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Chair: Mrs. Shelby Kramp-Neuman



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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mrs. Shelby Kramp-Neuman (Hastings—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 127 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women.

I would like to remind all members of the following points. Please wait until I recognize you prior to speaking. This is a reminder that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

[Translation]

Thank you all for your co-operation.

[English]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Wednesday, September 25, 2024, the committee will now commence its study of gender-based violence and femicides.

Before we welcome our witnesses, I'd like to provide a trigger warning. We will be discussing experiences related to violence and to femicides. This may be triggering to viewers with similar experiences. If indeed participants feel distressed or need help, they should advise the clerk.

For all witnesses and for all members of Parliament, it is important to recognize that these are very difficult discussions, so let's try to keep our conversations as compassionate as possible.

I would also like to note that in order to have an efficient and organized meeting, I will be indicating when you have one minute left and then when you have 30 seconds left, just to keep us on point.

Additionally, this is a reminder to the witnesses and to the members that we are not able to show any props during our testimony and our questions today.

For today's panel, as an individual, I would like to welcome Alison Irons by video conference.

In addition, we have Megan Walker, advocate to end male violence against women.

Representing End Violence Everywhere, we have Cait Alexander, founder.

Representing Safe Centre of Peel, we have Shelina Jeshani, director of strategic partnerships and collaboration, joining us by video conference.

Finally, from Women's Shelters Canada, we have Anuradha Dugal, executive director, joining us by video conference.

At this point, we will begin with our opening statements.

Ms. Irons, you have the floor. Please, go ahead.

Ms. Alison Irons (As an Individual): Good morning. I'd like to thank the committee for having invited me to speak today.

By way of introduction, I'm an ex-RCMP officer of nine years service who attended many so-called "domestic disputes" during my service. Also, at that time, I was on the board of the North Shore Women's Centre in North Vancouver, B.C., as a police adviser.

I've also worked as an Ontario government investigator and investigative manager for Ombudsman Ontario, primarily in the field of corrections, and I retired as a government director of enterprise-wide services. Further, I'm certified as a Canadian human resources leader, or CHRL.

Sadly, I'm also the mother of 26-year-old Lindsay Margaret Wilson, born July 30, 1986. My precious daughter and best friend was stalked and shot to death by her ex-intimate partner, a legal gun owner who never should have been granted a licence, in a murder-suicide on April 5, 2013, in Bracebridge, Ontario, just two weeks before completing her graduating exams. I accepted her degree from Nipissing University posthumously.

I want to emphasize to the committee that my daughter's assassin had never been violent with her until the day he murdered her in cold blood. He was clean-cut, articulate and from a well-to-do family of professionals in the community where he lived. He was also manipulative, artful and controlling with my daughter in a number of ways. He'd tell her she was the love of his life, but he would undermine her self-confidence by constantly criticizing her looks, her weight—she was slim, not overweight—her clothing choices, etc. She left the relationship twice when she caught him drug-dealing behind her back—another manipulation, as he was not the person he purported to be.

The first time, he lured her back with letters articulating his love for her, his apologies and the inevitable promises of changed behaviour. Occasionally, he [*Technical Difficulty—Editor*]

The Chair: Ms. Irons, you are frozen right now. I don't know if you can hear me, but we will suspend briefly while we fix it.

• (1105)

(Pause)

• (1105)

The Chair: I'm not certain if Ms. Irons can hear me, but whether she can or cannot, we will proceed to our next witness, just in the interests of time. There are approximately two and a half minutes remaining in Ms. Irons' testimony, so we will circle back to her.

In the meantime, I would like to welcome Megan Walker, advocate to end male violence against women.

Ms. Walker, you have approximately five minutes.

Ms. Megan Walker (Advocate to End Male Violence Against Women, As an Individual): Thank you so much.

I'm a lifelong advocate to end male violence against women. When I last appeared before you, on July 31, I outlined how dire the situation is for women and girls in Canada. I spoke about femicide and told you that between 2019 and 2023, 840 women and girls were victims of femicide. That number continues to increase, and will do so until it is recognized as a criminal offence.

Femicide must be named as an offence in the Criminal Code. Naming femicide will help families heal; it will help with data collection, and it will help raise community awareness, which is so desperately needed so that the community knows what questions to ask if they suspect a woman is being abused.

I was an affiant in the 2023 Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Reform v. Attorney General case. Superior Court Justice R.F. Goldstein wrote in that decision:

Some women and girls report being victims of torture, gang rape, mutilation, whipping, and waterboarding at the hands of [their sex] purchasers and exploiters.

He also wrote:

The violence employed by exploiters can include aggressive grabbing, open or closed hand strikes, kicks, choking, or burning victims using cigarettes or curling irons. Violence can lead to significant visible injuries. It can also [cause] death.

We live in a country where, due to the failure of government to act, it appears that some in government may consider women and girls to be nothing more than objects to satisfy the porn-fuelled fantasies of men. While Justice Goldstein used the term "sex work", I do not refer to any part of the commercial sex industry as work. It's not work. It's torture and can lead to femicide. Non-state torture must be added to the Criminal Code as a distinct crime.

If we are a country that truly wants to help women and girls to be safe, we need to invest in women and girls. They need a guaranteed living income, housing, counselling, education and other support services, and men need to stop torturing, raping and killing women.

Section 15 of the charter states:

Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

Women and girls are denied these rights. We are discriminated against based on sex. We are victims of femicide, killed because we are female. We are raped, assaulted, strangled and victims of non-state torture because we are female. Our homes are the most dangerous place we can be, a place where we are beaten and killed because we are female. We are objectified in every area of our lives because we are female. We are kept in poverty because we are female. We are denied opportunities because we are female. We are denied equal pay for equal work because we are female. We are denied justice in the legal and family courts. The courts ignore our evidence and call us liars because we are female.

The government has failed women and girls. It is the responsibility of the government to promote equality by creating legislative changes that comply with the Charter of Rights and Freedoms to guarantee that women and girls are equal before and under the law. My heart aches every time a woman or girl becomes a victim of femicide. Today I am thinking about Cheryl Sheldon, Breanna Broadfoot, Tiffany Gates, their families and all victims of femicide, including Alison Irons' daughter. Femicide is preventable. These women should be alive.

• (1110)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Walker.

Next, I would like to welcome, representing End Violence Everywhere, founder Cait Alexander.

Ms. Cait Alexander (Founder, End Violence Everywhere): Thank you for inviting me back to the committee.

I hope you can recall the photos I shared with the committee on July 31, 2024, which was the anniversary of my attempted murder. They captured four hours of torture at the hands of my ex-boyfriend, who still remains an alleged abuser. He was charged eight times, but his charter rights superseded mine. He is free without consequence.

I am a survivor of intimate partner violence and a victim of the Canadian injustice system. My ex was not successful in killing me, but this country kills justice, and it kills safety.

This is the remainder of my speech, which was not heard in the summer. It is a non-exhaustive list of solutions provided by survivors, lawyers and professionals in other industries.

Declare IPV, SA and femicide a national state of emergency. With increases of 68%, 75% and 27% respectively, this is very fair.

- Legislate and define the term “femicide” in the Criminal Code.
- Include men and male-identifying persons in ending male violence against women.
- Lawyers should be made available for victims pro bono before they report to the police, as we have an institutional culture of victim-blaming.
- Immediately hire more trauma-informed judges and court staff with mandatory, in-person training and updates about new legislation.
- Have police available at all times to take statements from an IPV or SA victim.
- Hold violent offenders in custody until trial or on house arrest with ankle bracelets. There should be a zero-tolerance policy for any abuser who breaks bail conditions, and he should immediately be held in custody.
- Create a registered IPV offender list. We have one for SA, and we desperately need one for IPV, starting at 16 years of age. Publicize this list on a website to protect women and girls.
- Name offenders publicly immediately. Femicide is not a private issue.
- Never use restraining orders, undertakings or peace bonds in egregious crimes that involve deadly force. They are not a solution.
- Bail must be increased and scaled to the income of the abuser. Actually enforce bail conditions. Any surety must pay the amount up front and forfeit it if the perpetrator commits another offence. This money should then go back into a fund to directly support survivors.
- Abusers who put meritless claims in the legal system should face severe penalties and criminal charges, including penalties for perjury.
- Have absolutely zero discrimination against sexual orientation, length of relationship, race or any other form of discrimination against victims. Abuse is abuse.
- All abusers who are convicted of any type of SA or IPV must complete in-person abuser programs, regardless of the intensity of the crime.
- Amend section 11(b) of the Charter of Rights, perhaps with Bill C-392. There should be no time limit or stay permitted with human-on-human crimes.
- Reformative justice is never to be utilized without the survivor's consent.
- Re-educate victim services, as, in its current state, it is retraumatizing and not safe.
- Do not revoke gun laws that protect victims and survivors.
- Survivors' privacy should be protected from abuse. There should be no NDAs or subpoenas of personal information. This is in section 278 of the Criminal Code.
- Provide criminal trials within a 90-day period. There must be no more waiting years and years on end.
- It should be mandatory that every province and territory has a cabinet office dedicated to IPV, SA and femicide.
- Funding should be available to support survivors in transition out of abusive environments with CPAs and other financial advisers.
- Victims should not have to pay for their own transcripts online.
- Restorative justice should still allow for a victim impact statement.
- Abusive fathers should never, ever have access to children.
- Make the punishment so severe that abusers will think twice, and when they proceed to abuse, actually follow through on condemning them to life sentences. Stop condemning the survivors.
- Act urgently. We continue to lose innocent women every single day. Honestly, we really need your help.
- Provincially, the NDP has been very vocal in supporting survivors. Federally, the Conservatives predominantly support us, save for a few non-partisan leaders who are actually putting people over politics. This clearly means that the harrowing issues survivors and victims face are being listened to not by the current governments, but only by the opposition parties. It also means that these issues are very explicitly non-partisan issues, so stop politicizing our fundamental human rights.
- We need to stand together, especially as women and especially the people in this room. It costs Canada over \$8 billion a year to deal with the aftermath of IPV alone. We could be preventing it with those funds. Prevention is worth more than the cure, and prevention is the only cure for femicide.
- Brkti Berhe was stabbed to death on Thursday in front of her children right here in Ottawa. It cost her everything. The cost for her children is immeasurable.
- This is the status of women committee, and the status of women in Canada is terrible. Stop kidding yourselves. Stop lying. Stop pretending. This type of behaviour is exactly what abusers use.

