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Chair: Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg



Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs

Tuesday, December 5, 2023

• (1600)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

[Translation]

Welcome to meeting number 74 of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs.

[English]

For the first hour, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted on Monday, October 3, 2022, the committee will resume its study on the experience of women veterans.

For the first hour we have two witnesses, but we are trying to get in touch with Ms. Hayward because the sound check was not going so well. We will pursue that.

For the second hour the committee will proceed to the consideration of matters related to committee business.

[Translation]

Today's meeting is being held in hybrid format, in accordance with the standing order. Members may participate in person or via Zoom.

As to interpretation, those participating via Zoom may choose the French audio, the English audio or the floor audio.

Although this room has a high-quality audio system, there can be feedback that can injure the interpreters. So we ask you not to place the earpiece close to the microphone to prevent such feedback and ensure that we can continue the meeting and avoid causing problems for our interpreters.

In accordance with the routine motion, the connection tests have been done or we will continue doing them.

I would like to provide a trigger warning because we will be talking about veterans' experiences.

Before we welcome our witnesses, we will be talking about experiences related to mental health. This may be triggering to the people here, to viewers, committee members and their staff who have had similar experiences. If you feel distressed or need help, please advise the clerk promptly.

[English]

Before we welcome our witnesses, I would like to provide this trigger warning. We may be discussing experiences related to gen-

eral health and mental health. This may be triggering to viewers, members or staff with similar experiences. If you feel distressed or need help, please advise the clerk.

[Translation]

I would now like to welcome our witnesses.

[English]

We have with us Ms. Caleigh Wong, who is here as an individual. We also have, via video conference, Stephanie Hayward, who is a veteran.

You will have around five minutes for your opening statement. After that, members of the committee will ask you some questions.

If you don't mind, I am going to start with you, Ms. Wong. You are here, and you have five minutes for your opening statement. Please go ahead.

• (1605)

Ms. Caleigh Wong (As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I worry that I might go over by a minute or two, so I hope you'll forgive me.

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the relative privilege I've had in my military experience. Unlike many witnesses who have come before you, and unlike many women who have served in the CAF, I have never experienced aggravated rape. I was also a reservist who served for only five years and deployed once on a six-month tour to Latvia. I never planned on the CAF being a lifelong career, and without significant bills to pay or a family to support, I always had the option to leave.

I'm here because I believe I can offer the perspective of someone who has had a foot in both worlds—as an operational soldier for a time and as a student and advocate whose work has largely centred on discrimination in the CAF.

In this opening statement, I aim to speak mostly about the two most formative experiences I had in the CAF, mainly my BMQ, or basic military qualification, and my pre-deployment and deployment experiences.

I joined the primary army reserves when I was 18 years old. I completed my BMQ and BMQ-L by 19 and my trades training by 20, and I was deployed when I was 21 years old. I released last year at age 23.

In the lead-up to my BMQ course, I was posted to a base on general duty as an untrained private while I awaited my course start date. During this time, a significantly older service member—a man—made unwanted advances at me, referencing an Asian fetish that he had. This person also made jokes about keeping child pornography on his computer. Someone other than me reported him. However, as the victim of interest, I was the one whom the report focused on specifically from that point on. The officer I spoke to told me I would be asked to testify at a proceeding for the incident and that I should not speak to this person any longer.

As far as I know, there was never a charge and there was never any follow-up with me. At the time, this service member was punished by being assigned meal hall duty, where he would count service members as they came in for their daily meals. This meant that I saw him three times a day, every day, when he tried to talk to me. I later learned this was not his first offence. He was described, generally, as a “crazy but harmless” soldier whom people just learned to tolerate. This all happened to me during my first full-time work in the CAF.

During this time, I was introduced to the military culture I would spend the rest of my career trying to push back against—the culture that called the knee pad inserts that went into our trousers “promotion pads”, that had male staff in my basic training discussing plans to sleep with certain female students after the course was over, and that has an incredible tolerance for discrimination and sexual violence.

There was an attempted rape in camp during the first couple of weeks that I was deployed in Latvia. The victim was a Canadian woman who, while only seeing the rapist in the dark and from the back as he ran away, believed him to be a Canadian man. For my rotation, there were 500-some Canadian soldiers on base, but only the 30 or so Canadian women were talked to about this event. The proposed solution by the command team was to employ a buddy system among women soldiers and to discontinue use of the all-gender sauna. The men in the battle group, as far as I'm aware, were never spoken to about this incident.

In Latvia, I repeatedly heard my male colleagues and even superiors talk openly about their fantasies or the sexual experiences they'd had with women soldiers around the camp. I heard my female colleague get told to “not play the gender card” while she was bringing up concerns she had to her male superior. I heard one of my male colleagues talk about a Snapchat group where men from his regiment shared photos of themselves wearing their regimental caps during sex, at times without the knowledge or consent of the women involved in the sex they were having. One male colleague of mine, during our pre-deployment training, consistently overstepped articulated boundaries I had set, including groping me, especially during events where drinking was involved, of which there were many.

During my deployment and also during my career, I heard countless stories of soldiers committing or attempting to commit sexual

assault against either civilians or female service members. Even after these events came to light or were reported, many of them were simply moved to other units or, at worst, demoted one rank.

There seems to be doublethink present in the minds of a lot of male Canadian soldiers: Sexual misconduct issues are being “shoved down their throats” and this whole topic in the CAF has created a witch hunt, but at the same time, I believe there's a general attitude of being able to get away with such acts of sexual violence because this has so consistently been the case with the people and stories we hear about every day in the workplace.

