HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

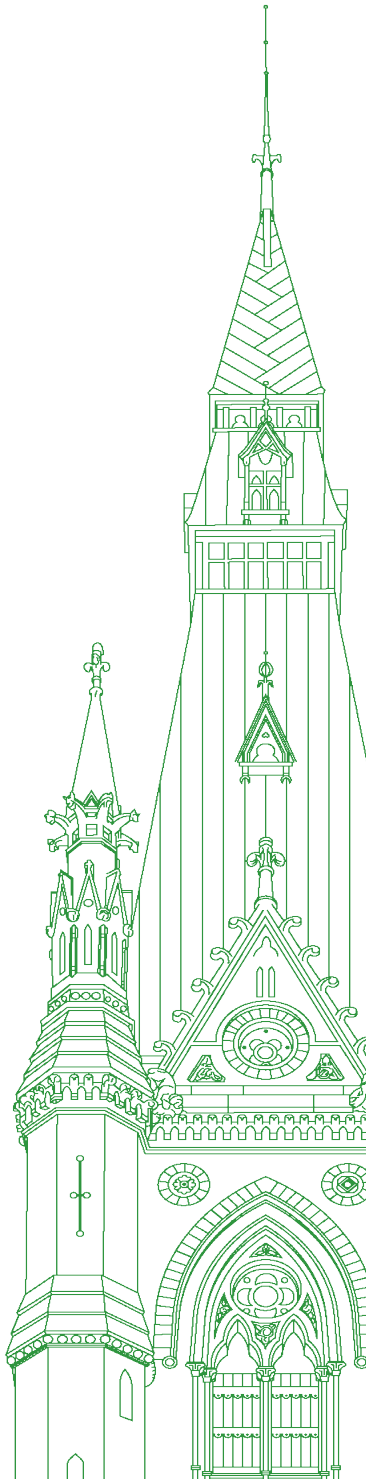
43rd PARLIAMENT, 2nd SESSION

Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 044

Tuesday, June 22, 2021



Chair: Mr. Bob Bratina

Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

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● (1115)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Bob Bratina (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

I 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 on its study of the sex trafficking of indigenous peoples.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I'd like to outline some best practices.

Participants, you can speak and listen in the official language of your choice. At the bottom centre of your screen there's a globe. You select that globe and then select English or French as your preferred language. Then, as we proceed, if you wish to speak in the other language, there's no need to make any technical adjustments, but you should be on the language of your choice as we begin, so look for that.

When you speak, please speak slowly and clearly. When you're not speaking, your microphone should be on mute.

With us today for the rest of the time available to us are Trisha Baptie, community engagement coordinator of EVE, and Karen Pictou, executive director of the Nova Scotia Native Women's Association. Our witnesses will give opening statements. They are usually around six minutes, but we'll offer you as much time as you need to complete the sentiments that you wish to share.

I should tell you that when we go to questioning, there's no requirement to answer any questions that may cause you discomfort. We understand the sensitivity of things, so please don't ever feel that you need to engage in any question or other conversation that causes you discomfort.

Having said that, I'll ask Karen Pictou, the executive director of the Nova Scotia Native Women's Association, to present her testimony first.

Thank you. Go ahead, please.

Ms. Karen Pictou (Executive Director, Nova Scotia Native Women's Association): Thank you, everybody, for inviting me to speak at this very important meeting today. I'm going to apologize up front because I was invited to this meeting late last week and I haven't had due time to prepare as thoroughly as I would normally like to. I've written some speaking notes, but I am going to kind of wing it a bit as well. Please feel free to ask all the questions you want at the end.

I am Karen Pictou. I am Mi'kmaq from Millbrook First Nation, Nova Scotia. I am the mother of four daughters. I have three grandsons. I am the daughter of Bill Pictou and Philippa Pictou. I am the executive director of the Nova Scotia Native Women's Association. I came to this role three years ago. I followed my heart. I left a well-established career I had made for myself in first nation employment and partnership development and took a leap of faith to enter this role because I felt it spoke to my heart, it spoke to my lived experience and it spoke to what makes me feel good about the work that I do. I feel that I bring a lot to this position, not only from what I've learned in school or what I've learned in my career but also from what I've learned through my life. I am a Mi'kmaq woman who lived off reserve for my childhood, moved back on reserve, was a teenage mother, was a victim of sexual violence, was a victim of domestic violence, and also, as at least one person here knows, was a victim of human trafficking.

I feel that my life experience has brought me full circle to be in this role and to feel that I'm making a positive impact, not only for my community and for our province of Nova Scotia but for all indigenous women, girls and two-spirit people across the country.

I take this role very seriously and I have given it my all. When I came into this role three years ago, I didn't know a whole lot about the Nova Scotia Native Women's Association. I knew the gist, that they were an entity that spoke up for the needs of indigenous women in our province and that they have a long history. Since entering, however, I've learned so much more.

The Nova Scotia Native Women's Association is actually the third-oldest Mi'kmaq organization in Nova Scotia. Following the release of the “1969 White Paper”, there was a large political uprising of the Mi'kmaq in Nova Scotia. This led to the creation of our first Mi'kmaq organizations in 1969 and 1970, the *Micmac News* out of Membertou and then the Union of Nova Scotia Indians, which is now called the Union of Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq and is one of our two tribal councils in Nova Scotia.

During this time, the White Paper made it very clear that the Government of Canada wished to cause extinction of first nations people across Canada through policy. However, indigenous women across Canada were already facing this threat of extinction through government policy, through the Indian Act. This was not a new situation for the Mi'kmaq women of Nova Scotia, but it became a situation that impacted all Mi'kmaq people in Nova Scotia.

Even after the White Paper policy failed to go through, the political uprising continued, and so did the realization of our rights. However, during that time, indigenous women were still excluded from politics, whether within the province or on reserve. Shortly afterward, our first two female chiefs were elected in Nova Scotia. A community member from Membertou named Helen Martin travelled to each of our communities in 1970, gathered the women and talked about the issues of the day. All of the women agreed that something needed to be done to address these ongoing issues and the threat to indigenous women's survival, as well as their right to be Mi'kmaq, to be a part of our communities and to all that is held within that.

At that time, they agreed unanimously that they would create the Nova Scotia Native Women's Association. We were founded in 1972, so next year we will be celebrating our 50th anniversary.

However, despite the Nova Scotia Native Women's Association being one of the oldest and most highly recognizable Mi’kmaq organizations in the province, we continue to struggle and to be in survival mode.

About three years years ago, we finally received long-term provincial core funding and then, shortly after that, received a smaller amount of short-term federal core funds. The federal core funds have now been cut, to my understanding, despite the increase of capacity and the increase of work. The increase of work being asked of us by Canada is to assist with things like human trafficking, to assist with economic development for indigenous women and girls and to assist with healing our communities.

That valuation, however, has not translated into giving us core funding to take us out of survival mode and proposal-based funding. That needs to happen in order to address human trafficking. The Nova Scotia Native Women's Association is the only indigenous organization in Nova Scotia that is working to address human trafficking to provide support and services for those impacted by and currently in human trafficking, as well as for leaving it.

A number of issues cause us to be more vulnerable, including colonialism. That was the first one, right? That completely impacted the way our people lived and the way they viewed gender roles. Mi’kmaq people had very strict gender roles. That is not to say that women were less valued—certainly not. Women were highly valued, as were two-spirit people. However, colonialism changed that and flipped it on its head.

I'm sorry. I feel that I'm rambling a bit now. I'll get back on the topic.