• (1115)

The hardest part is knowing that no amount of awareness, law or funding can bring back those who should have been survivors instead of victims. I cannot stand to lose another human being needlessly, based on bad policy.

Supporting survivors supports the community, but please do not mistake our kindness for weakness. We are not going away. The more you turn survivors away, the more we will band together. The more you try to silence us, the louder we will become. The more you ignore us the more visible we will be.

Will you stand on the right side of history?

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Alexander.

Next, representing the Safe Centre of Peel, we have Shelina Jeshani, director of strategic partnerships and collaboration, by video conference.

Thank you.

Ms. Shelina Jeshani (Director, Strategic Partnerships and Collaboration, Safe Centre of Peel): Good morning, Madam Chair and members of the committee.

My name is Shelina Jeshani. I'm the director of the Safe Centre of Peel, which is located in Brampton, Ontario, serving the region of Peel. I've had the privilege of addressing this committee on several occasions, and I convey my gratitude for today's invitation.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the many survivors who have courageously shared their stories, and I want to remember the women we have lost in our country as a result of gender-based violence. Femicide is the intentional killing of women, girls and gender-diverse individuals based on their gender, regardless of their relationship with the perpetrator. This can occur in various contexts, including intimate or familial relationships, or even when the victim doesn't know the perpetrator, such as in cases involving strangers. The unifying factor is the gendered motivation behind the killing, which distinguishes femicide from other forms of homicide.

Globally, women face disproportionate risks of gender-based violence, often ending in murder, solely because they are women. The data on intimate partner violence in Canada reveals a disturbing prevalence, though IPV remains under-reported. In 2023, Peel Regional Police alone responded to 9,570 IPV calls, with 486 of these cases involving strangulation—a clear indicator of escalating violence and a heightened lethality risk for victims. In 2023, the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses reported 62 femicides in Ontario, of which seven were in Peel Region.

The Ontario domestic violence death review committee identified femicide as both predictable and preventable, consistently highlighting common risk factors in cases that lead to femicide. To prevent these tragedies, the committee frequently recommends enhancing risk assessments, strengthening safety planning and expanding community-based support services. Additionally, they emphasize the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration, bringing together law enforcement, social services, health care providers and community organizations to build a unified response to intimate partner violence and to better protect those at risk.

The Safe Centre's model can play a crucial role in preventing femicide by providing a comprehensive, trauma-informed and survivor-centred approach to addressing GB violence. The Safe Centre is an innovative, evidence-based and best-practice model for how a community can work together to respond and provide a safety net for victims of IPV. The centre has been in operation since 2011 because of the commitment of our 24 community partners, led by Catholic Family Services Peel-Dufferin, which together provide an integrated and coordinated service delivery model.

As I have presented in the past, it took community organizations and the voices of survivors to dismantle silos, coordinate our service system response and provide holistic and integrated care. Survivors told us they did not want to have to repeat their stories over and over. They did not want to be told they couldn't bring their children with them to these different services. They often just gave up trying to travel from place to place and navigate a complex system they didn't understand. They didn't know where to go for help and what was really available for them. We were losing our early intervention opportunities.

The Safe Centre recognizes that cross-sectoral collaboration among human services is vital in responding to survivors of IPV. By providing a safe, confidential space, women experiencing abuse can access essential resources before violence escalates to the point of femicide. We understand that intimate partner violence does not begin with femicide. Instead, there are warning signs and patterns of escalating violence. At the Safe Centre, our partners are trained in risk assessment using a validated tool that allows us to approach risk in a unified, clear manner. This shared framework enables us to develop tailored safety plans that reflect each woman's unique circumstance, ensuring we meet each client's specific needs effectively and consistently. Our cross-sectoral partnerships allow us to create a service system for her and her children that is accessible.

The following are recommendations for your consideration.

There is a need for public awareness campaigns to educate Canadians about femicide and gender-based violence. The goal should be to raise awareness in order to support early intervention and prevention.

• (1120)

Recognize femicide as a specific crime under the Canadian Criminal Code. Adding femicide as a legal term would highlight the gendered motivations behind these killings. This would provide a foundation for collecting accurate data and ensuring focused interventions.

Mandate training for health professionals, judges and law enforcement on recognizing intimate partner violence and the warning signs that can lead to femicide.

Integrated models like the Safe Centre consistently demonstrate their effectiveness and impact. For this model to expand and remain sustainable, it needs dedicated funding, specifically for these cross-sectoral service systems. This is essential.

Thank you for the opportunity to share the work of the Safe Centre of Peel and for your commitment to address gender-based violence.

I'll be happy to take questions later.

Thank you.

• (1125)

The Chair: Thank you, kindly.

Next, I would like to welcome, from Women's Shelters Canada, Anuradha Dugal, executive director.

Ms. Anuradha Dugal (Executive Director, Women's Shelters Canada): Good morning, Madam Chair, committee members and fellow witnesses.

I'm joining you today.... Temporarily, I'm in the territories of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh peoples in what is now known as Vancouver.

Women's Shelters Canada is a national organization with a membership of 16 provincial and territorial associations. We run a national searchable website to help anyone in Canada to find a shelter near them, called sheltersafe.ca, and we are connected to over 600 violence against women—VAW—women's shelters that support survivors. We support these shelters.

Femicide is on the rise. We now commonly say that one woman is killed in Canada every other day and that one woman is killed by a male partner once a week. On Thursday last week, as we've already heard, a victim named Brkti Berhe was stabbed to death in front of her two children at a park in Ottawa.

We need danger assessments for every woman. Every woman connected to a service should undergo a danger assessment. Shelters frequently see this danger. They recognize the level of risk and act accordingly. In some cases, these are misunderstood or ignored by other social services, so then a woman is not adequately protected.

Some of the signs we've heard about today—which include damage to property; harm to companion animals; and verbal, physical or psychological abuse that includes coercive control—are also red flags. It is true that there will not always be physical violence, but strangulation or choking is a factor, as is the presence of firearms. These are all considered within a danger assessment, but they are not always recognized as a threat of femicide by all services.

There is a clear link between femicide and IPV, intimate partner violence. The vast majority of perpetrators are men, and with these known risk factors we also know that there is an increased level of danger when a victim decides to leave. The most serious IPV cases should be reviewed by a collaborative group of services with a

wraparound protocol, including health services, children's services, law enforcement, shelters, education and all social services, with a view always to protecting women and their families.

Women are not believed, and sometimes women's services are not believed. Danger assessments can be played down. We need to change this and always believe women. This is what saves lives. We need a funded, robust emergency transition housing system. I recently visited a shelter in a small town in southern Alberta. It receives 1,500 calls a year, but it can only manage to directly house under 350 of those women in a community of around 100,000. This is a huge turn-away number, and there is a point at which this becomes another serious danger with regard to femicide.

As I said, shelters are able to assess danger and safely plan accordingly, but if we do not have enough beds or emergency beds for women, then until the shelter is funded fully as a whole, we cannot support every woman who needs it, where and when she needs it, for as long as she needs it. That is what will keep women safe.

In addition, the housing crisis is impacting femicide. We need safe, affordable housing for every woman. Women are staying longer in emergency shelters because they cannot find safe housing. When they do find it, they are still at risk. I recently heard about a case in which the police had informed a woman in the community that her abuser had found out where she was. She had left that abuser safely, transitioned through a shelter and found private, safe accommodation. She did not want to leave her safe housing, because of the impossibility of finding that again. The risk of losing her home again and again puts her at even greater danger because of the volatile, unreliable and worrying housing system.