The majority of women I've met in the CAF have experienced some form of sexual harassment or assault in their career. Someone very close to me was sexually assaulted during her trades training course. Despite going through the arduous, oftentimes belittling process of reporting, she continues to work with her assaulter on a near-daily basis.

• (1610)

Throughout my career, I've heard different men of almost every rank talk about how they feel women deserve the hardship they go through in the military. There's an unequivocal attitude that we as women are just barely tolerated guests in this men's domain. The best of us—by that I mean the most agreeable, the ones who can navigate the rape jokes, sexualized culture and misogyny with grace and humour—are bestowed the ultimate honour for a woman in the military: being one of the boys.

I feel that there is a general deep incompetency of most military leaders to deal with sexual violence in their ranks. I also perceive a deep unwillingness to do so as well. I see and have felt a deep pressure to not report, and I've seen and felt a deep incapacity of this organization to deal with the cases of the people who do step forward.

To close, I want to share two journal entries of mine that I found while preparing for this witness testimony. The first is from about halfway through my deployment. It reads:

Now here I am. Over halfway through a 6-month deployment, and I've grown so accustomed to melancholy. It feels normal to me. There are always good moments of course (especially when I drink). But generally I am sad. I feel defeated by this institution most days. I think a lot about what its going to be like that first time I am back home and sit down at Rachel's place surrounded by my friends and I'll unpack what this experience has been like. And its going to be heart-breaking, for them too I know. To confess how unhappy I've been, but mostly how ashamed they would have been with me if they saw how much of a bystander I was, how silent I was for so many hateful moments. But I think its even more challenging to reflect on what kind of person I will be after all this — how this will change me in a way that will show forever. I think, to some degree, I will always carry this defeat. This loss of faith in something I once really believed in, this disenchantment with the organization and the belief in the potential for things to get better. I guess that's all just growing up, but a lot of growing up has happened in these 3 months. And I think when you have to grow up fast, you grow up a little different than had you otherwise would have given the grace of time.

The second entry is much shorter, and it's from much later, after I got back from Latvia. It reads:

It's been a year since I've returned home from Latvia. These [entries] aren't about that experience anymore, which is crazy to say. For a time it felt like life would always be relative to that experience. And that's not to say that I've reclaimed the woman I was and the qualities I had before I left. In fact, I am slowly coming to terms with the possibility that I may never see that girl again. That I may never get my mojo back. And I have been making peace with that. I am not all the way there yet, but I am making my way.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Wong. Thank you also for your service.

It takes a lot of courage to talk about this in front of the camera and in front of people. Thank you very much.

We're going to take a one-minute break to make sure that we have a good connection with the next witness, Ms. Hayward.

[*Translation*]

The meeting is suspended for a few seconds.

The Chair: Let us resume.

Unfortunately, Ms. Hayward is still having some computer issues. We will begin the question period with Ms. Wong and those in the room while the technician keeps trying to fix Ms. Hayward's problem.

By the way, Ms. Hayward has provided a lot of documents in support of her presentation.

• (1615)

[*English*]

I would also like to say to Ms. Wong that we're going to take a five-minute break during this session. If you need me to stop, just let me know.

We're going to start with the first round of questions of six minutes each.

I invite MP Cathay Wagantall for six minutes, please.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall (Yorkton—Melville, CPC): Thank you so much, Chair. Through you, welcome, Caleigh. It's an honour to have you in this room.

I was able to have an extended conversation with you a couple of times back in 2021 when we discussed the potential of this being dealt with someday through a study. Here we are, quite a while later.

I really appreciated your honesty and your professionalism in the way that you have moved forward with this circumstance in your life.

I want to refer to your journal. The first comment that you made from it was just shortly after you had returned home. Is that correct, the one that you read to us, or was that during your time there?

Ms. Caleigh Wong: I read two. The first one was during my time there—halfway through—and the shorter one at the end was after I returned home.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: You indicated in the first one that you were really unhappy with yourself and that you felt ashamed for not stepping up and speaking up more.

How old were you?

Ms. Caleigh Wong: I was 21.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: How long had you been in that situation, trying to deal with this interference and inappropriateness in your life?

Ms. Caleigh Wong: The neat answer would be, at that point, three months, or the six-month span I was in Latvia. I continued to do work when I was back at home, but obviously the deployment environment is very different. There it is inescapable. I was posted, and with COVID, we weren't allowed to leave the camp for an extended period of time, so I would say there were six months of....

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Prison?

Ms. Caleigh Wong: —inescapable military culture.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Okay. Thank you.

We talked in the past about this, and I asked you a question back then. I asked if you thought that somehow all of this could be handled and changed internally. At that point in time, you said you didn't think so.

What is your perspective on that now? Clearly, this is systemic and it needs to be dealt with, but just from some of your short conversations with us today, I appreciate the challenges in what that would involve.

Do you have any recommendations for this committee to say, "Listen, this is what needs to happen"?

At this point in time, would you encourage your daughter some day to enlist?

Ms. Caleigh Wong: To answer your last question first, it's a conversation I've had with different friends of mine. I think I would, with a theoretical daughter I might have one day, probably try to discourage her from enlisting, but as a woman who has been in the forces, I would never try to stop her. I think that's my answer.

In terms of the internal potential for change, I would somewhat maintain my answer that I gave you those years ago, but maybe with a bit more nuance. I don't think there's a neat internal capacity for this issue to be solved. For a number of reasons, I do not think the structure of the military and the way that everything from culture change to battlefield orders is disseminated through the chain of command are the model that helps facilitate meaningful structural change of an organization.

