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Chair: Mrs. Karen Vecchio



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• (1545)

[English]

The Chair (Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 82 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women. Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of members. I'm just going to go off the fly here. We're going to switch in.

Right now, if you have anything online, just put up your hand online and I'll be sure we check in with you. Also, to let Andréanne know, the sound check has been done, so all the translators have been done. Just make sure your microphone, your telephone and your earpiece are not close together.

Now, I'm going to pass this over to Michelle, but I'm going to make one comment before I do.

As you saw, this was scheduled to go in camera. We have been in camera for the last six weeks. In order for me to make sure we could have a motion go through—for any member, if you have motions—let me know. Trying to go back and forth between in camera and public is very difficult. Therefore, I always try to make sure that the work of the committee can get done first.

Michelle, I'll pass it over to you for your motion.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri (Peterborough—Kawartha, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to everybody, and thank you to the FEWO committee for what we do.

In the two years that I've been elected, I've had a lot of people come forward saying that Canada is just not what it was, and a lot of it comes down to public safety.

This committee has done incredible work, I actually think, on human trafficking, domestic violence, mental health and youth, but there is an elephant in the room that is not being addressed. I think that we have a duty as the status of women committee to represent women. That is our job. That is what we are tasked to do.

There is no denying that we have seen an increase in crime in this country—people don't feel safe—in particular, attacks against women.

I'm going to read into the record the motion I've put forward. I'm putting it forward because it's becoming more of a conversation every day. People are asking, “What are you doing, Michelle? How do you fix this country? How do you correct the road we're on?”

I'll read into the record what it is, but we have a responsibility here to do this. I believe it's going to be circulated in both English and French. I think it was handed out on Friday when I put it forth.

I move:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee conduct a study regarding the recent increase in violence against women, including but not limited to the notable increase of sexual violence and assaults against women on transit systems in Canada; that the committee hold no less than eight meetings on the subject and report its findings to House; and that, pursuant to Standing Order 109, the committee request that the government table a comprehensive response to this report.

I was going through all the articles and all the news that has happened, because there is data, and I can put this forth to the committee if they want. These are statistics. Sexual assaults are up 72%. Women are the primary subject. There are charts and there is data, but it is the personal stories that we have to remember, because these are people at the end of it.

I want to read to you from a Global News article published February 3, 2023. It's about Julia Rady. She was assaulted on the TTC.

This is from the article. It says:

Rady said she has been living in Toronto and riding the TTC for over a decade; this incident left her in shock.

“(I remember thinking at the time.) I cannot believe this is happening to me and I remember thinking after as I am going to the hospital that victim you read about in the paper suddenly, there is a name and it's my name”....

“It was a very surreal experience.... It was unprovoked and it was random. Nothing that I did merited what happened to me but it did.... [I] reveal[ed] other things are at work within our society.”

I think that's really powerful, but as you can see, it's article after article of random attacks on women and people riding transit, being pushed in front of transit. If we want to show Canadians that we are this incredible committee that is committed to protecting women, we have to do this study and we have to do it soon.

I know there's a lot on the table, but I would ask for your full support in doing this study, and I welcome any feedback there is.

The Chair: I'm looking at discussion. I have Leah first.

Go ahead, Leah.

Ms. Leah Gazan (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Thank you.

Thank you, Michelle, for presenting that motion.

As I indicated too, just moments ago, I know that one of the motions I have forward for study is to study the red dress alert. Like you, I am concerned about safety. The red dress alert would alert the necessary authorities when a woman, girl or diverse-gender person goes missing. It is a direct response to dealing with public safety and what that would look like.

Although, I want to be very clear, I'm not opposed to your study at all, I think that as a committee we also need to get together to study the solutions we can put in place. I know it's in the budget, but it needs to also happen. It's one thing to mention it in the budget; it's another thing to make it happen. I feel it's urgent because we know rates of violence, particularly for indigenous women and girls and diverse-gender folks, are increasing. I just want to put that out there.

Thank you, Chair.

● (1550)

The Chair: Thanks so much, Leah.

We'll go back to Anna, and then Michelle and Andréanne.