We need a stronger system for collecting national data on femicides. We lack clear, definable, consistent, agreed-upon protocols across Canada through all health, legal, policing and social-work jurisdictions. With these data, it would be easier to know how to intervene, what multiple signs to look for and what can be adapted to different communities, because not all femicides happen in exactly the same way.

I've highlighted four key steps: coordinated danger assessments, improved shelter funding, better affordable housing and disaggregated data.

• (1130)

I also encourage you to consider the full recommendations of the Mass Casualty Commission and the national action plan on violence against women and gender-based violence.

We owe it to every woman and to families to do better.

For that, I thank the committee for taking time to study this issue.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Dugal, for your testimony.

At this point, I would also like to acknowledge that Ms. Irons was not able to successfully connect via video conference to finish her testimony, so we will attempt to get her as a witness either Wednesday or at the next meeting. Be mindful of that when we are posing questions.

Indeed, thank you all for your opening remarks.

At this point, I would like to move to our first round of questions.

We will begin with Dominique.

You have six minutes.

[Translation]

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

Good morning, fellow members.

I would like to welcome each of the witnesses and thank them for being here this morning.

Today we are looking at a really tough topic. This isn't the first time we've talked about these issues at this committee, and the stories that are shared with us shock me every time.

I did a bit of research this morning, and in Quebec alone, 20 femicides have already been reported since January 2024. I don't know about the other women here, but I'm always hypervigilant when I go out. I've often had occasion to say that. I'm not sure men feel the same way. Women don't like to be in a dark place or a parking lot. There are many situations that make us very uncomfortable. Unfortunately, for almost 10 years now, violent crime has been increasing significantly in this country. We'll have a chance to talk about that again.

Ms. Walker, you painted a rather bleak picture. What you're describing verges on depressing.

Is it a pandemic, Ms. Walker? Would you describe the current situation as a pandemic?

[English]

Ms. Megan Walker: I'm sorry. Was the last part, "Would you call this a pandemic?"

[Translation]

Mrs. Dominique Vien: That's correct.

There have been 20 femicides in Quebec so far, and the year isn't over. Earlier, women gave some rather alarming statistics about

Canada. Some of the documents that witnesses have provided and others from various sources even go so far as to call it a pandemic.

Do you agree with that reading of the current situation?

• (1135)

[English]

Ms. Megan Walker: We can call it a pandemic, or an epidemic, as many of the provinces are starting to call this. It is a very serious issue, which, unfortunately, the government has chosen not to address.

Women do not have equal rights in Canada, and that is a tragedy, because women have so much to offer. In many cases, women are killed before they even make it through their teens.

I do present a dire situation. As I said at the outset, this is a crisis. It's something that needs to be addressed immediately.

We, who are survivors around this table, have the solutions. We need to be heard, and action needs to be taken as a result. Some of us have identified the actions that need to be taken, and in fact, many of us have identified the same issues.

For instance, femicide is preventable, but communities don't know how to prevent femicide. They don't know what questions to ask. There needs to be public awareness, because we all have a role to play in ending male violence against women and ending femicide.

It's the same, for me, when we speak about the rights that women do not have. Women don't have the right to walk through their communities safely. As you say, when you get out of your car, you're looking around; that is what all women do.

I really want to reiterate that the most dangerous place for women is in their homes.

[Translation]

Mrs. Dominique Vien: Why is the home the most dangerous place?

Is it due to the fact that the home is where women are most often trapped? To be fair, not all husbands and partners are dangerous, of course.

[English]

Ms. Megan Walker: A home is where women are sometimes trapped with their abusers. It's secluded. The community doesn't look into people's homes, so it's very easy for men to abuse women in their homes.

It doesn't take much to trigger an attack. A woman may say, I'm going to the grocery store, and the next thing you know, he's outraged because she didn't ask to go to the grocery store. She told him.

[Translation]

Mrs. Dominique Vien: Thank you, Ms. Walker. What you say is very informative.

Earlier, a woman also mentioned the need to set up a communication strategy in the form of a public awareness campaign. As she said, that would be a good idea. It was at this committee that I learned that, when someone has got to the point of strangling their partner, the next step can be killing them. These are things we're not aware of.

Ms. Jeshani, you want the term “femicide” to be included in the Criminal Code. I'd like to know what that involves and how it would improve the Criminal Code.

I don't disagree with you, but I just want to understand how this term could be more useful than the term “murder”, for example. I'm not a lawyer, but I can assume that it means the same thing from a legal standpoint.

I'm curious about your response to that. If you don't have a chance to answer it later, I would ask you to send the information to us in writing.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Dominique.

Pam, you have six minutes.

Ms. Pam Damoff (Oakville North—Burlington, Lib.): Thank you.

Thank you to all of our witnesses for being here today.

I want to start talking about the impact that femicides have on children and youth. As you probably know, there was just a report that, in the last 18 months, one in five victims are under the age of 18.

As you know, Ms. Walker, from when we worked together on getting Keira's law passed, it's children of women who are abused, but it's also young women themselves.

I see lots of heads nodding. I'm just wondering if the Safe Centre of Peel can start, and then I think I'll go to you, Ms. Walker, if that's okay.

● (1140)

Ms. Shelina Jeshani: Absolutely.

The impact on children witnessing violence in the home is profound. Children have various impacts, depending on their developmental age and their proximity to the violence. Their mothers are, most times, the main caregivers, and that has an impact on witnessing that type of violence.

The impact of femicide on children is profound. We have children and youth who have lost a parent to the worst form of violence, and usually it's the other parent who has caused that violence to happen.

The ripple effects are profound on their mental health, on their adjustment and on their ability to continue to reach their full potential.

Ms. Pam Damoff: I'm sorry, but I want to give Ms. Walker an opportunity as well.

It also means that sometimes children are killed as a result of the femicide as well, where the woman who has been abused is killed and the children are killed in the same act.

Did you want to add to that?

Ms. Megan Walker: I want to outline a story about Breanna Broadfoot, who was in London, Ontario. She was a 17-year-old girl who was trying to leave a man, and he viciously attacked her with a knife through her head and other parts of her body. He killed her, and what was so sad on top of that was the preventable nature of the killing. It was preventable, and that young woman left a brother behind, as well as her mom and dad, who are devastated, as you can imagine.

You cannot bring children back. If they are killed, they are gone, and the criminal justice system continues to fail these women.

In Breanna's case, he had previously assaulted her, putting her into the hospital in that case as well. The police laid appropriate charges, and it went before the courts, but rather than being held, this monster was released back into the community, where he found his way to Breanna and killed her.

Ms. Pam Damoff: On that, the administration of justice is provincial, and I know that you advocate with the provincial government as well, but the bail conditions are set by largely provincially appointed judges who administer the bail conditions. It's a huge issue, because we hear it time and time again.

I just have about a minute and a half left. This question is for Women's Shelters Canada. You advocated for, and we included in Bill C-21, provisions to ensure that firearms are removed in a prohibition order and in other circumstances.

Could you talk about why that's important?

Ms. Anuradha Dugal: Absolutely. Many abusers, when they have access to firearms, will use them against.... Sometimes it starts with threatening the use and then eventually leads to lethal use of firearms.

It is required that anyone with any kind of charge of domestic violence has their firearms removed. However, we know that the process of removing those firearms from individuals is extremely hard. While a firearm license might be removed from an individual, it is harder to remove all access to all firearms, depending on what kind of community that individual is in.

Firearm licenses can also be suspended if an officer suspects that this is happening, but as we know, women are very rarely believed, so the idea in some cases is that working on something that is a suspicion may not be the first priority of law enforcement officers.

● (1145)

Ms. Pam Damoff: You mentioned threats. Are firearms used as threats under coercive control in these situations?

Ms. Anuradha Dugal: Absolutely, they are. Firearms are used. Women are shown weapons. Weapons are pointed at them. Everybody knows where the firearm is in the house, and simply looking in that part of the home is a threat to a woman, because she knows exactly what that means.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next, I would like to welcome Andréanne.

You have six minutes.

[Translation]

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

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here.

Good morning, Ms. Jeshani and Ms. Dugal.

My first questions are for Ms. Walker and Ms. Alexander. I'm glad they have an opportunity to address the committee again.

I would also like to express my condolences to Ms. Irons. My thoughts go out to this mother who lost her daughter. I am the mother of a two-and-a-half-year-old girl. I can't even imagine what it's like to lose your daughter, knowing that she was a victim of violence in the hands of her intimate partner. This is a very emotional topic.

Your comments were a little different from the ones you made this summer. Some things struck me during your testimony at the time. If I may, I'm going to go back to questions that I took the time to prepare during your opening remarks in the summer.

Ms. Alexander, in July, you said that non-disclosure orders issued by police forces were a way of silencing victims, of shutting them up.

I would like you to tell us more about that. What are the impacts of non-disclosure agreements?

[English]

Ms. Cait Alexander: Non-disclosure agreements are used to silence victims over and over again. You're forced and coerced into not telling your story. They're utilized in the family court, criminal court and civil court. There is a group called Can't Buy My Silence that is working to abolish this.