In 2014, the Nova Scotia Native Women's Association opened the Jane Paul Indigenous Women's Resource Centre in response to a large number of indigenous women and girls who were involved in the street sex trade in Sydney, Nova Scotia. The population in Sydney is only around 25,000 people; however, there are at least 80 indigenous women and girls working on two city blocks in Sydney. This would amount to over 800 non-indigenous women on two city blocks.

This issue is glaring. We see it. We see these women all the time. However, I don't know that most of Sydney really and truly sees these women. They see them as an obstacle and want to push them further out into the industrial areas, and this is going to cause more harm.

The Jane Paul Centre is one of a kind. I don't know of one that exists anywhere close by in the Atlantic region. We started off from one office space in this little office that I'm actually sitting in right now. It's about 500 square feet. That's where we started. Over the last few years, we were able to expand to take over the basement of this building, which offered us some workshop space and a private counselling room. This year, we're actually planning a grand opening. We've taken over occupancy of 95% of this building, so we're able to offer the services where there were still gaps.

Some of those things still need to come to fruition. For example, there's the need to have a Family Court lawyer accessible to our women. Many of the women who are accessing the centre on a daily basis are being impacted by poverty, by the child welfare system, by grief and loss, and by the Indian residential schools, as well as being descendants of Indian residential school survivors. The first language of many of our women is Mi’kmaq, and they prefer speaking in Mi’kmaq. Many of them have experienced violence. Many of them have been impacted by MMIWG cases here in Nova Scotia.

They come in here faced with huge barriers, but with a lot of hope still, and here at the centre we thrive on that hope. We try to build that hope and we try to give them the tools they need to survive, to flourish and to have options. I think that's the biggest thing when we're talking about how to address human trafficking. We can get someone out of the life, but what options will they have? What opportunities will they have to sustain themselves to not go back to that life, to be able to have a secure home, to be able to fight to have access to their children again, and all of those things? If they cannot do that, I guarantee that they'll slip back into that life, despite its atrocities.

● (1120)

Here at the Jane Paul centre, we have a full-time counsellor on staff. We have program coordinators. We actually just opened up a new space, called a makerspace, where women can come in and make a craft. They can sit with an elder or a cultural support person. They can talk. They can learn new skills. When they're done making that, we actually buy it from them and we'll put it into our Sisterness Trading Post, which is right next door. That grand opening is happening soon and it's online, so I'll plug that later.

They can get money in hand right then and there to go and get what they need. They can go have a meal downstairs collectively. They can go to our food bank. They can take in a workshop. They can get clean needles. They can get condoms or whatever it is that they need at that moment.

The main thing is that they're taking in a cultural activity. They have a supportive environment and they're leaving here with food in their bellies and money in their hands so that they may not have to go back onto the street that night.

There are a variety of ways that human trafficking looks. Yes, human trafficking happens in the classic way of a charming man who comes and grooms a young girl and convinces her of this dream in the big city, and takes her off. Sure, that happens. That happens every day here in Nova Scotia. We see that.

It also happens many times to our women here as a result of being vulnerable or grieving or maybe being a product of the child welfare system. Maybe they have parents with addiction issues. Maybe they have a vulnerability from poverty, lack of housing or lack of education. They become prey to various things and then get into drugs and that type of thing.

They don't see themselves as human trafficking victims most of the time. They say, “No, that's my boyfriend. He loves me.” Would your boyfriend still love you if you said no, you weren't going to work the streets that night? Would you boyfriend still love you if you weren't paying for his addiction as well? Chances are the answer would be no.

It's very difficult for a lot of these women to even view themselves as being a victim of human trafficking. They feel they're making the choice. They feel that they've made their bed, so they'll lie in it, and this is the only choice they have. It's simply not true.

What we hope to do here is to find hope through hopelessness, not to isolate them and tell them they have to leave their boyfriend because he's harmful. No. It's to give them the tools to make that choice on their own.

I could talk on and on—

● (1125)

The Chair: We need to move on, because we have four more—

Ms. Karen Pictou: Okay, sorry.

I'll wrap up by talking about our next most important initiative, and then I'll leave it for questions after that.

In all of this work with human trafficking, domestic violence, MMIWG and all of these things we're working on, we are thinking about what we need to be able to complete this work. One of the most glaring things we see here in Nova Scotia is that there is no safe space for us to heal. There is absolutely none.

We could go to a hotel. It's not safe. There are people drinking there. We're not allowed to smudge there. We're not allowed to do ceremonies there. We can go to a resort, but it's the same thing. There's absolutely no safe space in Nova Scotia for indigenous people to heal from the hundreds of years of complex trauma that we're all dealing with. That needs to change.

I know Lenore has been a huge advocate for our resiliency centre. It needs to happen. We have an application in now to the green inclusive energy program. We have completed a feasibility plan. It is widely accepted by all Mi'kmaq organizations across our province and it needs to happen now.

I urge you to please, please let Minister McKenna know how important this project is for us to be able to heal. We need it to be led by indigenous women and centred in a safe space that is owned by indigenous women.

Thank you very much.

● (1130)

The Chair: Thanks very much for that.

We're going to bring in our two other witnesses. Ms. Baptie, we'll get to you next.

To both of you who have just joined us, at the bottom centre of your screen there is a globe, and when you select the globe, you'll find “English” or “French”. Choose the language you wish to hear in. When you are speaking, you can change back and forth, but you should be selecting either “English” or “French” on that icon.

Having said that, we're going to go now to Ms. Baptie.

Thank you for being here, Trisha. Please go ahead.

Ms. Trisha Baptie (Community Engagement Coordinator, EVE): Thank you so much for having me.

I just found out I was going to do this late last week, so like the speaker before me, I have notes that are a little cobbled together. I hope you'll have patience.

Six minutes is not enough time, but I hope I have constructed something vaguely coherent here.

I am speaking to you from Vancouver on the unceded traditional territories of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh peoples.

Traditionally, for the last 20 years or so, events have been started by acknowledging the traditional lands on which we stand, which I think is a good tradition to remind us of where we are, but as non-indigenous people speaking to those who look like me, this acknowledgement needs to drive us to look further into the history of where we are. Traditional territory acknowledgement is a not-so-subtle code for stolen land, and today especially, as we discuss indigenous women and girls, it is imperative for settlers to understand how stealing land equates with the complete destabilization of indigenous people, and particularly women and girls. We need to sit with these words, clearly identifying the issues and how it feeds into the topic we will be discussing.

I want to state clearly, for the record, that I am not an indigenous woman. The father of one of my sons is from a band in [*Technical difficulty—Editor*], but I cannot speak from an indigenous experience. I can, however, speak to what I have lived through with my friends and their families as they invited me into their lives, as well as about the amazing people I have met all over the country as I do this work. I can speak to the abuses I saw my friends suffer at the hands of police, social workers, and men and society at large.

I'm going to quickly explain who I am. I am a survivor of government care. I was apprehended just before my 13th birthday, which was also when I was exposed to the world of trafficking and prostitution. I would get out at 28, with a total 15 years of being exploited. Some of my friends are still being sexually exploited.

So many of my friends and I started being sexually exploited as minors. I find it infuriating that there are those who wish to draw an arbitrary line—say, at 18—for when girls and women choose prostitution. I would like them to tell me what we could have accessed and how we could have gotten out of that lifestyle. Being Caucasian, I had one or two extra options, but my aboriginal friends had few, if any, options that would have saved them from the violent ongoing sexual exploitation.

We lost loved ones to a serial killer and lived through horrors I will not go into. I was a citizen journalist at the Pickton trial, and my CV can go on for quite a while.