That being said, though, I think there need to be internal champions for this issue, because we've seen over the decades, with the various scandals that have come to light about the Canadian Forces, that the external pressure is never constant. Even though it's something that needs to coincide with an internal movement, for something to go about that, there needs to be pressure from both sides.

I think the challenge externally is to sustain that pressure. I think the challenge internally is to highlight, select and empower leaders who may showcase characteristics that we wouldn't traditionally associate with powerful, impressive military leadership, but those are the people who would be most able to establish the change that we're looking to establish.

• (1620)

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Regarding your first experience with this person above you, how long was it after your very first exposure to the military? I think it was very close to the beginning of your....

Ms. Caleigh Wong: Right. Yes. I joined in November 2017, and then my first full-time contract started in May 2018, so it would have been late May or early June when this happened.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: Thank you.

You commented that people said he was simply a “harmless” soldier. I can't imagine what it was like to hear the word “harmless” attached to this individual. Can you expand a bit on what that did to you? Are you comfortable doing that?

Ms. Caleigh Wong: Yes. Of course.

You're absolutely right. It was a hard thing to hear and a weird thing to hear being assigned to someone who had said such problematic things—not just about me, but other stuff he had said.

For me, in some ways it set the tone of what to expect going forward in this organization. Here was a man in his forties, maybe, going after a 19-year-old girl who hadn't completed her basic training or anything like that, and making these incredibly inappropriate jokes about child pornography, etc.

For that to be written off by the people around me, saying, “Oh, you know, that corporal has a reputation”.... He was known for saying these really, they would say, “out-of-pocket things” or whatever, but they always just sent him back to his unit in Cape Breton and hid him away there until the next rotation or the next summer season came around.

Mrs. Cathay Wagantall: In that environment, then—

The Chair: I'm sorry, but the time is up. I'm so sorry, Mrs. Wagantall.

We have to go to Mr. Miao for six minutes. MP Miao, please go ahead.

Mr. Wilson Miao (Richmond Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, for your appearance today.

Ms. Wong, may I call you Caleigh?

Thank you for being here and for sharing your story. I must say it does take some courage and bravery to share this with us and I really thank you for the service you've done.

I know that in your remarks you have shared the stories of what happened. Before I go on with my question, can you share with us what led you to want to serve in the Canadian Armed Forces?

Ms. Caleigh Wong: Absolutely. Thank you for your question, sir.

I came to Canada when I was 12. I was born in Malaysia. My mom is Canadian and my dad is Malaysian.

When I first came here as a young person, there was a real enchantment with Canada as a project, as a nation. There were rights afforded to me here that would never happen in Malaysia. Especially for me as a queer woman, the reality of my life here is just so different, so much richer than what could be true, at least publicly, in Malaysia.

I had a big romantic idea of Canada for many years of my youth after I'd first moved here. When I was 15, a recruiter came to my high school and talked about the reserves and about how it was something you could do through university. I never wanted it to be my full career, but I think it combined with the ideas of adventure and of helping pay for school and opportunities for challenge and growth. A very big part of that was the sentimentality I had about the Canadian project, and to a degree a sense of nationalism about Canada. That's probably why I joined.

Mr. Wilson Miao: After you joined the CAF, was what you experienced something you thought would be part of it? Before you joined the CAF, were you expecting that something like this would happen to you?

Ms. Caleigh Wong: No, I was certainly not.

Mr. Wilson Miao: Was an investigation made when you reported the incident to your superior? What kind of action was taken, other than demoting the person's rank, as you mentioned?

• (1625)

Ms. Caleigh Wong: The incident that happened while I was on duty, right before my basic training happened, was reported by someone other than me, and I was told what the timeline would be for how things would roll out and that I would be expected to testify at a certain thing and that this person's unit in Cape Breton would probably facilitate that to a certain degree.

That was the last I heard about it. I wasn't given a follow-up about that. The last I heard about this was when I was telling the story to someone in my unit. I named the person, and they said, “Oh, yeah, he's still in Cape Breton at his home unit.” I don't imagine anything has happened there.

There have been other reports that I've been somewhat a part of. On the ones that have anything to do with sexual violence or discrimination, I can't think of one that I've been a part of or that I've heard about that has seen what would be my idea of justice.

Mr. Wilson Miao: Even when you had the chance to share with your peers about the incident or this terrible experience, was there any other action taken to address the Snapchat you mentioned, or the child pornography or the Asian fetish? I imagine that these kinds of things are still happening right now in the military. Is that right?

Ms. Caleigh Wong: The only story I shared or alluded to in my testimony on which I will say something did happen quite quickly had to do with one of the instructors on my basic training course. He had talked about wanting to sleep with one of the students after the course was done. That came to light along with many other things he was doing. He was calling students faggots and he said the “N” word at one point during the course. That came to light with our course warrant officer—a higher-up—and he was removed as an instructor from the course. Other than that, no penalty came to him.

Mr. Wilson Miao: Not to say that it will repeat itself, but what would you like to see if another member of the CAF experienced a situation similar to what you experienced? What would you suggest to our committee would be a better way of addressing concerns like this?

Ms. Caleigh Wong: With regard to the example of the instructor on the basic training, I think that a big thing is not just acting in the short term to make the situation more comfortable for everyone. In that situation, he was removed from the course as an instructor. However, that was it; that would never have been on his record. It would not have impeded his ability, as an instructor, to be an instructor at other basic courses. It was just the immediate fix.