Section 278.1 of the Criminal Code is in relation to.... I'll compare it to the U.S. I can't safely live in this country, because my abuser is free.

In America, abusers cannot access the victim's health records, therapeutic records, medical records or otherwise, but in Canada, under section 278.1, abusers are allowed to subpoena those to court. That includes all of the aforementioned, but also journals, your personal journals.

I used to keep a journal. I still keep a journal every single day. Everything that I said about my ex can be utilized against me in court from my own private book. Those aren't the most comprehensive pieces of literature, but they would be weaponized against me

in court if I ever had a criminal trial for my attempted murder. That would have been nice.

That is what's happening over and over again. Two of my friends, Tanya Couch and Alexa Barkley, are working on this issue on Survivor Safety Matters. We all know each other. We're all friends. Tanya actually stayed her own charges, because she did not feel comfortable having her own personal records utilized against her in court. She removed the charges. A perpetrator is free because she didn't feel comfortable. They weaponize it.

I was sexually assaulted for the first time when I was 13. The second time was when I was 16. The third time was when I was 17. I've been grabbed on the street here. I was nearly killed when I was 30. That's all in Canada. It hasn't happened anywhere else in this world, and I've lived in 10 different countries.

I've already been through the criminal justice system. It took eight years to prosecute. I remember my own personal records being weaponized against me. The defence counsel sits there, and they throw it at you. You are getting ripped apart on the stand, when you're just trying to tell the truth. They will manipulate. It's terrifying. NDAs are used to say, "You can't talk about this. You can only talk about that."

I'm sorry. I'll try to keep this as short as possible.

It even happened to me for my attempted murder. When I got my lovely peace bond hearing, the Crown attorney said, "If you mention the other charges that have already been stayed, you might get cross-examined. You can talk only about the three times he hit you before he tried to kill you." I told her to take a hike. "We're going to do this. Cross-examine me if you need to."

The amount of strength it takes to have to shut down these authoritative figures when you're just trying to tell the truth.... It's repulsive. Everything needs to be amended in this justice system.

Thank you.

• (1150)

[Translation]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Since we're talking about justice reform, I want to ask you a quick question.

You are in contact with my colleague, the member for Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, about the Jordan decision. It stipulates that, after a certain number of years, cases are dismissed due to an unreasonable delay.

I would like you to tell us how this important issue relates to the bill that has been introduced.

[English]

Ms. Cait Alexander: Jordan is what killed my case twice. I was never given a criminal trial against the individual who bludgeoned me nearly to death on July 31, 2021.

I held up those photos in this room. I know I'm not allowed to bring props, but I didn't care, because you needed to see them. I have my attempted murder on video. There are 40-plus photos on my phone. I can hold them up. There's a chronological report. The SWAT team, tactical team or whatever it is in Canada came to my house. There's body-cam footage of the scene of the crime. This country charged him but would not give me a criminal trial because of the time. I didn't want to be here anymore, because of the policies in this country. I cannot live safely in Canada. I live in Los Angeles. That's a lot of privilege. I have an amazing family. My parents are behind me right now. I do not have the average survivor's story. I have survivor's guilt. How am I alive, when my head was split open in three places? How did I send a two-word text message to the people who saved my life?

The Jordan rule is sickening. It's terrifying and so offensive. I had to leave a child in his care. It eats at me, because I will never get my day in court. A peace bond is simply not good enough for someone who is very clearly capable of killing someone. He will do it again. I told the Crown attorney, "When he kills someone, the blood is on your hands. It's not on mine."

That is why I'm here today. This is so dangerous.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Alexander.

Bonita, you have six minutes.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo (Port Moody—Coquitlam, NDP): Thank you so much, Madam Chair.

I want to say to Cait Alexander that she is speaking for so many other women today who are so grateful she is able to share this for them.

My question will be for Megan Walker.

There are words like "prevention is the only cure" and "home is the most dangerous place". I'm thinking about those two things together. I know you've been in this space for a very long time.

My questions are, what new forms of violence have you seen evolve, and can the federal government do anything to end, or at least address, current and past forms and what's been evolving?

Ms. Megan Walker: There are new forms of violence. Maybe they're not so new, but they've come to the forefront many times now. This is around women who are strangled. What has been reported to me consistently is that they are strangled into unconsciousness. Then the abuser allows them to come back to life. He does this over and over again.

Also, we don't talk enough about choking. Choking and strangulation are two separate issues. Women report being choked by men, again, into unconsciousness. Sometimes they are choked by the man's penis. He will thrust it into her throat so deeply that she's not able to breathe.

These are some of the situations women and girls endure. On top of them having to look around the corner everywhere, facing threats of femicide and trying to survive, women and girls now have to face—I believe it is very much related to pornography—the experience of horrific forms of strangulation and choking. The

women and girls who report this also report that they will never recover from it.

• (1155)

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Megan Walker, I've heard this from girls as young as 11, 12 and 13. They experience this harassment. There's a threat of having those activities done to them in their classrooms when they're at school. They're being shown this at school.

Could you share what you've heard about how this is evolving? I'm thinking about the next generation and those experiences. How is this happening? What can we do to educate people?

Ms. Megan Walker: When we live in a country where women do not have rights, where girls do not have rights, we can expect this to happen.

I've done a lot of work with young people in the schools and outside of the schools. I remember one time talking to a group of children. We separated the boys from the girls, and I asked the girls how many of them were dressed the way they were because that's how they wanted to dress. One hand went up, so I said, what are the reasons you're dressed like that? They explained that they brought a change of clothes to school because their parents wouldn't allow them to dress this way, but they dressed that way because they were deemed to be either invisible or, and I'm sorry to say this—this is their term—"fuckable". Girls reported that they don't want to be invisible, so they will wear clothing and do whatever is required of them to satisfy boys—they don't want any boy to think they're invisible.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you so much for that testimony.

I'm going to ask witness Dugal something.

Thinking about prevention and those comments about how prevention is our only cure, I know that in British Columbia there is forensic nursing. I know a number of forensic nurses in British Columbia who are regularly intervening or have intervened around intimate partner violence and sex trafficking. I wonder if you could share what the areas are where health care could intervene in prevention and also in helping victims of abuse.

Ms. Anuradha Dugal: Health care has a responsibility to identify when there is someone in front of them who is experiencing the results of intimate partner violence. This could be a GP who is facing a woman who has anxiety or depression, asking the right questions about why the level of anxiety and depression is where it is, asking questions about what is going on at home, trying to find an answer. It could also be health care services in emergency rooms having protocols to understand the sorts of injuries they might be seeing and how they might be the result of intimate partner violence.

It is also important that health care workers understand a trauma-informed approach. They cannot ask questions in any way, and they need to understand the potential for revictimization and harming women more by asking questions or demanding answers at a time when women perhaps aren't ready or aren't able to explain what has happened. This is why health care services need to play a role in collecting evidence and making sure things are adequately recorded, so that when a victim is ready to do something, she can fall back on their information.

Finally, they need to have strong referral relationships. This is why it's so important that there is a wraparound protocol, that if a woman is coming, it's not just a case of somebody giving her a phone number when she leaves but making sure that somebody calls her afterwards and knows how to contact her.

• (1200)

The Chair: Thank you.

At this point, I would like to open the floor to Michelle Ferreri.

You have five minutes.

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

Thank you to our witnesses today.

This is probably one of the most upsetting committees and testimonies we've heard, and we've heard some pretty awful things.

We called an emergency meeting in the summer, and I'm so glad to see you guys back. The reason we called it was because since 2015, sexual assaults are up 75%, sexual violations against children are up 119%, forcible confinement or kidnapping is up 10%, indecent harassment is up 86.41%, non-consensual distribution of intimate images is up 801%, and trafficking in persons is up 84%. Intimate partner violence has been declared an epidemic in 94 Ontario municipalities. In Ontario, 30 women were killed in a 30-week window. Compared to 2014, intimate partner sexual assault was up 163%.

We had Detective Chief Milinovich from Peel Regional Police tell us during that meeting that a woman is strangled every single day in Peel Region. He said that of the percentage arrested by that unit, roughly half of them have already been released on bail since their arrest.

Ms. Walker and Cait, you guys have both told horrific stories of, in particular, Breanna Broadfoot, whose attacker was walking free when he shouldn't have been.

Cait, your abuser is free because of Jordan's rule, which is basically when a time period lapses, so apparently the crime doesn't matter—the crime against you doesn't matter.

Last week, a woman in Ottawa, in broad daylight, was stabbed and her throat slit in front of her children. Innocent bystanders had to hold her hand and tell her that her children were safe.

Bill C-75 was passed in 2019 under this Liberal government. In 2019 there were almost 215,000 total victims. By 2023 that number has increased to 251,000, or an increase of 17%. Clearly, this bill has made things worse. It has relaxed bail reform.