We have a question before us, although it is written like a statement. Why is sex trafficking among indigenous people so high, when they do not make up a high percentage of the population? What if we did not look at that question, actually? We know why. Women and girls are trafficked to meet the male-driven demand for paid sex. They are more vulnerable because on their territories, or in the case of the high numbers of youth who find themselves in foster care, life can be horrible, and they [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

What if we flipped the whole question and conversation and asked why we think men should be able to pay for sex? Where is the legal binding policy or human right that states that men paying for sex is a protected act? How does allowing any Canadian man to pay for sex help create a safer society for indigenous women and girls—or anyone, for that matter?

● (1135)

We keep sex consensual by not commodifying it, and PCEPA helps us do this.

I am a big policy law person. I quite like the finite details, so I really want to talk about the challenge to Canada's prostitution laws that's happening right now in Ontario, because it would affect not only all women but particularly indigenous women and girls. In Ontario, they would like to strike down impeding traffic, which is section 213; public communication, which is subsection 213(1.1); purchasing, which is the buying of sex; materially benefiting, or making money off the prostitution of someone else; and recruiting. They want recruiting decriminalized.

Whose neighbourhood would we have street prostitution in? I live in a poor neighbourhood. That's where they go: my neighbourhood. Whose schools or job fairs will the recruitment tables be at? Where will the billboards be? Pretty much all of the prostitution provisions they're looking at are predatory, because they rely on a third party making money recruiting, selling and advertising—a third party. Also, it's all young women, right? We're not talking about educated 40-year-old women secure in their careers; we're talking about marginalized, vulnerable youth. We need to really be thinking about that.

Now prostitution is euphemistically called being a “sugar baby” or something like that, but the core of it is the same: men taking advantage of women. Pimps and traffickers would become businessmen. If the tearing down of the Criminal Code happens, all of this will be legitimate exploitation and abuse. All these laws stop the parasitical and predatory benefiting from another's abuse. PCEPA benefited women and anyone being sold, because it changed the way they were viewed. They were supposed to get assistance.

I know that my time is done and I don't want to go over. I know there are a lot of other people. I'm just going to say two last things.

There was never a time in my friendships, which I have to this day with my friends who are indigenous, that I wasn't aware that we were treated differently because of the way we look. That's a really bad feeling, but I learned really early in life how to try to interject myself into situations, if I could, to benefit from the way I looked. Women and girls who are being exploited, who are at risk for trafficking and who live around man camps and resource extraction sites and live with that very real threat every day need intervention that benefits them, not anyone else. That's my last little item.

I know that my time here is done, but there's so much to say, so I'm going to end with this. Indigenous people—women, girls, my friends and loved ones—deserve a million times better than the way they live today. I mean, no clean water? How can we fight human trafficking if we're still fighting for water?

● (1140)

I want to live the rest of my life without burying one more friend. Now we are burying daughters, unfortunately.

If things don't drastically change, if indigenous people aren't given what they need to recover from the trauma that haunts them daily and given what is rightfully theirs, and if Canada does not bend to the ways of its original keepers rather than demanding adherence to colonial ways, things won't change, and I will bury more friends. That rips my heart out.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Trisha.

Part of today's activity, of course, is hearing a round of questions from our panel, which is a really important component, because we need to see how we've been influenced by the things we're being told by our witnesses.

We'll get to our questions, but right now we have two more witnesses to hear from, Ms. Perrier and Ms. Gobert.

Ms. Perrier, please go ahead for six minutes or for whatever time you feel you need.

Ms. Bridget Perrier (Co-Founder and First Nations Educator, Sextrade101): *Aaniin*.

First I'd like to acknowledge that I am standing here on the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the New Credit, who fall under the Two Row Wampum Treaty.

I represent Sextrade101 and the many Anishinabe women and girls who are enslaved in prostitution and/or trafficked.

My name is Wasayakwe. My English name is Bridget Perrier. I was born in Thunder Bay, Ontario, and put up for adoption. I was adopted by a good family who tried to raise me the best way possible, but as I got older the effects of colonialism, intergenerational trauma and child sexual abuse made me a perfect candidate for prostitution.

I was lured and debased into prostitution at the age of 12 from a child welfare-run group home. I remained enslaved for 10 years in prostitution. I was sold to men who felt privileged to steal my innocence and invade my body. I was paraded like cattle in front of men who were able to purchase me, and the acts that I did were something no little girl should ever have to endure here in Canada, the land of the free.

Because of the men, I cannot have a child normally, because of trauma to my cervix. Still to this day I have nightmares, and sometimes I sleep with the lights on. My trauma is deep, and sometimes I feel as though I'm frozen—or even worse, I feel damaged and not worthy.

I was traded in legal establishments, street corners and strip clubs. I even had a few trips across the Great Lakes servicing ship men at the age of 13. The scariest thing that happened to me was, at 14 years of age, being held captive for a period of 43 hours and raped and tortured repeatedly by a sexual predator who preyed on exploited girls.

My exploiters made a lot of money and tried to break me, but I fought for my life. My first pimp was a woman who owned a legal brothel, where I was groomed to say that I was her niece or her daughter's friend, if the police ever asked. My second pimp was introduced to me when I was in Toronto. I was a prostitute for money. He was supposed to be a bodyguard, but that turned out to be one big lie. Both are out there still, doing the same thing to more little girls somewhere here in Canada.

After many years, I was able to exit prostitution and rebuild my life, and with that, my education became a tool. I was recognized for my tenacity and my strength, and I am now able to be an asset to my community and my people. I am a mother, grandmother, activist and warrior woman. Now my experiences may be sacrificial at times, but I am doing them for Canada's Anishinabe women and girls who are being bought and sold, who have disappeared or been murdered.

We must look at who is doing this. It is the men.

I have a letter. The birth mom of my oldest daughter was murdered by Robert Pickton, and my daughter asked me to read this to you.

> Dear Senate,
>
> My name is Angel Wolfe. My birth mom's name is Brenda Wolfe. My mom was murdered by Robert Pickton.
>
> Her murder was one of the first six that he was charged with. I was six years old when she was murdered and nine years old when her jaw bone was found in a pig trough. I am one of the 98 orphans who were left behind because of that monster.
>
> I do blame the Vancouver Police Department and the RCMP. I believe that Bills such as [PCEPA] will save vulnerable women like my mom. I'm sickened that my mom's death has been used to legitimize such indignity and sadness.
>
> I'm also sickened by the term “the Pickton bill”. It's insulting and a slap in the face to the 98 orphans, and the organizations and the prosex work lobby movement should be really ashamed for speaking on behalf of the families who lost their loved ones.
>
> I blame prostitution, addiction & mental Illness for my mother's death, and on behalf of the 98 orphans, we do not want our mothers' deaths to be the reason prostitution is legitimized.
>
> I will make it my mission in life to carry her story and educate people about addictions, prostitution and the murdered and the missing.
>
> Sincerely, Angel Wolfe

● (1145)

PCEPA will protect my daughters and granddaughters and other young native girls from predator sex buyers who have the nerve to solicit in public. Just last week, I was in Thunder Bay where buying vulnerable women is not on the agenda of their police department or MAG or any other organization.

If prostitution were such a healthy path, then why are the sex buyers not telling their wives, girlfriends and families that they use or have used sexual services from prostitutes?

Sextrade101 believes that prostitution is not a choice, but it's lack of choice that keeps women and girls enslaved. We believe that everybody should be shown a viable way out of the sex trade and not be encouraged to stay in it. We believe in helping people understand the full price of life in prostitution before they become involved and in helping women get out alive with their minds, bodies, and spirits intact. We have all been collectively afraid, raped, beaten, sold, disregarded. Most of us were also children who were forgotten, neglected, abused, used, led astray, abandoned and not protected.