With regard to that specific example, I think that when an issue like that comes to light, it needs to be marked in a way that has an impact on their total career and on their character as a soldier, not just with a circumstantial solution.

Mr. Wilson Miao: Thank you.

I believe my time is up.

The Chair: Thank you very much, MP Miao.

We're going to take a short break. We're going to try to have Ms. Hayward with us. I will pause the meeting for a few seconds.

[*Translation*]

Communication with Stephanie Hayward has been restored.

[*English*]

Ms. Stephanie Hayward, you have an opening statement even though you have sent us a lot of material.

You have five minutes for your opening statement. Please go ahead.

• (1630)

Ms. Stephanie Hayward (Veteran, As an Individual): Hello. My name is Stephanie Hayward. I am a Canadian veteran.

I attended basic training in Saint-Jean, Quebec, in 2009. Little did I know that I was in more danger entering a basic training campus on Canadian territory than if I had deployed to go to war in a third world country. I was drugged, kidnapped and gang-raped while attending mandatory training. The last thing I remember is dozing off in class after our lunch break in the cafeteria, and waking in complete fear in an unknown location, with motel staff waking me. I was completely naked, with no identification, covered in blood and bruises, and I couldn't walk. While the military government covered up a crime, the criminals climbed the ranks.

I was forced into poverty and suffered medically untreated conditions for 11 years. I experienced homelessness, extreme poverty and poor living conditions, and for many years I could only feed my daughter and not myself, as I couldn't afford food or essentials.

In both my pregnancies I had severe complications and pain from untreated physical conditions from the military injuries. The pain got so bad for my second pregnancy in 2020 that I was put on bedrest and prescribed morphine. Both of my children have medical conditions due to complications in labour due to military injuries.

After four attempts to apply to Veterans Affairs over the years of 2010 to 2020, in 2020, when I was hospitalized for extreme PTSD and depression while pregnant, a social worker advocated for me to apply to Veterans Affairs again. I was approved for the rehabilitation program 11 years after the date of my release. Veterans Affairs, even with my being in a rehab program, didn't help me when I was on bedrest and on pain medications while in the hospital, or with medical expenses, even when they were directly related to my military injuries.

In November 2020 I started with the OSI clinic at Deer Lodge in Winnipeg. I started my PTSD therapy, and it truly saved my life. I'm so grateful for the team of doctors and professionals, as I was able to get secure housing to provide a safe and stable home for me and my children.

I want to make it very clear that I'm extremely grateful for the Veterans Affairs programs and benefits, as they had a huge part in gaining stability in my children's lives and my own. The matters I'm going to speak on are in areas where women fall through the cracks because the programs are designed for males and their anatomy.

Having received an award in 2021 of 21% for sexual dysfunction and the first critical injury benefit for sexual assault in 2021, and also other disability claims that equal 100% due to my military conditions, I still have been fighting for basic treatments, such as pelvic floor and physical therapy related to my women's reproductive health issues from my military injuries. I have spent the last three years fighting for medical treatments and have been denied. I've had to pay out of pocket, just to be told that women's reproductive health hasn't had any treatment codes for women since 1992. I live in chronic pain and have been fighting for basic medical coverage for the last 14 years, and I received no pay from Veterans Affairs until 2020.

As a single mother, I have very little support outside the home. Sometimes I have none. I had to fight for two years to get the Veterans Affairs independence program, as I was told I was choosing to be a victim over a survivor when I was just asking for assistance in my home. With being the lowest-paid veteran and Veterans Affairs only allowing me to apply in June 2020 and Veterans Affairs refusing to pay for the lost years of pay, it resulted in a huge overpayment by Veterans Affairs, taking disability lump sums, withholding of my pay for the rest of my life, and a huge tax burden.

Also, due to the new threshold for income replacement, I'm not entitled to career progression, even with having a DEC—diminished earning capacity—decision. The monthly amounts are not enough to cover my basic needs and allow me to attend my rehabilitation program appointments, and with the delay of reimbursement, fighting for dependent care is making it impossible to continue.

Even after I might finally be able to start pelvic floor therapy and other treatments related to physical health, my children have high-cost needs from my military injuries, causing them to need ongoing treatments and rehabilitation, with no coverage or help from Veterans Affairs.

My question for Veterans Affairs is this: Why are women not worthy of the same standard of care and entitled to the same benefits as our male counterparts? Women veterans' pay is 17% less than it is for males.

Second, why doesn't Veterans Affairs care for veterans' children? We are raising the next generation of potential serving members, as I came from two serving grandparents, and my children had better coverage while I was on assistance. Military veterans' children deserve better, and they matter too.

The headlines talk about national defence and sexual misconduct, but no one looks at the treatment of victims. They are being retraumatized in working with an outdated system and outdated beliefs at Veterans Affairs. Veterans Affairs has the ability and the resources to help empower women veterans. Instead we are forgotten service members.

I have an educational background in community economic development. I have a list of recommendations for programs that can help bridge the gap of services.

• (1635)

My right to serve was stolen, but I hope my testimony today will help protect future recruits at basic training...human rights and help improve aftercare for sexual assault for all women.

I would like to thank the sexual resource centre, the Bureau of Pensions Advocates, VETS Canada, the Poppy Fund and the national defence and Canadian Armed Forces ombudsman for helping me try to navigate this very complex process.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Stephanie Hayward.

As I said, if you need a break during this session, just let us know. Thank you also for your service and courage.

We've already started questions with members of the committee, so we're going to continue.

I'm sorry, Ms. Hayward. The interpreters ask that maybe during questions you go a little bit slower. I know that you said you wanted to stay within your five minutes for your opening statement, but the interpreters ask you to go a little bit slower.

