette: Yes, it doesn't go far enough, unfortunately, because it doesn't take into account and consideration the parents and the mothers. Once again, the most successful programs we've seen are where we're able to help support mom being mom, dad being dad, or grandma being grandma. If we don't include the parents in this conversation, we're going to continue to spin our wheels.

There hasn't been any healing. When we continue to look at child welfare as the only option here, we're not actually transforming what we need to do. There's so much healing that has to happen in our communities, and we need to include the parents in all of these conversations. We need to help them on their healing journey. We need to support them. We need to begin to really unpack our current approaches.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

Jaime Battiste, you have five minutes.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Thank you for your testimony, all of you.

Part of this committee's work is to make recommendations to our government on how we fix the problem. What supports are there right now for women who are trying to transition away from human trafficking or sexual exploitation? How are we helping to transition and support indigenous women? What are the programs that are working out there? Do you have any recommendations that you'd like to share with this committee on what we can do? What are the big priorities?

Ms. Coralee McGuire-Cyrette: I can jump in there, if that's okay.

We do have one of the first pilots. Ours is called the Courage for Change program. We started it locally here in Thunder Bay. We just did an expansion provincially in order to ensure that we have those on-the-ground supports for survivors of human trafficking.

That's critical in what's missing. Our program is unique because it was developed by survivors in our engagement report. They let us know that they need on-the-ground support. We have so many education and awareness campaigns on this issue. We need to be able to do concrete action. Our specialized trauma-informed care has been critical in seeing over 200 exits safely. Now, as we've expanded across the province, we're going to be able to have on-the-ground support to safely help to transition women across the province. We know that violence doesn't know boundaries; it doesn't know jurisdictions.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Would anyone else like to chime in?

Ms. Cherry Smiley: I was watching on Tuesday, and I know there is a lot of really good work being done in Manitoba—provincially there—with different exiting programs. There is a patchwork of programs here and there across the country, but we need a broader approach and a more holistic approach.

One thing that I think is a huge problem is that so much of the funding is project-based. The amount of time that it takes for a woman or a girl to recover can be a lifetime. It's not that she enters into a program and after a year she's good, she's done and away she goes. Maybe that's the case, but maybe that's not the case. We're putting these very, almost bureaucratic, in some ways, timelines on women's healing. That is something that I think we need to really look at.

As Cora was saying, these on-the-ground supports, the basic crisis supports, need to happen. Once you move through that, there is housing, which is so important, to have a stable base to work from. There's employment training and education. I know there was a mention on Tuesday about internships for women who have been sexually exploited.

All of these types of things need to happen, with the recognition of the ongoing emotional impact of being in that circumstance. That might show up six months later. It might show up 10 years later. There are women I know who, 10 years out, killed themselves because of that trauma. It doesn't just disappear. Investing in women and investing in indigenous women and girls, I can't think of a better thing to do, really.

● (1250)

Mr. Jaime Battiste: Ms. Skye, would you like to chime in?

Ms. Courtney Skye: I think it's important, if we're talking specifically about providing services for young people, that they not flow through child welfare agencies.

For the committee's information, in Ontario, Peel child and family services is a centre of excellence on responding to human trafficking. At the same time, Peel Regional Police indicated, in the first year after Ontario passed human trafficking legislation, 100% of the young people who had been trafficked were clients of the Peel child and family services. There is a huge disconnection between child welfare, their inability to really support children, and then asking them to service the people who have not been able to access [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] services.

I think there are community-based organizations outside of the child welfare sector that could be better positioned and have more credibility in the community to deliver services to young people.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Members of the committee and witnesses, Ms. Stark deeply regrets the technical issues surrounding her inability to connect. Apparently it was the kind of thing where they didn't check before digging, so her Internet service is not available. She was really hoping to joining us today.

As chair, if I may, because we won't have time for another full round of questions, could I ask each of you, in a couple of minutes each, as we approach one o'clock, to tell us what you would like to see?