Sextrade101 members and advocates are current and former prostituted women. We have a huge concern with the criminalization of prostituted women and girls. We have seen that diversion programs for prostituted women and girls are not the only the solution for everyone. We also have seen that a lot of money has gone out for support services, but we're still in this kind of silo.

Some 85% of Sextrade101 advocates and members have experienced pimp violence. This is pretty far from the picture painted by the Supreme Court of Canada, which is that pimps are nice guys. These pimps and sex buyers are the problem. They're the ones who abuse and in some cases kill.

I supported my daughter throughout the missing women inquiry, and the outcome was this: Our mothers, sisters, and daughters are not born to be used and sold for men's sexual needs. We are not commodities.

Also, we want to talk about linguistics. There's nothing in the native language, in indigenous languages, that describes selling sex, so if it's not in our language, it's not for our women.

I applaud former minister MacKay for the creation of Bill C-36, because he recognized the inherent dangers and abuses for those who are prostituted. That bill was a victory for survivors and those who are stuck in a vicious cycle of indignity and pain.

We need to look at the numbers, which show that 52% of human trafficking victims are native and that the average age of exploitation for a native girl is 12 years of age. Ninety-eight per cent of the women that Sextrade101 has worked with have said that they have wanted out at some point.

As a sex trade survivor, I thank you so much for giving me the honour of speaking on behalf of the survivors in Sextrade101 and all the Anishinabe survivors across Canada, whether they are still in or have exited.

What we're seeing now is the increase of girls using social media as a tool for their exploitation, only as sugar babies, as Trisha pointed out, there is now a niche for native girls. When I was in the game, we never said we were native, because we knew if we said we were native, we would be in trouble. We would be in trouble by being assaulted or whatever, so we hid our identities.

Just last week I had a young woman from northern Ontario sleeping on my couch because the treatment centre that we paid $20,000 for to get private drug and alcohol treatment took one look at her and said she wasn't fit for their program. We had nowhere to send her, and at that moment, after 15 years of injecting drugs, she just wanted.... She was done. We had to think outside the box and figure out something radically fast.

● (1150)

I've seen a lot of money going into this, and not a lot of action. We don't have a safe house for indigenous women here in Ontario. We have a lot of religious-run safe houses, and I'm sorry, it's not a fit for my girls, my indigenous girls. I always get emails. Every week I get this “Hi, Bridget, we feel that this survivor fits your criteria.” Why? It's because she's indigenous and she's opened her mouth and said what she feels is best for her.

I don't know where to put them. I don't know where to put them, and I'm putting my children at risk by having them in my home, but I can't send them anywhere else, so we have this girl right now who has had 15 hard-core years on the street. She survived an attempted murder. I can tell her story and sit here and say, “Holy cow, she's doing good.” We have her in a bush camp and she's off drugs, and that's a big accomplishment. I told her that in 35 days your brain will retrain itself.

We're in crisis. I was in Thunder Bay, and they're buying women left, right and centre. The Thunder Bay police don't want to be burdened with the issue of exploitation, and they don't even want to admit that there's human trafficking going on. The pretty native girls are being farmed to southern Ontario and trafficked along the Golden Horseshoe.

What I'm seeing now, and Trisha is saying this, is that we're burying our daughters. I'm seeing girls that I was out there in the trenches with, and now it's daughters. It's intergenerational. If we don't help them figure out their potential, we're creating room for the new generation. It's happening. I'm now seeing grandma, mom and grandchild. Let's add fuel with a pandemic and now an opioid crisis, and we have the perfect brewing pot for exploitation.

When a prostituted indigenous woman is murdered, we see what happens. It's the Cindy Gladues and everything.

I guess what I'm trying to say is that we're in crisis here, and especially in northern Ontario. I'm only in northern Ontario for one week out of the month. I go to Thunder Bay. That's my job. Nobody knows where to go, and the people who are providing frontline help are putting themselves in harm's way to help women exit. If we just had a place to send them, like a one-stop shop, it would be so much easier.

What we're trying to do at Sextrade101 is mentor them. We don't have core funding like that. We have to get funding through another organization, but to this day, our recidivism rate back into prostitution is only at 4%. Obviously we're doing something right.

With that, I'll say *meegwetch*, and I'm up for questions.

Thank you.

● (1155)

The Chair: Ms. Perrier, thanks so much. It's remarkable testimony.

We'll go now to Janet Gobert. Take as much time as you need. Please go ahead.

Ms. Janet Gobert (Community Initiatives Coordinator, Bonnyville Canadian Native Friendship Centre): My name is Janet Gobert, and I am of Ojibwa descent from the Peepeekasis first nation in Saskatchewan.

I currently serve as the community initiatives coordinator with the Bonnyville Canadian Native Friendship Centre located in Bonnyville, Alberta, which I acknowledge is Treaty 6 territory and is a traditional gathering place for many indigenous people.

The Bonnyville Canadian Native Friendship Centre is dedicated to bridging the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous people culturally, socially, economically and recreationally by promoting communication and delivering effective programming within our community.

In 2020, I acknowledged a gap in service provision that could be addressed by a project called Iskwew Iskowtew, or “where women heal by fire”. It implements promising prevention and intervention practices that advance knowledge and enhance empowerment supports for at-risk populations and survivors of human trafficking in the Bonnyville and Lakeland region.

The objective of this program is to reduce violence against women and human trafficking through evidence-based programming, which includes, but is not limited to, providing a safe haven where clients will have access to relevant programming and support services. Utilizing a wraparound approach, our holistic crisis support mentor, peer support worker, indigenous wellness worker and critical incident stress management coordinator deliver consistent programming with traditional knowledge keepers who share their understanding on site in addition to providing access to land-based activities and cultural ceremonies.

During the development of this program, I acknowledged that assisting indigenous women and girls transitioning out of sex work would require the support of numerous organizations within the community to address issues such as education, housing, employment, mental health and substance abuse issues. Hence, a board indicative of the aforementioned was established.

It was noted within our meetings that there are three essential components that are necessary to the creation of social and political change within the sex trade. These are social services, law enforcement and community education. I would like to address the latter.

With regard to our service area, it was identified that our program needed to concentrate on community education. Within our community and surrounding area, human trafficking is not acknowledged, and this is a barrier that we need to overcome. It was duly noted that opening this Pandora's box within the community would need to be navigated with accurate information, education and promotional tools in order to be effective. This component of our program will be executed no later than September of 2021, with continued ways of change in its wake.

The debate that surrounds laws and regulations placed upon prostitution-related offences is rooted within a framework that distinguishes prostitution as either sex work or sex trafficking. As the former represents a choice in regard to prostitution, the latter represents forcible containment within the sex trade. As legal responses to prostitution-related activities vary depending on a community's social, political and economic commitments, criminalizing sex trafficking victims renders their experiences of violence and labour exploitation less visible, thus producing a tendency to discount the human rights of women involved in sex trafficking.

As sex trafficking in Canada is inherently harmful and dangerous, specifically towards indigenous girls and women, a public policy change must be enacted in order to address such issues. The issue of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls is a sociological phenomenon in Canada that is entrenched within Canadian policies, laws and institutions. In Canada, indigenous women and girls form only 2% of the total population, yet they constitute 16% of the total population of women who are murdered or go missing.

Traffickers choose vulnerable, exploited women because they are perceived as expendable, thus reducing them to the status of a mere sex object rather than an actual human being. Often we have victim-blamed these women for their own murders due to their high-risk lifestyle, such as working in the sex trade, whether by force or by choice.