Ms. Walker and Ms. Alexander, this bill has allowed these perpetrators, these abusers, to walk free. Why would a victim or survivor report violence and abuse if they know nothing is going to be done?

Why would an abuser stop abusing if they know there are no consequences?

Ms. Cait Alexander: My abuser was allowed out on bail the next day for 500 bucks, so I was immediately terrified. I put my family at risk. He puts my family at risk. They're brave enough to still live here. I can't do it.

I've spent the last week in Toronto with my organization, End Violence Everywhere. We launched at the Canadian fashion awards on the 19th. We held a national rally with our non-profit, Voices Against Violence. On the 24th, the day the woman was stabbed in Ottawa, my family and I were at a gala that I chaired, where we raised \$600,000 for Shelter Movers, which is another charity.

You're leaving this up to the non-profits when you don't listen, and we can't do it alone. It doesn't matter how much awareness and how much money we throw at things, if we don't have good legislation, we are going to die.

Ms. Megan Walker: That is the core of the issue.

The legislation is not appropriate as it's designed.

We need to recognize, first of all, that all women and girls are potential victims of violence and femicide for no other reason than the sex they were born. If we can't acknowledge that as we write legislation or even consider legislation, we're in trouble.

I'm telling you, everything you say today is accurate.

What do we want to do? We want to be part of the solution.

I envision having a core group of individuals, with the government at the table, making recommendations about how to change this.

I know I'm talking too long, but I just wanted to say one last thing about this.

This is not about provincial versus federal. This is about women. Women have to be at the core of the issue. I don't want to go back and forth, because it doesn't help. It doesn't help when I'm told that it's a provincial issue. It doesn't matter.

• (1205)

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Exactly.

I have only 10 seconds left.

Would you like to see Bill C-75 scrapped, so that the people who are abusing these women are held in jail and not walking free?

Ms. Cait Alexander: Yes.

Ms. Megan Walker: Absolutely.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next, I would like to welcome Sonia, who is joining us by video conference.

Thank you, Sonia.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu (Brampton South, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for coming today and sharing your testimony. Cait said we all have to find a solution, and your testimony is very important in doing that.

My question is for Ms. Jeshani. You work at the Safe Centre of Peel, which is doing very good work for all women. I have a very important question for you.

In 2022, Peel police laid 531 intimate partner violence strangulation charges in Brampton and Mississauga. We know strangulation has many long-term health and psychological effects on victims.

Could you please tell us what your organization, the Safe Centre of Peel, is doing to support victims of strangulation?

Ms. Shelina Jeshani: Thank you, Sonia.

Yes, as you heard from the statistics, Peel police is telling us it's seeing at least one strangulation case a day, and we know that cases are under-reported to the police. From April this year until the beginning of October, we saw 17 strangulation cases come through our door.

We've started by understanding in our collaboration that we have to have good training and good capacity-building, so that we all understand the issue and we're all able to respond. We have brought in folks from the strangulation prevention institute to do training with all of us, so that we can start to recognize the signs of strangulation, we're asking the right questions and we're educating people on this issue.

This has allowed us to now start screening folks to be asking those questions, because we know that many times, victims of IPV do not talk about strangulation. Sometimes, the strangulation was so bad that they passed out. They don't remember everything. We have to ask questions about what the violence has been like and what different acts have been happening. We also know that women of colour may not necessarily have markings on their neck to show issues of strangulation.

We've started with that training, and with that, we've come together and we are creating a strangulation prevention protocol in our region that will be instituted with and used to train all of our 24 partners. This is so that we are all screening and using the same risk assessment to determine the level of risk, and we're making sure that people get the medical attention they need.

We also know that in strangulation cases, she may say, "I feel fine. I don't feel anything," but it can be days or weeks later that there are internal injuries that actually cause death.

The research is clear. We know a woman who is strangled is 750% more likely to be killed by that man. When I hear folks from the strangulation prevention institute talk about strangulation, they talk about men using it with a God complex. The ability to put their hands around someone's neck and to know they have the ultimate power and control to stop someone from breathing—that they can take their life away.... It is the most extreme form of violence we can ever see. We have to pay attention. We have to talk about it, and we have to talk about it with our young people.

We started a few years back, talking in schools about healthy relationships, but we have to talk about what unhealthy relationships look like and what those signs of violence are. We have to name them.

This is some of the work we're doing. We know we need to do much more, because one strangulation a day is too many, and that's only what Peel police is able to give us at this point.

• (1210)

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: Thank you, Ms. Jeshani.

Just quickly, last time you spoke about the need for cross-sectoral integration to bring communities together with justice, legal, health and education services for survivors. You talked about the school program.

I know the Safe Centre of Peel is a good example of the integration, but what measures can the government take to foster those sorts of cross-sectoral networks to support victims of gender-based violence?

Ms. Shelina Jeshani: Cross-sectoral collaboration is so important, because we know that when people have to go to many different places, they're not going to go. Our needs assessment in 2009 showed that people needed to go to approximately 18 different places to get all of the services they needed. With young children, with language barriers, with lack of finances, with big regions being in crisis, you're not going to get to all of that. That's virtually impossible. Why have we created a system that is so difficult to navigate?

The safe centre model, like other models, is about that integrated wraparound care, where people need to just come to that one place, or a partner agency gets them there, or the police get them there. That one place starts the whole service system. We talk about a health care system in our communities, but do we have a service system to address IPV? No. It's all of us, as non-profits, trying to figure something out, and doing this in silos. The safe centre model allows for all of that to come together. We're communicating and providing expert services based on the functions that we need in order to create a service system.

The Chair: Thank you very much, and thank you, MP Sidhu.

Next, we have Andréanne, for two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Alexander, for your openness. I took note of what you said in response to my questions about non-disclosure agreements. Unfortunately, that problem was also the focus of concerns expressed during the study the committee did on the safety of girls and women in sport, a study that I myself proposed.

There's also the whole issue of the Jordan decision. We are very concerned about it, so we have introduced a bill in the House of Commons to put an end to the situation.

Ms. Walker, you can say more about those two topics, but I would like to come back to the comments you made in July. You highlighted the issue of the epidemic of femicide in this country, and you talked about the importance of modernizing the system.

Which of the points you talked about in July would you like to come back to?

[English]

Ms. Megan Walker: It's important to recognize that the expertise comes from women with lived experience, not from a government bill that has not had anybody provide any input into it.

When I think of femicide happening every week, or every couple of days, whatever it is, we need to name it first of all as femicide, so it becomes visible. We need to be able to collect data around femicide, and we need to work to help families heal. There are a number of prongs that would be part of this.

Whether it's femicide, choking or torture, whatever it might be, those problems will continue to exist until we are invited to sit at the table on a permanent basis to help resolve the issue. The issues are so many, and the government has so far either not taken any action, or done it on a piecemeal basis. We have to then retrieve the motions, or the recommendations, from the government and undo them. We need to make sure we're at the table, have a voice and contribute to the conversation.

Ms. Cait Alexander: What kind of country do we want to live in? It's really simple. Every time I cross this Canadian border, I shake. I love this country. I have so many amazing people here, but we do ourselves such a disservice by not having a functional justice system. We are really losing the grip on it. Feeling safer in America is a very ironic situation.

• (1215)

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Zarrillo, you have the floor, for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you so much.

Some of the testimony today has me thinking about the real lack of investments from the Liberal government on this very important issue.

I just was googling this: In 2019 there was only \$2.5 million over three years to keep children safe from online harms. In 2023 they were willing to put \$50 million over five years towards ParticipACTION for kids, but there was only \$2.5 million over three years to keep children safe from online harms.

I'm thinking about the future. I'm thinking about some of the testimony I heard today and how important it is that we have healthy kids and healthy boys growing up, and healthy women.

I would like to go back to witness Jeshani, who talked about some of the education that's happening in school. I was thinking about this. If the federal government can have a campaign on online harms—a minimal campaign—and a larger one on ParticipACTION, getting kids out to exercise, could the government take on awareness campaigns to help educate kids at school about healthy relationships?

Ms. Shelina Jeshani: I think education is key. We know femicide is preventable. We also know that we live in a society in which violence against women becomes a closed-door problem, a women's problem. We need to change that. This is a community problem that we're facing.

Absolutely, we need to find different ways to bring information to diverse communities, with cultural sensitivity and language appropriateness, to be able to talk about this issue. We know there have been a tremendous number of campaigns over the years that talk about drunk driving, for example. Why don't we have campaigns that talk about violence against women? This is a community problem. When a woman is killed in our community, it costs taxpayers a lot of money. It impacts—

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: I'm sorry, but I don't have a lot of time. I just wanted to ask if you have ever seen a federal government truly invest in a significant awareness campaign to end violence against women, girls and diverse genders in this country?

Ms. Shelina Jeshani: I'm not aware of any campaign.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Okay. I'll ask witness Walker the same thing.

Ms. Megan Walker: No, I've not seen that campaign, which is why women and girls are dying, being killed.

The Chair: Thank you.

At this point, I would like to welcome Anna. You have the floor for five minutes.