Mrs. Anna Roberts (King—Vaughan, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I think the other thing that I'm seeing a lot of up in our region is that a lot of the female students at York University are afraid, when they have late classes, to walk home. There was a situation a few years ago where two students were brutally raped and murdered. They have security there. What is it doing?

I support your motion.

The Chair: Thanks so much, Anna.

Unfortunately, that is so true. That's such a terrible thing. Thanks for sharing.

We'll go back to Michelle and then Andréanne.

Go ahead, Michelle.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: I can hang on because I spoke already. I'll wait until the end. It's fine.

The Chair: No problem.

I'll go back. It's Michelle and Andréanne, then we'll go to Sonia and then we'll come back to you for rebuttal.

I'm sorry. It's Sonia, then we'll go to Andréanne, then we'll come to Anita and then we'll go back to Michelle.

Go ahead, Sonia.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu (Brampton South, Lib.): Madam Chair, this is so true. We have done great studies together. As you know, today we have our FINA letter to be approved. Every issue is very important for us.

I think we already went to the calendar. It's not like we cannot go on to study that. I think we need to first.... Leah has the red dress alert, and then I know some members already have a motion on the table. I think term by term we will do every study. I think every study is very important. I just wanted to say that.

The Chair: Thank you, guys, so much. You make it so easy to figure out where we're landing very quickly.

We have Andréanne, followed by Anita and then back to Michelle.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche (Shefford, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

The committee's most recent studies have been difficult. We studied cases of intimate partner violence. Committee members also met despite the pandemic expressly to study the disproportionate effects the pandemic was having on women. We saw that in terms of domestic violence and violence against women, the number of femicides in recent years has been alarming.

The pandemic seems to have exacerbated violence against women. That is why we also wanted to follow the recommendations in the Quebec report entitled "Rebuilding Trust", which looks at cases of violence. There have been calls for the federal government to take steps to ensure that people accused of violence wear a tracking bracelet, as Quebec and other provinces have done to counter the rise in cases of violence.

I'm trying to take as broad a view as possible.

We hear about assaults on public transport and in public places, but there are other forms of violence too. Over the summer, people in my constituency in Quebec asked me to broaden our thinking to include different types of violence. I'm referring here to the study and motion on coercive control tabled in committee.

Sexual assaults on public transport are horrifying, but it's just as horrifying to see women controlled by their partner and unable to break free from the cycle of domestic violence. Violence can sometimes be very subtle. There's sadly as much work to be done on hidden and discreet violence as there is on horrific assaults in public places.

I hope the committee will set itself the goal of looking into as many types of violence as possible. We could shorten our current study to begin the study on coercive control. This was also discussed by the committee. We need to determine how we can study the different forms of violence that still affect far too many women.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to Anita, and then Emmanuella online.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you.

I'm not speaking specifically on the motion, but more about how we're doing this and the process we're using. As committee members know, we have had several meetings in camera where we have sat down and some of us have put forward a notice of motion. I have a notice of motion from well over a year ago to do a study about the mental health of immigrant women who have faced sexual violence in conflict. I know that others have put forward what are really important motions to them.

I did that well before we even did the sports study. I'm finding that, as vitally important as Michelle's motion is, there is a fairness in this committee. We have sat down, for two years now, where each one of us has things we want to discuss. We've not done it with some emergency, half-hour public session to make sure that everybody out there knows that we're doing it, and then if we don't, it looks a little bit like an ambush, like we don't think that's an important issue.

Lots of issues have been raised—Sonia's one on health, and several others that I think are really important. This is such a good committee and such a consensus committee. I don't want to get to a point where we're all about just getting a clip to put on social media to embarrass each other when we're the committee that has done more reports and more good work—and all of it by consensus. We've heard and given voice to more women in this country than any other committee.

I don't think this is a fair way to do things. I don't want to say right now that I'm opposed to this, because everybody out there will think that I don't care about women on transit—which of course I do. I also think that people work really hard to put proposals forward, and then they say, okay, I'll put mine on the back burner because, say, the sports study is very urgent right now, or there might be another urgent one. Then they wait patiently and quietly to make sure that they get the study that they care about. I don't think this is a fair way to do things.

• (1555)

The Chair: I take that with great respect. Thank you, and I note that very much.