By creating a program in the Lakeland region that addresses issues such as education, employment, housing, mental health and treatment services, we make it much simpler to create an exit strategy for women within the sex trade. As indigenous women and girls in Canada face these socio-economic issues, this project could help to reduce the rate at which these women are involved in human trafficking, go missing or are murdered.

● (1200)

Finally, the lack of knowledge surrounding sex trafficking and the laws that pertain to its origin are why it is so difficult to detect the sex trade as well as to exit from it. It is integral to understand that these women live their lives in the community as grandmothers, mothers, daughters, sisters and friends.

I would like to thank each one of you for this opportunity to share our new program initiative with you.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We're going to go to rounds of questions now. We're a bit limited today because of the lengthy but brilliant testimony, but it is so important for us to hear it.

Please remember that the two people who are cited as analysts are remarkable in their ability to extract and put together for the purposes of our reporting the information that you've provided. As much as we'd love to continue questioning for a long time, everything that you've said is important and will be captured in the report that we will eventually prepare.

That said, we're going to go now to a round of questions for six minutes each.

Mr. Viersen, you're up first.

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank our witnesses for being here today.

I want to acknowledge the pain and harm that you've experienced from traffickers and men who buy sex. I want to thank you for choosing to appear at this committee in spite of all your pain. I hope that we can bring our committee to some understanding of the realities that Canadians across this country face and help to prevent others from being trafficked, so thank you very much.

Previous witnesses talked a little bit about the role of group homes and child welfare systems as places where youth are lured from. I was wondering if I could get each of you to comment about that a little bit.

We'll start with Trisha.

Ms. Trisha Baptie: Child welfare, in the simplest of terms, is a complete, unmitigated disaster. It is horrible.

I was at my mom's house. Someone came and told me to pack my stuff in a garbage bag, and 45 minutes later I was in a house where I didn't know anyone. There was some guy who kept grabbing my ass, and when I told my social worker I didn't want him to do that, she laughed and said, “Boys will be boys; just stay out of his way.”

We need to be working on keeping families together. Yes, that can be hard, but it's still the best. My group home was so unsafe, and since no one listened to us about how unsafe it was, we decided we would rather take our chances out on the streets. I was 12.

You know, you're on the streets and you meet a guy named Telly, and Telly invites you back to his place. You have drugs and alcohol, and you think you're so cool because Telly wants to hang out with you, and suddenly you understand that everything comes for a price, right? That price is sex at 12, when he's probably in his thirties or forties.

I think we need to also expand what “family” means. I think colonialism has put a very narrow definition on what “family” means.

I'm sorry that I'm stuttering. I don't even know where to start. It's just so bad. We need to tear it down and start all over again. That's the only way I see it working. I've been a foster parent for my friends' kids and I've done emergency placements for whatever reason, and kids want their parents no matter what. Let's fix those parents so that we can fix those kids so that this ongoing cycle of in and out of care can stop.

That's all.

● (1205)

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Thanks, Trisha.

Bridget, would you comment?

Ms. Bridget Perrier: What I'm seeing with child welfare.... I was lured out of a child welfare-run girls' home. The older girl that lured me and got me into prostitution was my older sister.

Staff didn't have a clue. They were maybe five years older than some of us. They were young girls working in a group home with haywire teenagers.

I was set out to fail right away. We know that when non-indigenous people adopt indigenous children, 97% of the adoptions fail. My parents were told that. A good thing is that my adoptive parents always stuck by and would go look for me.

Just last week I was in Thunder Bay and I was talking to a survivor, and she didn't even know who her child welfare worker was because she'd had 14 worker changes. Her daughter is showing high-risk behaviours, and nobody's listening to her. When I talked to the worker, the worker didn't know what I was even talking about.

The issue is that child protection was designed from the get-go to fail indigenous people. Like Trisha.... I'm actually the first survivor in Ontario to adopt a child. I'm fostering a high-risk 14-year-old right now whose mother is out there on the street. For us to get her treatment by saying that she's at greater risk to be trafficked is....

My foster daughter comes home from the treatment centre and says that a staff member drove her to a hotel at 14 years old. The 21-year-old staff member drove her to a hotel. The staff member has been fired and all that, but still, what is going on? I'm a mother of four girls. I had to battle child welfare to keep my children with me. Even to this day, when they knock on my door, I still feel like, “Uh-oh, I did something bad.” There's that threat.

My kids are older now. My youngest is nine. It's over my dead body that anyone's going to ever take my kids from me. I have a little boy that was massively injured. His mother too, my niece, was exploited. My son received an injury in the care of Children's Aid, a broken neck. If that injury happened in my house, all my children would have been removed, but because it happened in a registered foster home, it's brushed under the rug. So many other kids' stuff has been brushed under the rug.

I get it. There is a protection element when a girl is very vulnerable, especially when we're dealing with a mom who's in prostitution or in the midst of exploitation. We have to protect the young children. However, we need to look elsewhere, at family members or whatever. We need to look at whatever will work for that person. I really don't have many nice things to say.

● (1210)

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Viersen, we're well over time, and in fairness, we'll.... Perhaps the question will get picked up again.

I'm going to ask Ms. Zann to go ahead for six minutes.

Ms. Lenore Zann (Cumberland—Colchester, Lib.): Thank you. *Wela'lioq*. I come to you today from the unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq here in Nova Scotia.

First of all I want to say thank you so much to each of the witnesses for their very moving stories and personal experiences, their lived experiences. It takes a lot of courage to speak out. It takes a lot of courage to share these stories with others, and until more people come forward and are heard and have people actually listening and ready to act, you're right to say that this cycle will continue.

Regarding human trafficking, Canada, our government, is guided right now by the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its supplementary protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons, especially women and children. It's been organized around four pillars: the prevention of trafficking, the protection of victims, the prosecution of offenders, and working in partnership with others. There's a new one that's been added, which is called empowerment.

They've added this particular new one to enhance supports and services to victims. I have to say there's about $75 million that is going to be coming over six years, including $57.22 million over five years, and with $10.28 million ongoing to implement an enhanced suite of initiatives to help strengthen our response and fill critical gaps.

That said, how much of this issue do you feel has to do with organized crime, and how much do you feel has to do with just individuals who are exploiting women and children?

Who would like to go first? Karen Pictou, would you like to go first, and then Ms. Perrier and Ms. Baptie and Ms.... I can't see your name there.

The Chair: You only have about three and a half minutes.

Karen, please go ahead.

Ms. Karen Pictou: It is 100% completely tied to organized crime.

I can interconnect this. The last thing I was going to talk about actually was that when I was 13 years old, I had disclosed sexual abuse and became a troubled teen. I was put in a group home. During my time there, we had pimps at the door daily trying to drive us to the mall, trying to do different things to get us and to groom us. There was also a police task force called the pimp task force. They would come in and give us lectures and talk to us about the North Preston's Finest gang and this and that. At this time in the early nineties, out in the street child prostitution was huge. You could walk down Hollis Street on any day of the week at any time and see 12-year-old, 13-year-old, 14-year-old girls openly selling sex. All of these girls were being pimped by organized crime leaders. That continues to this day.

Here in Nova Scotia, we do see this continuously. Various groups, including the Hells Angels, traffic women here in the province online and on the street and bring them across the country to traffic them. It is 100% connected, and I would laugh at anyone who says otherwise, because I've seen it first-hand. I know the individuals involved, I understand the structure, and I understand that the majority of women who are being pimped are not even fully aware of who their actual pimp is. Because of the way it is structured, the pimp has another woman, a higher-ranking woman, who does the pimping for them, and you don't even necessarily meet the man at the top. That's how it goes, so 100%, Lenore, I guess it is connected.