[*Translation*]

Dear committee members, kindly indicate who your question is for.

Mr. Luc Desilets now has the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Luc Desilets (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good evening, colleagues.

Ms. Hayward and Ms. Wong, thank you for being with us today. Thank you also for your service to the country. You are extremely brave to share your experiences with us, things that were not always easy.

Ms. Hayward, do you still have outstanding claims with Veterans Affairs Canada?

[*English*]

Ms. Stephanie Hayward: I've been trying to fight with them since I started. I tried to appeal it twice for the income replacement, as my pay is actually honoured by SISIP as a basic corporal, but Veterans Affairs won't honour that amount, even though my injury was from 2009 and SISIP long-term disability honoured that pay.

The problem is that SISIP is paying me one amount and Veterans Affairs is paying me a different amount. There are two programs, but they do not coincide, so I'm not entitled to the 90% pay of my release; I'm only entitled to the threshold, which is substantially lower than what my pay would have been today.

I'm trying to fight with them, but they took overpayments and they've taken disability payments and they've taken my pay. Anything they can take, they've taken.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Do you have any other outstanding claims right now?

[English]

Ms. Stephanie Hayward: I'm hoping to have some help. I've kind of hit a brick wall. At this point, I don't have any resources to pursue any more because VAC says this is a military grievance, but then when I talk to DND they say it's a VAC issue. I'm just between two different people telling me it's this one's fault or that one's fault, but no one.... Other veterans who were hurt at the same time as I was have basic corporal pay, but I'm not entitled to it.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you.

Would you say that your military service had an impact on the physical or psychological health of your children?

[English]

Ms. Stephanie Hayward: Yes. Due to my labour for my daughter, because of the scarring that I received from my sexual assault and the pain that I was in, I was on bedrest. I was contracting early on, but then when I was in labour with my daughter, she got stuck at nine and a half centimetres. She couldn't engage more because of my scarring. I actually tore my cervix because I couldn't properly deliver. It was due to untreated scarring and injury because of a sexual misconduct.

That was in 2009, so I was six years without medical treatment.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you.

With regard to your claims, did Veterans Affairs Canada take into account the problems you experienced during labour that you say are related to your time in the armed forces?

• (1640)

[English]

Ms. Stephanie Hayward: They said no. They said they wouldn't look at it because it's childbirth, so it's another misunderstanding about women's health, and they wouldn't even consider it.

I was literally hospitalized for extreme depression. I had to go for surgery. When they were counting down, I didn't want to be alive anymore. I told them I was in so much pain and my kids deserve better, and I woke to a social worker helping me apply for VAC and stuff, but they wouldn't even cover mental health supports when I was in the hospital while I was pregnant. I was having a complete mental breakdown because my nightmares were the worst when I was pregnant because it's the same traumatic experience to my in-

sides that it was in my assault. It makes the nightmares and the night terrors flood back. I was in extreme pain, extreme poverty, struggling with a four-year-old and pregnant.

They still wouldn't cover the time that I was there, even after being on a ward at the rehabilitation program. They still wouldn't cover any of the treatments. They said it was because it was pregnancy-related, but it wasn't. They wouldn't even listen to my gynecologist at all. They prescribed me morphine when my son was born. The doctors don't prescribe that for just anybody.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Would you encourage young people to serve in the armed forces?

[English]

Ms. Stephanie Hayward: Coming from a family of military professionals who served, I love the idea of serving because you get to travel and you get to experience different things. I think if the culture could change and actually respect human rights....

I understand that you can't control every single person who comes into the military and you can't judge them when they first come in, but the fact is that after my injury, I was treated like a criminal. I was treated like I was the bad person because I wouldn't change my story to meet their mandates. Instead of treating me like a human being, they treated me like an animal and kept me in basically a sea can until I was to go home because I wouldn't change my story to what they wanted it to be. They threatened me by saying I could keep my employment as long as I changed my story to whatever brackets of hazing they considered my assault. They consider it as a hazing, like a ritual. They didn't consider it a sexual assault. During the last three weeks of my basic training, before I was to go back home, while I was being contained, they threatened my life and they showed me all those things.

If they can change and hold people accountable and treat people fairly and provide essential medical treatment after an assault.... If I had been provided a rape kit at the time of my assault, they would never have questioned my injuries, because there would be proof and evidence and I could charge somebody criminally. Because they destroyed evidence and they did these things, I couldn't come forward with any information because they were the ones who hurt me.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I forgot to welcome one of our colleagues, MP Sonia Sidhu, who replaced Mr. Randeep Sarai. She's on video conference.

I would like to ask Ms. Blaney to take the floor for six minutes, please.

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

I want to thank both the witnesses for their powerful testimony today.

We've heard again and again from women veterans that they often feel their experience is invisible. In both of your testimonies you talked very clearly about how what happened to you was made invisible; there was no follow-up, there was no rape kit provided, there were no actions taken to move forward. I think this just re-emphasizes that reality of feeling invisible and ignored.

I'm going to start with Ms. Wong, but I'm asking both of you the question.

One of the things that has been very clear through this study is that data is a concern. Because it's isn't gathered appropriately while women veterans are serving, when they get to VAC it's often challenging to prove the things that happened, because that data is not there.

I have a two-part question. First, what data do you feel should be collected in the future so that when you get to VAC you actually receive the supports you need? Second, should that documentation happen internally, in the same way that it's happening now—when things happen, everything is reported internally—or should it be an external process so that there's a step away from the CAF while reporting incidents like the ones you experienced?