You've brought forward your testimony. You've not only informed us; you've enriched us. I think all of us on the committee are really touched by the work, the effort, the intensity that goes into these dense and complex and personal problems, and that people are willing to work on them, such as you are. Hopefully we can meet some sort of expectation in the report that we'll put together with our staff and our analysts

I'll ask Ms. McGuire-Cyrette, Ms. Skye and Ms. Smiley, each of you, to just wrap up for us, based on your testimony, what you would like to see from us.

Ms. McGuire-Cyrette, would you like to go first?

Ms. Coralee McGuire-Cyrette: Thank you. Yes.

We definitely need to look at investment in indigenous women specifically and in indigenous women's safety. That's really clear and concrete for what's needed: not only safety but also healing. Those approaches are what work, because even when Courtney spoke to you on how violence against non-indigenous women has decreased, there is a direct correlation to the investment that was made in non-indigenous women and their safety and healing.

We are asking for the same thing. We really need to have action, and it needs to come from the community up in order for us to address this together. We have provided some key recommendations that can be included in your report and will begin to be the first step in tackling this issue.

I want to thank everyone for agreeing to listen to us here today. We're happy to help and to have further conversations. We would recommend that you read the reports we've written to help you with more understanding of what we've learned here in Ontario.

Meegwetch.

The Chair: Thanks so much.

Courtney Skye, could we have your final remarks?

Ms. Courtney Skye: Yes. Thank you for that, and thank you to the committee for setting up this session and inviting me here today.

I think it's very important that.... I know there was a commitment to enrich the national action plan that was put forward a few weeks ago by the federal government in responding to the inquiry. I think that should be a high priority. There were huge gaps within the national action plan about whether or not it was actually setting down a baseline of measurement for us to actually know if we're having an impact with any of the programs and services that are being developed for indigenous women, including those for sexual exploitation or trafficked women.

I think there needs to be a lens and a stronger vision to that work that was put forward, because it simply doesn't go far enough, and it doesn't address any of the failures of Canada to fully participate in international human rights mechanisms. I think there is a lot of potential and there is a lot of work that could be done there, but I also think that what's important to remember is that indigenous women [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] advancements being made for the better of our communities and for our future generations.

Thank you. Have a good day.

● (1255)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Smiley.

Ms. Cherry Smiley: Thanks for inviting me and for doing this study.

I think I would echo what Cora said about making investments in indigenous women and indigenous women's organizations. Having the space to heal, to learn from each other, to talk to each other and to do that on our own terms is incredibly important.

I also think what's important is that we have that space for healing but that we also have that space for politics: to be political, to be part of these discussions and to be able to do that amongst ourselves in terms of quickly organizing indigenous women so that we can advocate, not just for ourselves but for each other. I'm sure that has been the experience of the other witnesses here. For the women who we come across and work with, so often that's what they want to do: They want to help other women.

We need to be having these spaces for healing—it's very important—but we also need to be having political spaces for indigenous women to have debates and disagreements amongst ourselves and to be able to do that on our own terms. It is really important that we have women-only space, that we have indigenous women-only space, where we can begin and continue to build a political analysis from the commonalities and differences in our experiences. Those spaces are being eroded all over the place, and I think that if we have those places, it goes beyond just social services, which are needed, of course, but we need more than that. We need the ability to imagine a better world for ourselves and for our sisters and then to be able to act on that vision.

It really does, I think, pay out for the whole Canada. If we're given those opportunities, we will take them.

The Chair: Thank you so much. All of you have made such an impression on us. I know we'll go over our notes, and our analysts will provide us with things to read, but your interventions really reached deeply inside us. We won't be forgetting this in the next day or two, I can assure you of that. Thank you so much for a remarkable couple of hours.

Mr. Viersen, you have your hand up.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Yes, I just want to ensure we are still having the meeting next week on Tuesday. There was some discussion about not having it. I hope that's not the case. I hope we are still having the meeting on Tuesday.

The other question is for the clerk. Are we able to table the report? I know there are two days—one in July and one in August—where things can happen. Are we able to table the report on one of those days?

The Clerk: If you are referring to “back door” or summer tabling, I believe it's possible. I'll confirm with you via email.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Okay.

The Chair: I will see you Tuesday.

Mr. Viersen, perhaps you'd like to move to adjourn.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: I move that we do adjourn, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Is everyone in favour?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you, everyone. The meeting is adjourned.