● (1215)

Ms. Lenore Zann: Thank you.

I don't think I have any more time, but Ms. Baptie....

The Chair: Go ahead.

Ms. Trisha Baptie: It's probably a bit different out here in B.C. We do have organized crime. I wouldn't say it's 100%. There are a lot more “Romeo” boyfriends and there's a lot more grooming of girls at 17 to get them in at 18. There's a bit of a different dynamic out here.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Thank you.

Ms. Perrier, would you like to add something?

Ms. Bridget Perrier: We do have organized crime here in Toronto and in northern Ontario. The Galloway Boys are big in Thunder Bay, Ontario. They have an infestation of Toronto gangs up in northern Ontario that are bringing girls out, but we also have Asians. The triads basically own all of the massage parlours and are given licences by the City of Toronto to keep open and keep servicing men. We also have North Preston's Finest. It's not so big. We don't have street prostitution like it used to be here in southern Ontario.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Thank you so much. I think that's all the time I have.

The Chair: Well, maybe Janet could go ahead.

Ms. Lenore Zann: Okay, thanks.

Ms. Gobert, are you there?

Is she on mute?

The Chair: No, she's not.

I can't hear you, Ms. Gobert. We'll get that solved in a moment. We need to move on to our next questioner for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Bérubé, you have six minutes.

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

I am in the constituency of Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, on the unceded territory of the Cree and the Anishinaabe.

Everything you have said today is very harrowing. You have a lot of courage to be here before the committee today. You have gone through terrible things: exploitation and violence. Once again, I greatly admire the strength that you are showing by being here today.

Let's talk about the way trafficking young children starts.

How do you know that those children have been subjected to it? Is there a process? How did you manage to get out?

You can all answer my questions.

[*English*]

The Chair: Who's first?

Go ahead, Karen. Would you like to start?

Ms. Karen Pictou: For me, personally, how did I get out of human trafficking? I was arrested. I had been beaten and stabbed in the stomach. My face was smashed in and my teeth knocked out, and one of my neighbours called the police. The police came, brought me to the hospital and then proceeded to put handcuffs on me. They said that the man, who was my pimp, accused me of stabbing him in the shoulder. They arrested me for assault causing bodily harm and assault with a weapon.

I ended up in jail in Toronto, and I finally got to call my mom. Those of you who know my mom know she's a fighter. My mom, Maurina Beadle, took on the Supreme Court of Canada and won Jordan's principle for her son Jeremy.

My mother is also a social worker. She saw those signs of what was happening to me. She tried to intervene, but I was lost. I was in love. I thought I knew the world and I didn't listen and I left. She worked with a police officer named Tony Ryta in Toronto. He was part of the Toronto prostitution task force. He kept her updated every day that he saw me on the street. He would talk to me and say, “You know, your mom wants you to come home.” I would ignore him.

That day that I was arrested was my saving grace, because I didn't go back there. I had boundaries and I wasn't allowed to leave Toronto and my house was within an area where I wasn't allowed to be, but my mom came up and worked with the courts to have me allowed to go back to Nova Scotia. When I went back to Nova Scotia, I was able to get into Tawaak Housing, which is a subsidized indigenous housing in Halifax. I proceeded to go to family court to win back custody of my two youngest daughters, who were under temporary custody orders with my pimp's sister. I won, and then my life changed from there.

If we look at the signs, we see that one of the signs is that all of a sudden a daughter or a two-spirited person is in love and keeping secrets and has lots of money and is taking off without telling their mother where they're going; talking about dreams in other cities and keeping the person they're dating under wraps, not wanting to introduce them to the parents.

There are a number of different red flags, but ultimately, I think one of my suggestions of what needs to happen, speaking from my experience and my mother's experience, is that we need to have a full support system for parents and loved ones who are trying to get their daughters out and trying to get their daughters home. My mother did it alone and was lucky for that connection with Tony Ryta. She felt that she was connected, that she knew that her daughter was alive.

That support needs to happen. By the time the police find you in one province, it's so quick to be gone to another province, and then the search happens again. Our parents, our loved ones, need support and love to be able to continue this fight.

● (1220)

The Chair: Is there someone else? Ms. Perrier or Trisha, would you like to comment?

Ms. Bridget Perrier: What we're seeing is the grooming process, and the grooming process would be done by the bottom bitch. I'm going to use the terminology that traffickers use.

The grooming process consists of either getting them in debt with drugs or giving them purses or whatever. I was groomed by my own sibling. It was really easy. I was amazed that there was someone who looked like me, who spoke like me, and she was fully involved in prostitution. She had already been introduced at the age of 11. She brought her younger sister in. It was very easy.

Traffickers don't take empowered young girls under their wing. I never met an empowered young girl who got pulled into prostitution. Usually the pimps know. They know the broken home, the sexually abused, the traumatic sexual event. Any young girl or young LGBTQ person who has had some sort of trauma is very vulnerable. We have to look at that vulnerability.

I know Detective Ryta really well. Back then he was in the morality unit. He used to try to do things to scare us out the game, and we'd just look at him. What happened to me was I was in jail. I got out of jail three days before my son died. I had to go through losing a child who.... My son had leukemia and he was very vulnerable. I could have brought him home any kind of illness. I had to pinky-promise him that I would never go back to work. I kept that pinky promise, but I had good parents. Still I remember not being able to breastfeed my first child because of the dissection that had happened to my body.

I'll pass it off to Trisha.

● (1225)

The Chair: Be very quick, Trisha. We need to get to our next questioner.

Are you okay? I've got the same thing.

Ms. Trisha Baptie: Sorry.

If you want to see grooming, it looks so different today from what it did 30 years ago. You need to go online. That's where it's happening. It's happening on Snapchat, on Twitter. It's happening online. The best resource to find out what grooming looks like right now is a website called.... It's by Gail Dines, and her website is.... I'll get it to you guys. I will. It's absolutely the best website for dealing with that.

As for how I got out, I don't think there's a story there. I met great people. They helped me. I got out.

What I want to talk about is my friends. They had to move mountains to get out, because they were indigenous. Here in Vancouver, aboriginal housing is right next to our Downtown Eastside, which is right next to our drug dealers, and then the services to help them get out are two blocks away from the stroll. Apparently this is so they feel safe in the neighbourhood and they can find resources in the neighbourhood.

I would argue that this keeps them in. My friends who lived in.... I was able to live with my kids in a neighbourhood outside of Vancouver. No one ever put me together with my kids. For women in aboriginal housing and use aboriginal services.... They are using services and they are trying to get out, but it's also a way to keep them under surveillance, and they're never given a chance to get out from under that thumb unless they have people who are really rallying and working with them.

I think that's very unfair. I think it's unfair that I get to leave the area of my exploitation and they have to live there. We need to be looking at things like that.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

Ms. Blaney, please go ahead for six minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Thank you, Chair, and I want to thank all of you for your testimony. I think the history of indigenous women being trafficked is Canadian history that goes so far back. I think of my granny, who was in residential school and at 16 got married off to a carpenter in the community who was significantly older than she was. I remember hearing that story and thinking, “That explains some things.”

I want to thank you all for telling that story, and for also understanding how systemic it is in our system.

My first question is going to come to you, Karen. You talked about the government cutting money while you're being asked to do even more. I heard testimony from everyone about the lack of resources and not knowing where to put people who are trying to escape trafficking.

I wonder if I could come to you first, Karen, and then I will come to you, Madame Gobert, because I haven't heard from you yet. I would love to have you answer that question, and then I'll continue on.

Ms. Karen Pictou: Certainly.