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

First of all, I want to thank Megan and Kate for their bravery in coming back after the fiasco last summer. You should be applauded. You're very strong women.

There are a couple things I want to get to.

Ms. Walker, you said on September 15, 2022, that the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, the former justice minister and the Minister of Women and Gender Equality attended a meeting to discuss the urgency of the Criminal Code definition of "femicide". It's been two years, and still nothing's been done.

Femicide is not a private issue. Restraining orders, undertakings and peace bonds offer women and girls a false sense of security and place them at an increased risk of femicide. I want to set the record straight, because I know my colleagues across the hall keep stressing that this bail reform is a provincial issue, a provincial law. Let me make one thing clear: Although provincial judges and justices of the peace are appointed by the province, they have to abide by the bail laws created and implemented by the federal government.

I understand education; I understand that not all men are bad, but if we don't change the laws, this issue will continue to happen. Do you agree that it is now time to act and not to keep doing more research? We don't need more research. We know what's happening. Let's "Get 'er done."

Ms. Megan Walker: Absolutely. I can also just clarify one thing. We invited all of those parties to the meeting, but they never responded, so we were never part of that meeting with the government, because it never happened. I think that's an important point to make.

You are spot-on. It's time to move on. Let's stop talking about it. Let's move on and make it happen.

• (1220)

Ms. Cait Alexander: When are we going to hold these abusers accountable?

Ms. Megan Walker: Exactly.

Ms. Cait Alexander: They don't like it. The only thing they'll respond to is pressure. I'm not about mass incarceration, but there are certain individuals who certainly should not be on these streets, full stop. They cannot be rehabilitated. They don't respond to, "Don't do that again." They do it over and over, and every time you let them get away with it, they're empowered to continue. Then they kill someone. Every time you give them a peace bond, that is their golden ticket to say, "Ha ha ha. I won," and they act on it.

We have to do it now. The cost to move away out of violence is about \$30,000. Let's talk about the funds that takes. Without my parental support, my family unit and the resources that I was privileged to be born to have, I would not have been able to move to America to get away from him, and I probably would be dead. However, I'm lucky; I'm one of the lucky ones. The majority of

people don't have what I have. I recognize that, and I'm here because we have to change this. We have to. Otherwise, it's going to continue to get worse.

We had to act 30 years ago, so let's have no more studies. I'm done. I want to move. I want to protect. I need to protect the next woman.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: Can I just ask...? I believe the comment that you made, Ms. Alexander, was that it cost \$8 billion per year.

Ms. Cait Alexander: That's an unreported fact from 2009.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: Okay. Let's go back a step.

The individual, the criminal—I'll call him a criminal—who abused you has the means, obviously. Would you agree that individuals who cause that type of harm...that we should seize their assets to help the victims recover?

Ms. Cait Alexander: Yes.

A voice: I concur.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: If we continue to talk about the violence against women when every single day there's another victim, this is never going to change unless we can persuade the current government to change the bail reform act and keep these criminals in jail so that women can walk safely on the street. Would you agree with that?

Ms. Cait Alexander: I concur.

Ms. Megan Walker: I would ask the government this question: How many dead women does it take for you to recognize that there's a crisis with women in this community?

Mrs. Anna Roberts: Exactly.

I also want to make note that your parents are here, Ms. Alexander. I have to tell you that I'm very proud of you, of your strength and of your parents' strength, because—

Ms. Cait Alexander: They're lucky. They're lucky I'm here.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: We're very proud. You stand for all women. Your strength has given me strength to carry on this fight, and I will continue that fight for both of you and for all women, because we need to change the law.

I can't say it enough. We have to stop talking about it, stop researching it, and change the law to make individuals understand that in Canada we appreciate and respect women. Right now, that's not the case.

Ms. Megan Walker: I just want to add one more quick point about that.

The Chair: If you could incorporate that into the next person's questions, into that time, that would be great.

Ms. Megan Walker: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Roberts.

MP Hepfner, you have the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner (Hamilton Mountain, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, genuinely, to all of our witnesses for their testimony today. It's really important.

We've been talking about bail reform and Bill C-75, so I just want to go over what's in that legislation and get your feedback on what you would change.

In 2019 we created a reverse onus, so if you've been charged with a violent offence involving an intimate partner, it's on you. The onus has reversed. The accused has to prove why they should be let out on bail. That changed.

Ms. Cait Alexander: It doesn't happen.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: The courts have to consider previous intimate partner violence convictions. Strangulation has to be considered. Serious forms of sexual assault have to be considered. It involves a higher maximum penalty in cases involving—

Ms. Cait Alexander: It's not implemented.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: It's not the law that's wrong; it's the way that it's being implemented by courts.

Ms. Cait Alexander: Why should we have to prove it, when it's on video? That's a huge problem in this country, because charter rights are good for good people, but they are not good for criminals.

• (1225)

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: We have heard today that the problem is the law, so I've read out the law, but what you're telling me is that it's not the law but the implementation at the court level—

Ms. Megan Walker: I'm not going to go back and forth on that point. The point is that it's not being implemented, and women are being killed, so I don't want to argue about this or that.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: I think it's important to nail down where, exactly, it needs to be changed.

Ms. Megan Walker: It is the law, because if the law were working and appropriately drafted, I would not be sitting in a courtroom, on an ongoing basis, watching justices of the peace say, "Now, are you sure you won't do it again?" and let him go. It's rare—

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: It's how the justices of the peace are interpreting the law. Okay.

Let me move on to my next question about—

Ms. Megan Walker: No. Don't say that, please. I don't accept that. I think it was a poorly written law, and it needs to be changed.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: In what way, exactly, would you change it?

Ms. Cait Alexander: My ex is free. He was out the next day after he tried to kill me, full stop.

Ms. Megan Walker: I think it needs to be changed, after consultation with survivors, so their experiences are reflected in it, and that is missing. I think, if that were included, we would have a stronger piece of legislation that would potentially save lives.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: Thank you.

The Chair: I gently remind everyone to speak through the chair. Thank you.

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: There's another thing we've been talking about. We just finished a study in this committee, about coercive control, and a lot of the examples we heard today began, at least, with coercive control. We heard, especially, from Alison Irons, before she was unable to rejoin the meeting, that her daughter wasn't physically attacked by her partner until she was killed, but there were lots of examples of coercive control leading up to that.

To start with the Safe Centre of Peel, if we criminalize coercive control, how much of an impact do you think that would have on our incidence of domestic violence?

Ms. Shelina Jeshani: There are a few things to be thinking about when you think about coercive control. One is that we have to start naming it. We have to start understanding what coercive control actually looks like, how it escalates to other forms of violence and, yes, to femicide. Putting it into the Criminal Code is one way, but it's not the only way. I think that's why we need a holistic approach when we talk about coercive control. We need to educate people in the community and build capacity around service providers like health care professionals, as well as judges and law enforcement, so that they can start to pay attention to these signs and ask questions—so that there is that understanding of all these various elements.

Again, it comes back to the education, at the early point in those teen years, when they're first starting those relationships. What is a healthy relationship? What does coercive control look like—

Ms. Lisa Hepfner: I'm sorry. I don't mean to cut you off, but I have 20 seconds left.

I want to go quickly to Ms. Dugal from Women's Shelters Canada. Our government invested, actually, more than half a billion dollars across the country in women's shelters, but we hear regularly that it's not enough. How would you like to see women's shelters funded across the country?

Ms. Anuradha Dugal: Women's shelters need funding for capital expenses—to renew their infrastructure, to build more shelters and to have more shelter beds—and we need to increase the number of second-stage shelters, the transitional housing, for longer-term stays. Most shelters, 64%, have not received any kind of annual cost of living increase from their main government funder; 74% of shelters say that insufficient funding is a major challenge for them in housing the women who need the services they offer. All levels of government need to get together and fund shelters adequately.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Hepfner.

Next we begin our third round. MP Ferreri, you have the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thank you so much, Chair, and thank you to our witnesses.

We certainly wouldn't want to bring you here and tell you how the legal system is working, when it's clearly not, which is what it feels like a Liberal member just did to you. I think that's the whole point. It comes back to the same point that I asked you.

Why would a woman or anybody who's a victim, a survivor, come forward when they know nothing is going to happen, and why would an abuser stop doing that if they know there are no consequences? This is all law. Everything you've said today, Cait, makes the point that there are no consequences in this current justice system. There is nothing in place to stop someone from actively going out and murdering someone in broad daylight—in broad daylight. I don't know how much more serious we can get today, folks.

We see the Liberal member sitting across the way, saying, "Oh, well, let's go into the weeds here. Bill C-75 is doing a great job." It's not. It's not working. People are dying. Let's cut it and do what needs to happen here.

Bill C-75 was supposed to make it better, and it has made it worse. The stats are here. Those are cold, hard facts.

I guess I would turn to Ms. Alexander again. I think one of the things people don't understand is Jordan's rule. How could you have somebody who literally "bludgeoned" you—in your words—almost to death...? You have video evidence. He was out on bail for \$500 the very next day. Is that the only time he ever served?