Ms. Wong, can I start with you first?

Ms. Caleigh Wong: Thank you.

I think Stephanie will probably be able to speak a little more to data in terms of going to VAC afterwards.

I do think that it needs to be externalized. The nature of the military environment is that in PMQ situations, you are friends with, live with, cohabit with, train with everyone you work with. In military settings, sexual assaults usually happen with people the victims already know. I think the entire mechanism of reporting of data for incidents should be externalized, because even if there was a more casual way to make note of something happening rather than engaging the formal reporting mechanism, I think that would be beneficial.

I hope that's answered your question. I know it was a two-parter, and I'm struggling with the other part.

• (1645)

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I think you got it. Thank you.

Ms. Hayward, would you comment?

Ms. Stephanie Hayward: The problem with regard to my assaults and the information that was collected was that the pensions advocate had to call basic training in Saint-Jean, Quebec, to get my medical file, which was sealed in an area and was never attached to my VAC document. The only reason I was able to go forward with my critical injury benefit was that we found the medical documents. They treated me for my sexual assault and I had everything to keep me alive, but they wouldn't provide a rape kit.

When that information got to VAC, my decision was awarded through the medical information that was on file, but Veterans Affairs still doesn't use that information as valid information. Even though it comes directly from DND, it's still not recognized as information on my file to prove my medical conditions, even though it was enough to award a critical injury benefit.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: The collection of information is currently internalized. Do you think it should be external in these kinds of incidents so that there is more accountability and less connection to the CAF?

Ms. Stephanie Hayward: If it were a perfect world, there would be some kind of way for this for all women across Canada, women in the CAF included. Sexual assault is not just about the assault; it's about the collection afterward. It's about the physical body afterward. It's the fact that victims deserve the right to a criminal court case, if they can do it.

I found out through my studies and working with the national ombudsman that only 20% of Canadian hospitals offer rape kits. Every single hospital that's around basic training or any kind of military base is hundreds of kilometres away. That's where you have to go to even receive it. From contacting the surgeon general, I know they have no interest in applying a rape kit protocol. It costs \$1.25 to provide these tests.

The sad part is with regard to the collection of data. I think it should be similar to victim services in Canada, where they have a different person who records the information. At least there's a middle person. For me, when I was trying to report this, I wasn't even allowed to go to the RCMP. I wasn't allowed to go civil. I was basically contained into an area and I couldn't speak to anybody. I couldn't even go get sanitary pads by myself, even though I couldn't walk. I couldn't go anywhere. At the end of the day, if I'd had somebody to talk to that wasn't them....

I did whatever I could to survive at that point. I was just fearing for my life. If I'd had somebody else who would listen to me, I could have explained what happened. To them, they labelled me with all these military legal terms, but they never let me speak to anybody. When I got back home, the RCMP said they couldn't do anything because there was no information. They had contained the information.

I believe this is how rapists get away with what they do. They get to hide the information. If there was at least a way that we could trace it, maybe somebody who was doing this could be found. I know I'm not the only victim.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: You talked about the fact that you went through extreme poverty and periods of homelessness after being discharged. Did you get any sort of support from VAC to figure out what benefits you could benefit from to prevent you from being unhoused?

Ms. Stephanie Hayward: Three times prior to 2020 I tried to apply for Veterans Affairs benefits. The first one was in 2010, when I was escorted out of the building by security. The second one was later in 2010, when I was suicidal. They denied it. When I became pregnant with my daughter, I ended up in Villa Rosa, a pregnancy shelter for women. I couldn't work because of the excruciating pain I was in. I reached out to them. It's part of protocol with the shelter that they reach out to any person you can potentially have funding from, because I had no income. They denied me at that point. Even working to get it addressed, I was denied. Veterans Affairs wouldn't even talk to me until 2020. They wouldn't even accept any information from me until 2020.

• (1650)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We have 15 minutes left. We will have a last round of questions.

I would like to invite Mr. Terry Dowdall to go ahead for five minutes, please.

Mr. Terry Dowdall (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank our guests today for their service and also for their testimony. Hopefully it helps other individuals who either are currently serving or plan on going through at some point in time.

I happened to see a report that came out today. It's a shocking, disturbing report from Stats Canada that says there is a significant increase in sexual misconduct in the Canadian Armed Forces. It just came out. Actually, I just saw it while we were here. The numbers are extremely disappointing.

Originally they did a study, way back when, on sexual misconduct in the military, which I was part of at that time. I believe it was early 2020. These are the numbers we're seeing here, as an example. In 2016, 1.7% of the people reported sexual assault in the military workplace. In 2018, it was 1.6%. In 2022, we're seeing 3.5% of individuals.

It's not getting better. We did a report, but I don't know if that was actually acted upon. It is extremely unfortunate to see those kinds of numbers come through.

In your testimony especially, Ms. Wong, you were saying that those who committed these awful crimes in the military either were demoted or moved on, while you're a barely tolerated guest at times. Those kinds of comments are extremely disappointing.

What can we do as an organization? Do we need more females in the higher ranks?

Seeing some of this.... As you said, when you're a bystander, you feel bad at that particular moment in time. I'm sure there is a lot of that.

What do we need to do? These numbers are absolutely shocking. We're not going to get people wanting to join the military. Certainly we don't want them to have the experiences that the two of you have had.

I'd just like your comments on what we can do to improve on that.

Ms. Caleigh Wong: Thank you for your question.

I don't know that it's going to be a simple solution by any means. I don't think that adding more women to senior positions.... I'm sure it's a good start, but it's kind of like that analogy of a different captain at the same ship. It's just a numeric representation rather than something more substantial.