Shortly after I began this role just a little over three years ago, we received $100,000 per year for a three-year period through our national umbrella organization, NWAC, as federal core funding. However, leading up to the end of that agreement, there still is no decision being made, so now we are faced with the fact that if we do not get money into our bank account from federal core funding, we will lose a large portion of the capacity that we currently have at the Nova Scotia Native Women's Association.

We have secured long-term provincial core funding. However, that only pays for our rent and the salary of our core staff, which would be three individuals. It certainly is by no means enough [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] this work.

I might also mention that the only other thing that is keeping us afloat at the moment is the short-term funding that we've received from WAGE for a couple of different projects. Part of the problem here is that although the project proposal-based funding continues to keep us in a state of survival, when we're in a state of survival, we cannot look at those long-term goals. How do we plan five to 10 years out if we don't even know if we'll have funding to exist then or if we'll have the programs and services that we need to support? We need 100%.

For the Jane Paul centre, we have received five years of funding from the Department of Justice, so we have three years left. That is in the amount of $150,000, which does not even pay salaries. It literally pays the rent, utilities and insurance to keep the doors open.

We need a commitment from Canada that these programs and services and the organizations delivering them are important and deserve an investment of sustainability, because we know this issue is not going to go away overnight. Simply put....

I guess I'll just leave it there. Thanks.

● (1230)

The Chair: Ms. Gobert, could you try again with your mike?

That's good. Go ahead.

Ms. Janet Gobert: I can't speak from personal experience, but as a community initiatives coordinator in dealing with this group of women, housing was definitely an issue.

Approximately a year ago at the friendship centre, we opened a men's shelter. However, we've seen a transition happen with the client base that was accessing it. Right now, we're in the beginning steps of transitioning it into a women's shelter for those who have been affected by human trafficking.

As Karen said, funding is definitely an issue right now. We are using funds that we have received from head office for the fourth round of COVID funding. Yes, we do have short-term funding from WAGE as well, but I guess our issue is that when we look at transitioning this to a women's shelter, we're looking at little blocks of funding, so right now we would only be looking at operating for a one-year period.

Is it absolutely necessary that we have long-term funding? Yes, it is. We cannot offer service without keeping these women safe, so without having that shelter for these women, our work is pointless.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you for that.

Ms. Perrier, you talked about people having to stay in your house because there's nowhere to send them. I'm curious as to whether you could talk about the concern you have around a limit of resources and not having a place to send folks so that they are safe.

Ms. Bridget Perrier: There's a lot of money. I'm seeing millions of dollars for initiatives, but nobody has opened up an on-site, three-siloed safe space for women. I can't send these women to battered women's shelters, because first of all, they're putting the other women at risk. Cross-contamination happens, and I don't think that's where healing begins. We need to have our individualized area and treatment centres.

To be really truthful—and I'm here to speak the truth—it's a big cash cow. Human trafficking is the new thing, and people are eloquently writing proposals, getting millions of dollars and doing nothing. A prime picture is Thunder Bay, as well as Toronto. In Ontario, we have nowhere to send indigenous women who are exiting the sex trade unless I farm them out to Manitoba, but they're at capacity too. Therefore, we have nowhere for them.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: That's my time.

The Chair: We're going to go on now to the next round, and I think, judging by the clock, we'll have at least one intervention from each of the parties represented on the committee.

Gary Vidal, you are up first. You have five minutes.

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

I too want to thank our witnesses today. I'm not going to pretend to be able to even acknowledge the pain and the suffering that you've experienced in some of your journeys. I can't even imagine that. However, I want to thank you for coming and sharing your journeys with us to help us understand this as parliamentarians and try to move forward in a way that might offer some solutions for the future. I appreciate that.

Over 50% of the survivors of sex trafficking in Canada are indigenous women and girls, even though they make up 4% of the population. This is obviously a huge challenge.

You've referred to a number of things as you've each spoken. We've talked about the child welfare system. We've talked about public policy changes. We've talked about exit strategies. We've talked about a number of different things. What I'm looking for from each of you is just a recommendation that would be very significant from a prevention perspective. I get the challenges exit-wise, but how do we stop it in the first place? What are some really practical things that the Government of Canada could do that would help to prevent young women and ladies from even being put in this place?

I think I'll start with Ms. Gobert because she hasn't had an awful lot of opportunity today, and then each of the other witnesses could take a minute of my time and answer that question if they can.

● (1235)

Ms. Janet Gobert: Sure.

When we talk about empowerment.... I'm not sure which witness said that the empowerment of girls means they will not be able to be trafficked. That is something that has been discussed over and over again within our board. What we were looking at in that regard is going into the schools. I know it has been done over and over, but switching it to have a cultural aspect to it is what we're going to be attempting to do.

The Chair: Who'd like to go next?

Go ahead, Karen.

Ms. Karen Pictou: First off, in Nova Scotia one simple way to prevent future human trafficking is to stop the Goldboro LNG mining plant that is scheduled to happen. The Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia will own a work camp with 5,500 temporary workers that will be located just outside the borders of Paqtnkek First Nation. I guarantee you that there is no training we can do and that there are no policies that we can put in place to keep our women, girls and two-spirit people safe. If and when indigenous women, girls or two-spirit people are harmed from this project, it'll end up being the Mi'kmaq who are liable, because they own the work camp.

This needs to end. We do not need this. The Mi'kmaq will not benefit enough to risk our lives and to gamble the well-being of our communities in order to house this project. I guarantee you that stopping the Goldboro plant will prevent human trafficking in Nova Scotia.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Perrier.

Ms. Bridget Perrier: We're going to go back to empowerment. I think we need to teach our boys not to rape. I think it just goes.... It's not about our little girls. Why is it always our females who have to bear the brunt of men's bad behaviours? I think we need to have “buyer bewares” throughout Canada to warn that if you're in this city, this territory, to buy sex, you're going to be publicly shamed.

If you put accountability on the men who are causing the problem, then it could mean putting a revenue-type thing on it, making more sex buyer busts, making them pay for us. I really think that when you tell them, “Hey, if you're caught buying sex in this neighbourhood, your car's going to be impounded, your vehicle's going to be tagged and your wife's going to get a letter”—or your spouse, your work or whatever....

I just think that we need to put the onus back on the buyers. That's my whole thing. It's the buyers. If we didn't have the demand, we wouldn't have this problem.

The Chair: Trisha, would you like to come into this?

Ms. Trisha Baptie: I went to Sweden for three days. I was invited by the government to study the prostitution law they had just passed. I think we need to do two things that they did.

One was public education. All across transit, in the airports and everywhere, you'd see welcome signs saying that buying sex is a crime. They believe that, and they ingrained it into the fibre of their society. I went to a high school there because I wanted to talk to kids who had grown up under the new prostitution laws. I had 17-year-old girls tell me that they would not date boys who had looked at porn because they knew how much they were worth. This law changed the way they saw each other and the way they interacted.

If we want to change a country, we change the laws. We want laws that say this is ridiculous and you can go to jail for treating our women this way.

● (1240)

The Chair: Wow. Thank you for that testimony.

Jaime Battiste, go ahead, please.

Mr. Jaime Battiste (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Yes, thank you. My question is going to be for Karen Pictou.

Karen, I want you to talk a little bit about the Jane Paul centre and the resiliency centre that you have planned. How are these important examples of how we can use part of the money with the missing and murdered indigenous women's group to prevent violence against women, and racism as well?

Ms. Karen Pictou: I did speak a little bit about the Jane Paul centre and the resiliency centre. Essentially, the prevention work would be in family healing and empowerment, as we talked about. It wouldn't just be open for victims or for survivors; it would be open to all of our community members to take part in healing activities. It's to do different things that are culturally based, to provide opportunity, provide training, provide support, provide community, and provide acceptance and eliminate stigma. It's all of those things. Every day, the Jane Paul centre works to prevent death and to prevent violence.