We have Emmanuella, then Dominique and Michelle, but I have Michelle back and forth in here a few times.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: You could go to Dominique.

The Chair: Okay. There we go.

Emmanuella, go ahead.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos (Saint-Laurent, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I'd like to first thank Michelle for bringing this forward. I think it's a very important subject, and one that definitely merits being studied and looked at by our committee.

With that being said, other points that were raised were very important as well. Leah's study, Anita's study and other studies that have been on the docket for a long time have been sitting there and

waiting. I actually have one that I would like to put forward as well after this, or bring it back, because Jenna is no longer on the committee, and it was actually her health study. I think it's really important, and I'd like to raise that as well.

There are many competing, very important issues that we should be looking at, so I wonder if eight meetings might be a little bit long. If we want to really fit in as much as possible and help Canadian women—and women in general living in Canada, as much as possible—we may want to limit the number of meetings per study, perhaps by looking at who we actually want to hear from on the study and seeing in how many meetings that could be possible.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'll pass it back to Dominique.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Dominique Vien (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Frankly, it's very difficult to decide. I understand, and I agree that each of the proposals and motions tabled and waiting to be dealt with is very important. With all due respect, I do not think we should tackle these proposals and motions in the order in which they are presented to us. I believe that, in this case, logic dictates that one motion that has been tabled before another motion does not necessarily take precedence. We must consider other aspects, and the aspect here is urgency, Madam Chair.

I'll speak for myself. As a woman, I am constantly in a state of hypervigilance, and it is unbearable. I go out at night, and I use public infrastructure. I am uneasy and perpetually on guard, on the alert. It's totally abnormal.

Ms. Ferreri clearly illustrated this situation through the newspaper articles she tabled. The issue is current, and current events are calling on us to address it. We've really put our finger on something. We need to do something about the daily lives of women and girls who go to school or work, and of some women who accompany their children on public transport—the subway, the bus, and so on. It's a matter of urgency and a priority situation because it is ongoing. We're talking about violence against women. We can see it and verify it, and we are all in a state of hypervigilance.

I support Ms. Ferreri's proposal.

• (1600)

[*English*]

The Chair: All in all, I think we already know where this is going to go. It's basically about in what order of precedence we are going to be doing this study.

There were three more hands that came up during that period of time. I want to take it to Michelle, because she has given up her time multiple times.

We'll go to Michelle, Marc and Leah, and then we'll figure this all out. Is that okay?

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thanks for the discussion.

Thanks, Chair.

Listen, I hear all of you. We always have this problem in this committee. There are a million fires to put out. How do you decide which one to put out first?

To Anita's question of why now. It's because people are messaging me. If they are not messaging you, I don't know if we're just getting different emails. However, public safety is in massive chaos in this country.

To Dominique's point, you can't just say, "Okay, this motion was in first." We are legislators in the House. We have to prioritize which fire to put out first, and we are the status of women committee. If women are being assaulted 72% more and they're the primary subject, that's an emergency.

To Leah's point—whom I work with very well—your red dress alert is critical. You know you have our support on that. Murdered and missing indigenous women and girls is a crisis, but it's already in the budget. We don't need a study on that. I'm saying I would back it up in another way to ask, "How do we put this in without a study?", because we already know it's critical. You already have our support. Maybe, procedurally, I'm being wrong, but let's do that. Do we have to sign a letter? What do we have to do? Let's put in a red dress alert. It's easy. Let's do that.

This is a study of legislation, of policy, of crime, of chaos and of public safety in our country. Why now? To Andréanne's point—who's very passionate and great at this—it's because coercive control is a horrible and awful issue, and we have dealt with such emotionally exhausting studies in status of women.... Those are deeply systemic, awful problems that we are going to have to solve as a country and as a culture. However, when we look at legislation and we look at more violations yet fewer people charged, we can fix that in Parliament. That is something we can actively, strategically do to fix public safety for people, for our daughters and for women in this country.

That would be my plea to you to put this in priority. I appreciate and respect all of your comments.

Anita, I am not trying to kibosh this committee. This isn't about a social media clip. This is about people writing to me. I see you shaking your head, and that's kind of disrespectful, if I'm going to be honest. If they're not writing to you.... These are the emails we get. These are the stats. This is the data. I am appealing to you guys to listen to that.