• (1230)

Ms. Cait Alexander: Yes.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: It was thrown out. The entire case was thrown out, and this guy is walking free. Explain that to people at home, because it makes no sense.

Ms. Cait Alexander: Nobody understands it, because I have spoken to judges and to prosecutors in America, and they ask, "What are you guys doing up there?"

It's a national embarrassment, and the criminals know this, which is why they park themselves in this country. That is why Canada is fourth in the world for human trafficking and why we're seeing such staggering numbers, into the hundreds of per cent increase. All these stats are people. All these stats are people like me. They're your sisters. They're your siblings. They're your relatives. They're your neighbours. For so long, there has been no justice system in this country.

I'm really sick and tired of having to repeat this when it's so blatantly obvious. I am losing a sibling—a survivor sibling—every single day. I can't handle the phone calls anymore, the text messages, the Facebook messages, the emails: "Hey, she's dead," or, "Hey, he's free," or, "Hey, he's out on bail," or, "I have 38 charges against him, but he gets permission to see my child, and he just raped me and impregnated me again."

I'm not kidding you. This is what's happening in this country. They keep doing it, because you don't put them in custody.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: There are no consequences.

I want to ask about the most dangerous time. There was a bill put forward by a senator whose own daughter was murdered. It was Bill S-205. It dealt with that vulnerable period when the abuser is charged and is then let out on bail or on a surety.

Would you say, Ms. Walker, that it is the most vulnerable time, when violence and potential murder are most likely to happen?

Ms. Megan Walker: I think the most dangerous time for that to happen is at the time of separation, but yes, the criminal justice system's failure also impacts the ability of women to seek help. When you have a situation in which somebody has been incarcerated overnight, or whatever it is, and then released, even if they're released with an order that they have to stay 25 metres away or whatever it is, we have abusers who sit on that 25-metre line and watch the woman come and go. She is never safe, and a peace bond is not even worth the paper it's written on. This is what women and girls are facing.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: In that bill, they wanted to give the authority to the survivor, so that she or whoever.... Men are victims of this as well. Let's point that out. They took that out of the bill—that they would be notified, that they had the power and authority to water that down.

These are the kinds of things that were.... You have to change the law if you are going to change this.

The last point I'll make is about incarceration. We have these crazy stories of these children witnessing this violence. What are those children going to go on to do? They're going to go on to have violent relationships. Let's just call a spade a spade. If we don't have programming in place in the jails to support men, to understand why they are violent—they can't be walking free, because they're not capable of that—and if we don't fix the inside of our prison systems, we are going to have a merry-go-round.

• (1235)

Ms. Megan Walker: We totally agree.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Ferreri.

Next, I'd like to welcome MP Damoff.

You have the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thanks a lot, Chair.

I think everybody here—the witnesses and all members of this committee—agrees that what's happening is not working. The level of femicide is atrocious. I was on this committee for four years when I first got elected, and we're still talking about it. One of the things we recommended early on, as a committee, was a national action plan. We didn't think we were going to get it. Marc Serré might have been on the committee with me at the time. We now have \$500 million invested in that national action plan, but the problem is huge.

I have a request for our analysts, if I may, because a number of things have come up.

Look, I don't want to point fingers at federal, provincial or municipal.... Municipal is responsible for police services that don't act properly, either. We need to make sure everybody is doing everything they possibly can. The National Police Federation has said, "In much of Canada, especially in Ontario, it is Justices of the Peace...who are Order-in-Council appointments, but usually have no legal practice experience as a lawyer or law degree, who preside over almost all bail hearings in much of Canada." Those are provincial appointments. In my region of Halton, the government cancelled the new jail. Do you know what's happening? Judges won't sit in Halton Region, because there's mould. When you talk about Jordan's rule.... The province hasn't built a courthouse in Halton. It's crumbling, and people are being released. Trust me, I think it's horrific that this is happening and that provincial jails are triple-bunked so judges won't send them to provincial jails. We all need to take responsibility for this.

There are a couple of things I would ask the analysts. Could they do a division of who is responsible for what in the criminal justice system? Also, there's a StatsCan report called "Average counts of adults in provincial and territorial correctional programs" that shows, year by year, the number of people who are held and the alternative—who is released on bail. I went back and looked at those numbers. In 2010-11, 59% of people were being held on bail. Today, it's 80%. The stats don't correspond to what's happening in the justice system.

I forgot to put my timer on, Chair. I'm sorry. I got so emotional there.

The Chair: You have about two minutes and 10 seconds.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Okay.

When we studied Rona Ambrose's bill on sexual assault, one of the things we heard is that women think Crown prosecutors are representing them, when, in fact, they're representing the Crown. The defendant has someone in court, and the woman often thinks she has someone in court, too, when, in fact, deals are made that don't represent her.

Maybe you could all comment on this.

I'm wondering whether you think there should be support for women through the court system. Quebec has done a much better job than we have in the courts where this is dealt with.

Ms. Cait Alexander: I'll answer very quickly.

That's what my organization does. It's end-to-end private advocacy based on an American model, again, because we don't have that in this country. Victim services are inefficient and retraumatizing, and they are sponsored by the government. I sat in on a Crown attorney meeting for another woman who was nearly bludgeoned to death with a hammer. The Crown lied to her face the same way my Crown lied to me about Jordan's rule. That's what we provide. I said, "Nope, you're lying to her. Be honest."

That is literally what we do: end-to-end advocacy services, whether financial, medical, therapeutic or housing. You name it, and we figure it out for that survivor.

Ms. Megan Walker: It's important to remember that what exists now is this: Somebody from victim services gives a tour of the

courthouse and does other stuff as needed, but what these women need is somebody to sit with them during the entire process. That happens sometimes, but it's rare.

● (1240)

Ms. Pam Damoff: We'll go to the Safe Centre of Peel, then to Women's Shelters Canada.

Ms. Shelina Jeshani: I agree one hundred per cent. Women have told us over and over again that they need somebody to hold their hand. The most difficult system to go through is the justice system. When somebody is struggling in so many different areas—there may be cultural or language barriers—having to understand the legal system is very daunting. Having somebody hold their hand.... In our community, we have the victim-witness assistance program, but they are so inundated with cases that they don't have time to provide as much support as women really need.

You're absolutely right. The Crown is not there to support the victim.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Shelina Jeshani: The Crown has a different role.

Ms. Pam Damoff: And I.... Oh, okay.

The Chair: I've been a little bit generous.

At this point, I would like to welcome Andréanne for two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I still have a lot of questions I'd like to ask. This is a heartbreaking topic, and I have only two and a half minutes to talk about it.

What Quebec is doing is not perfect, but one good thing it has done on the issue of violence against women was to set aside any trace of political partisanship and draft a non-partisan report entitled "Rebâtir la confiance". The objective was to rebuild trust. Members of all political parties considered the issue in a spirit of cross-sector co-operation, with people from the justice system, the health system and the community.

A report has now been released, and we will have to analyze it and look at the recommendations that were made and their consequences. I'm thinking in particular of the issue of specialized courts, which are currently testing the use of electronic bracelets. We also need to examine something else raised in the "Rebâtir la confiance" report, making coercive control a crime, because that is a federal responsibility.

Ms. Jeshani, I'd like you to answer me in 30 seconds, because then I'd like to ask Ms. Dugal one last question.

It won't solve all the problems, but in what way are criminalizing coercive control and recognizing the term "femicide" in the Criminal Code solutions that need to be explored?

[English]

Ms. Shelina Jeshani: Naming femicide is taking away the invisibility of the issue. Naming it makes us understand that women are at risk and especially at risk by their intimate partners. I think that is part of the solution. It's not the only solution. We need many prongs in order to be able to address this and name this and come together as a community.

I do think that education is key. I think training of those who are in power to make decisions is key, and I think legislation that names this and has clear accountabilities and consequences for those who choose to use violence to hurt their intimate partners is essential.

[Translation]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Thank you.

As it happens, I was disturbed by a public awareness campaign in Quebec when I was a teenager. The slogan was something like "violence may not always leave a mark, but it always hurts". I understood very early on that violence often begins insidiously and involves a certain amount of psychological control.

Ms. Dugal, this is my last question. You talked about recommendations from other reports.

Are there one or two recommendations you would like to see included in the committee's report at the end of this study?

Ms. Anuradha Dugal: Thank you.

[English]

Madam Chair, I just want to also point out, on the previous question that I was not able to answer, that there is not enough money in the justice system to enable women who cannot afford to represent themselves to get adequate support. The income level testing that is required is extremely low. Many women cannot afford the kind of legal support that is needed for them to go through any kind of legal service, whether it's a divorce case, an IPV case or, indeed, their own attempted murder.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Dugal.

With regard to the last question that Andréanne posed, if you could submit those recommendations to the committee, that would be great. We've already exhausted an extra minute or two of her time.