I believe the work we're doing.... We have about 10 volunteers—although not so many right now, because of COVID—who come and work out of the Jane Paul centre who are former clients. That shows that something we are doing is working, and it needs to be recognized.

I believe that future generation is one way we're going to prevent exploitation. As I said, we need to to build up our own identities as Mi'kmaq women and understand our key role within family, within community and within our society. That needs to get returned to us.

Another way will be around having space and place. In Nova Scotia, for example, Highway 102 is the human trafficking corridor to the rest of the country. The majority of women who are coming out of human trafficking across Canada started in Nova Scotia.

Believe you me, we may not talk about it a lot. As you know, Jaime, a lot of times our women are stigmatized when they come forward and talk about these types of things that have happened to them. A lot of times they're silent. However, this building—our resiliency centre—will be a beacon of hope. You will see our building from the 102. It will be a beacon of hope so that if a woman can just get to our door, they'll be okay. I guarantee that they will be okay.

Another thing that we're doing is working in partnership. We don't want to duplicate services from any other organization. We work very closely with the YWCA and the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre. One of the things I'm doing in Sydney today is going to view some real estate. The Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre and the Nova Scotia Native Women's Association are partnering to open a home for women exiting human trafficking, as well as for women who are in need of a safe space. It will be located in Sydney. It will be owned and operated by indigenous women. Although that is a response to human trafficking, I know that it will also work as prevention, because our communities will be aware. There will be education. These women will survive and they'll be able to grow healthy families.

I'm sorry for the long-winded response. I'm trying to get in a lot in a short period of time.

Mr. Jaime Battiste: No, it was a good response.

Something I've always been curious about is this: If someone is seeking to leave trafficking and someone is in crisis or they feel they are vulnerable, what are the supports available for that person? Can they just call 911? Do they have culturally sensitive, relevant supports available so that they can just dial a number or send a text or log on to a website? Can you tell me what someone would be able to do and whether that is working?

● (1245)

Ms. Karen Pictou: Certainly I suppose you could call 911. I don't know that really that is the way it ever happens, though. I'm not aware of that.

I know that we do have a strong response within the police system in Nova Scotia, and we are very well connected with Corporal David Lane, who heads that group. They're certainly doing a lot to try to address this issue, but it's not working. It's not enough, and Constable David Lane would be the first to tell you that his back really is against the wall a lot of times. As soon as they start getting a track on someone, they move into a new province, and then there is this whole jurisdictional issue of trying to get the other province up to speed and so on.

To make a long story short, any woman who contacts the Nova Scotia Native Women's Association at any time of day, even if it's by pressing our Ring doorbell an the Jane Paul centre, can access someone at any time of day. Our new resiliency centre, once it is built, will have the same capability with a Ring doorbell. We'll bring them through to a safe space, even behind bulletproof glass, and hold them there until we can get them to safety. As the other lady said, if need be, we would bring them to our own homes. We have done that and we will continue to do that, but we shouldn't have to.

In Nova Scotia the only shelter available for women exiting human trafficking is church-based. I don't need to explain to you how problematic that is for indigenous women and girls here in Nova Scotia. There need to be alternatives, and that's why Pam Glode and I are ensuring that.... There's no money. We have no funding to do this. We're just doing it based on what we can gather up from donations to buy this building and to get it started. We believe that when we build it, the opportunity will come.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madame Bérubé, are you able to pose your question?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: Yes, Mr. Chair. My apologies, I had to step away.

Ms. Gobert, you said you want to see certain things happen. What are they?

[*English*]

Ms. Janet Gobert: I'm sorry, but could you repeat the question, please?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sylvie Bérubé: In your introduction, you mentioned some programs, especially education programs. You said that a Pandora's box must be opened and that political changes must be made. What are your recommendations for making those political changes?

[*English*]

Ms. Janet Gobert: I understand that all of the other witnesses are from larger centres, and this is quite a small community. What we have found is that there is such a roadblock when it comes to the RCMP and keeping these women safe.

I believe it was Karen who mentioned access, and I like what she said regarding this beacon and being able to press a button. That was something else that we had run into problems with. There was no funding, so the way we fixed that was that I now have a cellphone that is kept on 24 hours a day so that I can get out and help these women.

With regard to political change, I'm sorry, but I'm at an impasse. I do not know what I could recommend at this point. All I know is that something needs to change in order to keep our women safe.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Thanks, Madam Bérubé.

Rachel Blaney, go ahead, please.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair. I will go to Trisha.

You didn't get a chance to answer my question, and I will frame it specifically for you, based on your previous testimony.

You talked about the area where trafficked indigenous persons are and the fact that the aboriginal housing is right there. The services are a couple of blocks away, and they're staying in that area because they don't have an alternative.

When we talked about having the resources to support people who are trying to get out, you talked about the ability to leave and how beneficial resources are for you. Do you see a gap there in this particular case?

● (1250)

Ms. Trisha Baptie: It's a huge gap. There's a bit of push and pull, right? Some women are scared of leaving the area; they've never really left the area before. What does it mean to be out of the area? Some do feel more comforted being in the area, but my girlfriend has three kids and lives in aboriginal housing, which is not even 500 metres away from where we used to work. Now she's taking her kids by that area, and it's triggering her every day. How do you stay sober when you're triggered every day, right?

I think you're from B.C., right? In Vancouver here we call it poverty pimping. We have these monolithic organizations that try to take over every project that comes up, and in doing that, they trap everyone in this part of the city in an area of —I'll be generous—ten square blocks and then turn and look at people and say that they have all the resources they need, but they don't. They don't have anything.

In Vancouver here, we have harm reduction. We don't have recovery; that's too expensive. We don't have detox beds; that costs money. Giving a condom and a needle is the cheapest way to deal with this issue.

We need to find the political will to put money into resources that say we value our women—not only our indigenous women, who are absolutely owed that, but women, period. We have a Prime Minister who wants to say we have a feminist government or a feminist country; I call bullshit on that. I still can't get a peace bond for a woman who's black and blue. I still can't get police to take trafficking seriously.

I hate the word “trafficking”; it's prostitution. Trafficking is just a fancy new label for something that's been going on for millennia, which is men's sexual abuse of women, right?

Sorry. I went on a tirade.

What I think would be beneficial is to create programs outside the demographic of where women are abused and slowly work them into communities outside of what they know. I succeeded because I'm not walking by a crack dealer to go and get milk. I'm not walking down a street where every third car is asking me if I'm for sale.

We need to change the living conditions of women, and by that I mean that we need to expand the parameters of where they can live, because we've limited them to these little spaces that entrap them in a cycle over and over and over again.

Okay, I'm done.

The Chair: Wow. That's amazing testimony.

Members of the committee and witnesses, the analysts are tasked to provide our committee with a summary of the evidence from you, the witnesses. That's for our reference when the committee does reconvene, whenever that may be.

May I say on behalf of the committee that I'm so thankful for having had the opportunity to be in your presence and to hear what you have to say. The subtext, for me, is the self-esteem that you have, considering what you've been through in your life journeys. It would be very easy for any one of you to basically give up, and here you are fighting for what you know is right, based on your experience. I think that all of us need to learn that no matter where we are and whatever the influences have been on our lives, there's still a better outcome available if only we strive toward that, and that's why you are here today.

Our analysts will be capturing that. We're not finished with this study, but on behalf of all of our committee, I want to thank you so much. This has been life-changing, I'm sure, for all of us.

With that, this meeting is adjourned.