I appreciate the time. I appreciate what we've built in this committee. I definitely want to keep fighting for women.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks very much. I have Marc coming up next.

I know, personally, we are all trying to work to make sure that we're doing the best thing all of the time. If you're coming here for the first time, we want to make sure that we're working to make sure that women are having the best lives possible.

We're going to go to Marc, Leah, Anita and Sonia.

[*Translation*]

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

I thank Ms. Ferreri for moving this motion. Violence against women is certainly a problem. We all agree on that.

Clearly, there are several crises at the moment. One of the reasons we added the sports study to the agenda was its urgency.

I have done extensive work with the Indigenous Liberal Caucus. I therefore understand the importance of Ms. Gazan's motion. The situation of indigenous women in Winnipeg and across Canada is beyond dire, as is the crisis in general. Coercive control is also an appalling phenomenon.

However, I would like to talk a little about the process, and ask the committee if we can take a step back. At some other committees, the chair and vice-chair are asked to meet as a subcommittee to determine the priority studies.

Today we are going to vote on the motion, but there are other motions we'd like to consider. I just want us to be careful. Voting against the motion doesn't mean we're against it. It's just that there are many other studies we'd like to undertake. I think Ms. Ferreri understands that.

I request that we adjourn this debate to determine how we can sit down together and consider all of the motions. Ms. Gazan's motion, Ms. Larouche's motion, and many others are so important. They are all priorities. So we need to work together.

● (1605)

[*English*]

The Chair: The request is a dilatory motion to adjourn the debate.

Is that what you want to do right now?

That's fine. It's non-debatable when we get into adjourning debate. It's a recorded vote.

An hon. member: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

The Chair: We're in a dilatory motion, so we have to vote whether to adjourn.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I'd just like to respond.

The Chair: We can't because it is a motion to adjourn debate.

Mr. Marc Serré: I'll remove it then.

The Chair: I'm happy to do whatever.

Are you moving the motion, sir?

Mr. Marc Serré: I'm not moving it.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Let's just continue with the discussion and then we'll get on to the.... When we need you to do that, I'll give you the thumbs-up.

We have Leah, Sonia and Anna.

Leah, you had a comment.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I apologize for not adjourning, but I do have to address the red dress alert.

It is not easy. It is in the budget, but as we see from other budgets, it's not always spent. We need to decide as a community how this will roll out at different levels of jurisdiction. This cannot stay on the budget. This is a crisis. The Prime Minister acknowledged it as an ongoing genocide.

This is a real solution that can save lives. It can happen shortly, but we need a study. I do not oppose your study. We've had lots of studies on violence, but this is an opportunity for us to address that, to deal with this hands-on and then move on.

In my riding of Winnipeg Centre, this is costing lives. We lose kids every single day—young kids, especially those in child welfare. I really support what you're doing, but I also support active solutions. I know you're talking about constituents, but it's also about people knowing that this committee not only does studies but comes up with actions that are implemented to save lives. It would also help with what you're talking about on transit, where a lot of young girls are sex-trafficked. There have been reports of it. They could call a red dress alert.

We have support on this committee and from the government to implement it. We have support across party lines. We just need to implement it, like we do in our committee.

I'm sorry, Marc. I didn't adjourn, but if you want, I can call for adjournment. I just had to respond to that.

The Chair: Next is Sonia.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: Andréanne can go next.

The Chair: Okay.

Andréanne, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Madam Chair, what is happening to these women is obviously a tragedy. I think committee members agree that it's not a matter of choosing on a first-come, first-served basis, and that sometimes there are urgent situations. We saw this in

the case of Sport Canada; it was in the news. We adjusted our schedule and bumped meetings to deal with the health of women and girls in sport.

I mentioned coercive control simply because I wanted to show that we still have other studies to carry out. I was not at all opposing this study. In fact, I was merely trying to strike a compromise. For example, instead of holding eight meetings, could we hold six? That would let us understand the urgency of coercive control. We could have six meetings and then move on to the other studies.

I am only trying to take into account how pressing this other type of violence is, and the various studies we need to do on other issues of concern to women. Having said that, I know that this study is more relevant, according to current events, at present.