• (1245)

Ms. Anuradha Dugal: My recommendations are funding for shelter spaces, danger assessments, wraparound holistic services that include all kinds of social services, greater coordination and a full implementation of the national action plan above the \$5-million level that the current government has offered. We need billions, not millions.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

MP Zarrillo, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Bonita Zarrillo: Thank you.

I'm just going to follow up on the national action plan and the fact that, in 2022, it was supposed to be 10 years. Right now, I think we have two bilaterals, one with Manitoba for \$22 million and one with Saskatchewan for \$20 million, but there has not been an annual report out of WAGE to track its progress.

Again, I hope this report reflects how slowly the government has been rolling out funds. I'm going to think about the missing and murdered indigenous women and girls calls for justice. Very little of that money has been spent. Money doesn't help when it's sitting in somebody else's bank account.

My question is for Ms. Dugal.

I'm the critic for seniors and women with disabilities, and I hear many stories of how there just isn't enough data on intimate partner violence and family violence for women with disabilities and seniors. I wonder if you could just share with this committee what you've seen over time in regard to seniors and women or persons of diverse genders with disabilities experiencing intimate partner violence at home.

Ms. Anuradha Dugal: Of course, the reason women, diverse people with disabilities and seniors are more vulnerable to violence is that they are more isolated. They often have fewer resources. It is much easier to use multiple forms of abuse. Often, financial abuse is used against women with disabilities and seniors, as is abuse with the assistive technology that they might use and need and abuse that is coercive in nature.

The threats of physical violence can also be much more difficult for somebody who is a senior or disabled, because they have, if you like, a more delicate health system when they are facing those threats, and fewer opportunities to find help. Because it is not recognized, we often infantilize older people, and we take away their agency. If we don't believe women to begin with, we believe older women and disabled women even less, because we take away their rights and they're not able to express what they are experiencing in many cases.

There are some programs that are specifically available to older women and women with disabilities. Having specific programs available to them is essential. You can't work with older women in a trauma-informed way in the same way. You need to have different, separate services.

The Chair: Thank you.

Dominique, you have the floor for five minutes.

[Translation]

Mrs. Dominique Vien: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Before I ask what will probably be my last question, I want to make a couple of quick comments.

The first is for all of us as parliamentarians. If we really want to solve the problem, move forward and achieve actual results, we must first recognize what works and what doesn't.

Obviously, there's something wrong when women are assaulted and men are given a slap on the wrist because the laws have changed. Colleagues have already raised cases where criminals have received a discharge or been released on bail. They served their sentence at home when they should have been in prison instead. As parliamentarians, we should look at what happens in such cases, properly address the problem and recognize that necessary changes need to be made.

My second comment has to do with women being made invisible. A popular trend is removing, or trying to remove, the word "woman" from legislation and replacing it with a slightly more generic word, such as "individual" or "person". There was one particular case in Quebec City, and other similar attempts have been made. I'm sorry, but I cannot get behind that trend, and I'm glad the record will show that.

My third comment is for you, Ms. Walker. You said that a lot of the femicides that occurred could have been prevented. It sends shivers up my spine to know that they could have been prevented but that, as a society, we failed to protect these women. In Quebec, there is a horror story right now that involves children. Something is not working. There's a disconnect.

My fourth comment is for Ms. Jeshani. I tried, as did my colleague Ms. Larouche, to get some answers. I would ask you to clarify. When you and others say that femicide must be criminalized, I agree with you. However, that position needs to be backed up by an argument and a narrative that shows how things will change as a result. Some people will say that femicide is the same thing as murder. They will add that it is not necessary to add bells and whistles, so to speak, to the Criminal Code.

We have to do something worthwhile as a committee. I would appreciate it if you could send us the reasons why you and the other witnesses think that adding the word "femicide" to the Criminal Code will improve the situation and prevent women being murdered. On that issue and many others, I didn't get the answers I was hoping for today.

Mrs. Roberts, I know I was going to share my time with you. I don't know if I've left you any time. I'm sorry if I haven't.

• (1250)

[English]

Mrs. Anna Roberts: I just want to read into the record that Bill C-75 also added a reverse onus—I think it was mentioned for bail—when an individual is charged with an offence related to intimate partner violence and has previously been convicted of an offence relating to the intimate partner violence.

How is that protecting women?

Ms. Cait Alexander: You can't leave it up to the abusers. Saying, "Oh, well, I'm a first-time offender".... They used that with my ex. It's utter nonsense, because even with me, he wasn't a first-time offender by the time he was arrested. Stop leaving it up to the abusers. Stop leaving it up to the defence counsels.

I would just add a comment. Every single woman I know who is no longer with us, their ex-partner was out on bail—every single one—Caitlin, Breanna, Angie, Tiffany, Holly and Kelsey. In the last year, those are the ones I'm aware of personally. It's because we're not prosecuting these offenders and keeping them where they need to be.

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Serré, you have the last five minutes.

[Translation]

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

My heartfelt thanks to the witnesses for being here.

The subject we are studying is extremely difficult. I agree with the witnesses about how hard it is to know which level of government to talk to. Solutions have to be found. As Mrs. Vien said earlier, we absolutely have to identify specific solutions if we want to solve this crisis.

Before I ask my question, I want to clarify some comments that were made earlier. Last year, as part of the national action plan, the government allocated \$500 billion to help all 10 provinces and three territories combat violence against women. A report will be submitted in December on the progress made in the 10 provinces and three territories. That said, we know that \$500 billion is not enough. Solutions have to be found.

Ms. Alexander, you talked about your organization. Thank you for all that you do. It must be extremely difficult for a non-profit to navigate the system from a victim's perspective. I can't even imagine.

How could the federal government help you? How could we fund the type of system that could remedy the situation? It is clear that Crown prosecutors are not there to help victims. Obviously, the provinces have to be taken into account as well.

The federal government has budgeted \$30 million to support crisis hotlines. Could a crisis hotline be added to the program to help women who are victims of violence? That would be one way to bring people together.

• (1255)

[English]

Ms. Cait Alexander: This is actually something that's going on in Mexico right now. We're going to be expanding down there too, because this issue is obviously a global problem. There is actually a separate number, 555, that you can call if you have SA or IPV or femicide against you. That actually is a program that's being rolled out there. I'm happy to share further details.

An advocacy program is so needed. This is something we can talk about. We understand the step by step, because we've lived it.

I am giving survivors a thing that I wish I had had after my attempted murder—that exact person, a friend. We're calling it a “friend”. We're calling it a re-entry into rebuilding life. Remove all this clinical intake, client jargon and have it be a trauma-informed program.

It's working. I've contacted Peel Regional Police actually and have had more reports made. I've contacted school boards. We're helping. I talked to a 13-year-old girl about her sexual assault and helped get her perpetrator prosecuted properly.

We need the resources to do it. I have relied on private funding exclusively because I have access to America. That is not the majority of non-profits in the U.S., but I have brought business people onto our board to facilitate these things.

I would very happily have a discussion about how we can fund a proper advocacy program in this country, so that survivors and their families feel like they are supported through the justice system.

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you for that.

Ms. Dugal, from the Women's Shelters Canada, you mentioned the lack of data. Can you be specific? The data is there, so I want you to clarify what you mean by the lack of data.

What else do we need to collect?

Ms. Anuradha Dugal: Actually, the data isn't there. This is one of the reasons we need to name it femicide.

In many cases, when we are looking at the homicide numbers, it is sometimes very hard to identify when it is the case that a woman is a victim of a femicide linked to IPV. In some cases, the police do not ask that question. In very many cases, it takes advocates to bring it forward and say that they see this as IPV, that it is related to violence and that they want them to go back and look at it again.

There's no consistency in how the data is collected. We need information on the background of victims, on their social location, their race, their geographic location and how many times they re-

ported to the police before this happened. If they never reported to the police, why didn't they report? What is the family saying about what happened? What did the neighbours see?

This is the sort of information we were able to gather through a multi-year, government-funded research grant run by Dr. Myrna Dawson, which led to the foundation of the Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability. That is why we need data. It's because we need accountability.

We also need to know how many times a charge is laid. What happens afterward?

Of course, that data is somewhere in StatsCan or somewhere in a police database, but we need it collected and collated for us.

• (1300)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dugal and MP Serré.

At this point, that concludes our panel for today. The meeting commenced at 11:03, so we will finish at approximately 1:04, because we had one minute of suspension as well.

In addition to that, I would like to encourage or implore any witnesses who did not have an opportunity to respond to questions.... If they would like to submit additional information in response to questions that were posed to them, they are welcome to do that.

On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank all of you for being here, for joining online and for your very sensitive testimony.

To committee members, we have just about two minutes of committee business that I would like to address. There are a couple of housekeeping things before the next meeting.

On mental health supports for witnesses, we have done this in the past with regard to the study of coercive behaviour. Is everyone in agreement to offer those supports to witnesses for this study?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: There was a proposed budget circulated, and a revised budget was circulated this morning. Is it the will of the committee to adopt the budget as proposed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: At this point, is it the will of the committee to adjourn the meeting?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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