One thing that I think does need to be targeted early on is the training system and the way we articulate to soldiers that they are good people just by virtue of being in the military. Almost any grievance that happens outside of that is still lessened because of the fact that they're a good man in the military. I think that is why sexual violence is sometimes so reduced. It's an organization with more important things on its mind, to be frank—national security and Canadian sovereignty, etc.

We train soldiers to believe that we're preparing them to potentially die for their country, so anything outside of that is almost secondary. That's what you're being trained to do.

I think a reconfiguration of what we say we want in a good soldier is a start. That's not just outside the merits of courage and bravery and all of this, but it's being a good, ethical and just person in the civilian realm as well as the soldier realm.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: Thank you.

I have another question for Ms. Hayward.

In your testimony you were talking about frustrations with VAC. We hear quite often that there are silos when you leave National Defence and Veterans Affairs and there are frustrations there.

Do you have some recommendations or something that we can improve upon for how we deal with those situations so that there's a quicker response and also, quite frankly, so that the forms might be a little simpler so hopefully we'd be able to get some information back? I know we've been pushing that as a party for a long time.

Ms. Stephanie Hayward: I do believe that it has changed a lot, because in the past they wouldn't even let me apply. I do believe they have taken some steps forward.

The best recommendation I have is, why doesn't Veterans Affairs trust the doctors that are in the communities? I submitted doctors' reports on different medical conditions. I reported all the information I could, but they wouldn't accept it because it wasn't under their list of doctors or on their list of recommendations.

We trust providers, but for some reason veteran case managers are allowed to make medical decisions for our veterans. I just don't know how that's legal.

At the same time, I know they're trying to do their jobs, and my case manager is lovely, but at the same time, when a doctor is explaining something and trying to get medical forms, why don't they trust the provider? They went to medical school, so why aren't they worthy of giving an explanation of what kind of treatments are available?

I wasn't even aware that my file was stored somewhere else until the pensions advocate found it for me. At the end of the day, I think that if somebody was to go look at these files and see what kind of information is there, I think we'd see that there is a lot more information there than we even know.

• (1655)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dowdall.

Now I invite MP Carolyn Bennett for five minutes, please.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (Toronto—St. Paul's, Lib.): Thank you very much.

Thank you both for your testimony. Your really upsetting stories, we've heard too often.

To start, I was wondering, Ms. Hayward, in the last paragraph, where you said to thank the sexual resource centre at DND, is that the sexual and misconduct resource centre that was set up after Deschamps?

Ms. Stephanie Hayward: Yes, it's the same one.

Hon. Carolyn Bennett: I was part of Women's College Hospital, where we set up the first sexual assault care centres 30 years ago with rape kits for everybody. Eventually we put in freezers, because women didn't necessarily want to report it right away, but if the evidence went in the freezer, then they could report it when they felt they had sufficient psychological support to be able to do that.

I think there are systems out there that don't seem to have infiltrated DND or Veterans Affairs. What we keep hearing is that DND

doesn't seem to have a system for women's health and doesn't seem to link sexual trauma with a poor pregnancy labour outcome or with postpartum or perinatal mental health issues. It doesn't seem to have gotten the memo. What we're also hearing is that, as Rachel said, the data isn't there even while people are serving, so VAC doesn't seem to know that this should be compensable. We're hearing a lot that there should be a presumptive approach in terms of compensation.

First, we're really grateful for the recommendations you've put forward there. Certainly, Ms. Wong, we've heard that that story about the instructor just being moved somewhere else. Whether it's priests, doctors or whatever, everybody just gets moved. There are no real consequences and there's no geographic cure for this.

There need to be consequences, because it adds to the trauma when it appears that this person got away with it. I guess I am asking what more we can do in terms of a systems approach.

For Ms. Hayward, I was very impressed with the idea that there should be some approach to children in terms of intergenerational trauma from what their parents, male and female, went through, but how do we look after those children who've been exposed to intergenerational trauma?

Say whatever you want and then send us whatever.

Ms. Caleigh Wong: Thank you, ma'am.

The first thing that comes to mind in terms what is to be done is that there have now been two reports, two external reviews, in the last six years on precisely the same issue. There's an immense amount of overlap in the recommendations between Deschamps and Arbour. I fear that there's the possibility that this will go nowhere. It's the matter of the implementation of these recommendations, the policy graveyard that we've been warned about.

Beyond that, I think a big issue that the military internally is unwilling to engage with is that this whole issue of systemic sexual violence is a result of the unfulfilled process of gender integration in the military.

Throughout the 1990s, 2000s, etc., so many military leaders claimed that we were a gender-integrated military. We've had women in our ranks in all trades since 2000-whatever, and it's been this check in the box, but we can really clearly see that this "add women and stir" thing that we've done in the military has had these awful consequences, such as systemic sexual violence.

I think that needs to be really deeply understood by military leadership, and I don't get the sense that it is. This isn't an issue of biology or even just simple culture; this is the process of the unfulfilled task of gender integration and organization.

• (1700)

The Chair: Ms. Hayward, go ahead.

Ms. Stephanie Hayward: This might be.... I don't know if you're going to take this the wrong way, but I respect it in the way....

I think that for the first bit of basic training, they should separate genders for the first few weeks, just to get to grips with understanding the concept and how the process works. At the same time, until they can set up these systems to protect the *[Inaudible—Editor]* people from getting injuries.... I know it's not a modernized approach, but a lot of other countries don't train men and women together at the same time.