The compromise I suggest to the committee is simply to reduce the number of meetings.

• (1610)

[*English*]

The Chair: I was sitting there talking to my vice-chairs for a second.

I have a few more people on the list here. I'm going to wrap it up, because it's very simple to me. I don't see a single person on this committee who is saying that we should not be doing this.

Right now, we are the status of women committee, where we work really hard and we get things done because we are women, plus Marc and, today, Iqwinder. I think what we really need to do is decide what direction we are going in.

We can adjourn the debate. All it means is that we adjourn the debate.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Madam Chair, I'd like to propose an amendment and a discussion about it, because we could take it into account for...

[*English*]

The Chair: To be honest, the reduction of the numbers is one thing that Emmanuella also brought up. I think that there are things.... I don't know if everybody is ready to accept this as is, because I think there are a few more things. I'm hearing everybody talk about what they want this to look like. I've heard coercive control. I understand all of these different things, but I...

At the end of the day, we can adjourn the debate and bring it back up, or we can vote on this but make sure it's amended to be in line with what we want, which, for a lot of us, because I think we really think through these things, that might not be the case. I understand the order of precedence. I know that there is a lot. That is the one thing we've always worked on collaboratively: What's next? In that case, this would be a "what's next?" decided by the majority of the committee. It is up to the committee as to how we want to proceed. I'm leaving it out there. We need to have that discussion. We know where this is going. Who wants to end it?

Andréanne, you have your amendment, which is asking for a few less....

I'm looking at some people to ensure we're recognizing that, if we do the debate on the amendment right now, that's what we're getting into. The only thing is whether this is exactly what we want.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Larouche, are you moving that the committee hold six meetings?

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Yes, Madam Chair, that's what I propose.

If we vote on the original proposal now, I'll move an amendment. If the committee decides to give itself time before voting, I agree. I proposed this because we were about to vote on the eight meetings, and I absolutely wanted the committee to have another choice. I'll give the committee time to think about it.

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay.

Are there any comments on anything?

Go ahead, Michelle.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: I support that—six meetings.

The Chair: Okay.

Right now, what we'd be doing.... If we want to do this, we can make it simple. The reduction would be the same motion with six meetings. The amendment to the motion would be for six meetings rather than eight.

Go ahead, Leah.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I know I have a bias. Women are literally dying in my community on a regular.... We have an opportunity to save lives. My head is focused on that red dress alert that I know we can get in place and that will not be a study but will actually save lives.

I need some time to think about this, because now we're looking at another study. We've had eight studies go through in this commit-

tee. We're rock stars on this committee. We are the best committee, but we have an opportunity to produce a tangible outcome. It's a really hard decision for me to make today. I'm wondering if we can adjourn debate so that I can thoughtfully think through my own bias about my study, because I feel that I can't be thoughtful right now. All of it is serious. Any violence is serious, and I don't want to minimize anything.

I'll leave it on the table. Thanks.

● (1615)

The Chair: I appreciate that. Is that an adjournment request?

I'm in a pickle, because I'm trying to figure out exactly where we're going on this one. Are you choosing to adjourn the debate?

Ms. Leah Gazan: Yes, I'm putting it on the floor to adjourn the debate.

Thank you.

The Chair: Okay. We'll have a recorded vote.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6; nays 4)

The Chair: Debate is adjourned for right now, but there are a couple of things we need to move on to before we go in camera.

Go ahead, Marc. Do you have a question?

Mr. Marc Serré: Quickly, I want to hear your comments, Madam Chair, on having the subcommittee look at the 12, 13 or 14 motions we already have on the table.

Is there a way for the subcommittee to help establish priorities?

The Chair: Absolutely. I'll work with the clerk and get this done. Our clerk is away, unfortunately, for a few days.

Let me go back to this: Just to give you the schedule for where we are going. On Thursday, we'll be coming back to the human trafficking study, so everybody will have that. We have recommendations coming out, and those have been compiled. Then, on Monday, we will be back again to the human trafficking study.

Will we be expecting version two at that time? It's not version two, so it's recommendations.

Next Thursday, we'll be starting our economic study on women, so make sure you have all of that in.

We'll now suspend for a few minutes so that we can go in camera.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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