At the same time, that doesn't mean there are other.... There are same-gender assaults. I believe it has to start at the very foundation of how these people are getting trained and how they're coming in. If they don't change at the bottom level and if they don't change the top views, it's not going to meet somewhere in the middle.

As Ms. Wong said, I don't think that when they mixed females into the ranks, they properly integrated them. I think they just did it to meet a standard of government policies about women and diversity. However, they didn't understand the complex situation of putting 99% males and 1% females into the same pool of people.

I know that when I went to basic training, the concept was that you're either 99% men or 1% women. Three-quarters of those girls are lesbians or bisexual. If you're young and unmarried, you're basically an open target. It's just one of those things. It's a culture belief. We, as women, can't go against that 99% of men. We can't do it. I know women are strong, but if they don't implement this in the highest ranks and then go down, it's never going to be adapted in the way it should be.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to have two quick interventions.

[Translation]

Mr. Desilets, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Wong, have you heard of summary trials?

[English]

Ms. Caleigh Wong: I'm sorry. It just went quiet.

[Translation]

The Chair: Could you repeat the question?

Mr. Luc Desilets: Ms. Wong, have you heard of summary trials?

[English]

Ms. Caleigh Wong: Have I been to a summary charge...?

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: No, I am not asking if you have attended.

In the army, I believe there is a process whereby members are judged by their peers. Those are referred to as summary trials.

[English]

Ms. Caleigh Wong: What I heard is whether there's a process in the military of a summary charge, and whether I have ever attended one. Is that the question?

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: I would like to move on to something else.

In your opinion, would it be feasible or preferable to have groups made up exclusively of women, cases with just women?

[English]

Ms. Caleigh Wong: Thank you for the question.

I think there would probably be an immediate benefit to it in that we might see.... I think there's an idea that in the red zone—the initial period of basic training, or the initial period of any start to a new thing—sexual violence is more likely to occur. There might be an immediate benefit with numbers going down, but I don't think it's a progressive move by any means.

There are other militaries that separate gender, for sure. If we were to have to do that in Canada and if that's the solution we commit to, especially in the long term, it would be quite disappointing. The reality is that these soldiers are not going to work in a segregated environment, and sexual violence doesn't just happen at basic training.

I definitely understand the sentiments of Ms. Hayward, but I don't think that is the long-term solution, no.

• (1705)

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: Thank you.

You referred to the system being unable to manage itself or to reduce the number of cases of sexual abuse, assault and so forth. You said the pressure has to come from the outside.

What do you mean by pressure from the outside? Which organizations or individuals in particular are you referring to?

[English]

Ms. Caleigh Wong: If I understand the question, it's about who is responsible for maintaining this external pressure on the military.

I suppose that would be the people in this room.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Desilets: That's right.

I think my time is up.

Thank you very much, Ms. Wong.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Desilets.

The last person is Ms. Blaney.

[English]

You have two and a half minutes, please, Ms. Blaney.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much, Chair. I'm going to come back to Ms. Hayward.

You talked a lot about the reproductive health issues that you have because of your military injuries. Could tell us if you feel that VAC recognizes the severity of these issues? Did it fully consider the benefits that should be provided?

If not, which sounds like the case, could you explain what gaps you see there in treating women veterans' reproductive health?

Ms. Stephanie Hayward: During the last three years of trying to get physical therapy for my pelvic floor, I've been denied. I was fighting with them. I've had to pay out of pocket.

When I had to contact VAC's ombudsman to discuss these matters, I actually found out that all women's reproductive health has no treatment codes under it and it hasn't been updated since 1992. You can quote me on that, because that's what the ombudsman will confirm. They had to go in and physically change the codes, and they have not been updated.

I don't know if any woman veteran has received reproductive health treatment benefits. I have a pensionable condition that is like an umbrella, so I'm able to access these treatments, but when it goes to the claims department or to Veterans Affairs, I get sent to four gynecologists to prove my injury or to do another assessment.

The thing about sexual assault is that these procedures are very invasive, so I don't want to go to three different providers. I want to go to one, do the physical therapy and get out. I've been trying so hard for the last three years, to the point that now I can't afford to keep going with my child care because I don't get reimbursed in time. I can't afford to continue just when I might be able to receive it.

Every time there's a physical injury, even with the new rehabilitation program, it's been so complex to try to understand why they make you go through all these steps when.... To me, it's common knowledge. To providers outside of VAC, it's common knowledge that pelvic floor.... If I were to injure my back, the pelvic floor is one of the number one treatments for that in VAC, so why isn't it

for sexual misconduct? I don't understand why injuries are different by territory.

I believe that Veterans Affairs needs to have a specialist in women's health to come on to the team and redesign the table of disabilities to represent women. Right now, the table of disabilities doesn't represent anything when it comes to women's health.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you so much.

I think my time is up, but I would love it if you could send something in writing to us about how VAC could better accommodate single mothers, because you brought that up and I didn't have enough time to ask questions. I would love to have you explore that.

Thank you so much for your testimony.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Thank you to both of you for your testimony. We will stay in touch through the clerk.

• (1710)

[*Translation*]

I would also like to say that it has been incredible for me and the committee members to learn that you have had such negative experiences.

On behalf of the committee members, good luck in your career, in your endeavours and in your families.

I would now like to thank the witnesses for joining us.

[*English*]

We had Stephanie Hayward as a veteran and we had Caleigh Wong as a veteran. Thank you.

We're going to take a two-minute break because we're going to go in camera.

Thank you very much. Stay in touch. Thank you for coming.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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