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Chair: Mrs. Karen Vecchio



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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mrs. Karen Vecchio (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC)): Welcome to meeting number 99 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

Since all of our witnesses are here virtually, I will just remind you to ensure that you are muted if you are not speaking and to raise your hand if you have a question during that time. If there is no interpretation, just interrupt so that we can hear you.

I'll remind everybody in the room to make sure that your earphones aren't too close to your mic. We want to ensure that there are no issues for the interpreters.

With regard to the speaking list, the committee clerk and I will do the best we can to maintain a consolidated order of speaking for all members.

On a little note, as a reminder today, we also did the human trafficking report. That was tabled today at 10 o'clock, so it's available. I wanted to make a little note. It's not a big deal, but there was a little typo. We believe that it's from formatting. That is something that's already being addressed. If there are any complications, we'll get back to you to let you know, but it's something that was not seen in all of the official documents, and it's something we now see online. It's already being addressed, and we'll get that handled.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Thursday, September 21, 2023, the committee will resume its study of women's economic empowerment.

Today we have three witnesses online. As an individual, we have Emily Whetung-MacInnes, who is chief emerita. From Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, we have Rosemary Cooper, who is the executive director. From YES Employment and Entrepreneurship, we have Kathy Slotsve, director of communications and stakeholder engagement, and Meltem Kilicaslan, project manager for ELLEVate.

What we're going to do is begin with five minutes for each of you for your opening comments. I will interrupt about 15 seconds into your last moments so that you know that time is winding up so you can conclude.

I am going to begin by passing it over to Emily for the first five minutes.

Ms. Emily Whetung-MacInnes (Chief Emerita, As an Individual): Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for having me here today. This is my first time submitting as a witness to a committee. I'm really grateful for that opportunity.

I'm going to introduce myself in Anishinaabemowin. I think that's a very important thing for me to do.

[Witness spoke in Anishinaabemowin]

[English]

As I was introduced, I am the former chief of Curve Lake First Nation here in Ontario, a mother of two little boys and the director of indigenous partnerships for business development at Ontario Power Generation.

I have been invited to share my experience as a woman in the energy sector in leadership. I was a lawyer before that, just to share some of my background with you.

Some of the issues that I think are important to discuss are experiences that I've had in starting and raising a family from the very early days of deciding to be a lawyer and start a family and not really knowing what that meant or being prepared for the career issues that come as a result of that.

When I had my children as a lawyer, we were completely reliant on external funding to cover the gap during maternity leave. The legal world continues to march on when you step out of it, just as many careers do. Re-entering the workforce after having children is a significant issue that I think many women have to deal with. Certainly, I have many friends and I have spoken to many women who end up changing careers after those 12 to 18 months off because re-entering the workforce is incredibly difficult. Additional supports for that would be phenomenal.

Moving through my career and my time as an indigenous mother living on an Indian reserve, in regard to being able to take care of my children—and I've spoken about this before—bathing your children in a community where they can't put their face in the bath water because it may be harmful to them is an incredible struggle. I know we've made progress in recent years on getting access to clean drinking water in communities in first nations across Canada, and I'm very proud to have been a part of that. Just keep in mind that those are the issues that indigenous women face.

Then moving through my career, I have now participated in the electrification and energy transition panel in Ontario. I'm on the Canada electricity advisory council federally. Finding scheduling conflicts and the need to balance not just work and additional participation but also being an indigenous mother of indigenous children and scheduling around school times and being able to support a family are incredibly difficult things to juggle. They are things that need to take a lot of time and care. Making sure that there's understanding in scheduling for the priority of being a mother to indigenous children in an education system that hasn't always been supportive of our own choice is a really big issue that I face on a regular basis. So there's making sure that there are opportunities to support women through those transition processes.

In recent years, with the pandemic, I think some of the positive things that I've seen involve the ability to work from home. This has made a significant impact in my life in being able to balance the most important role that I have as a mother and my career. The ability to be there during the day when my kids need me and still maintain a career, being able to juggle that and having a partner who is incredibly supportive but also has the ability to juggle some days in the office and some days at home so that we're there to see our children at the end of the school day is a significant factor that's incredibly important. The more I see opportunities to find that work-life balance and be able to be a mother, the more hopeful I am that I can continue to advance in my career and support the energy transition, which is incredibly important to me personally because of things like climate change.

I don't know that I've taken up the full amount of time that we had, but that's my submission today. I'm sure we'll get into more issues as we address the questions that the committee will have.

Meegwetch.

● (1540)

The Chair: Thank you so much, Emily. You know, it was almost exactly five minutes, just a few seconds short of that. Thank you.

We're now going to pass it over to Rosemary.

Rosemary, you will have the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Rosemary Cooper (Executive Director, Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada): *Unnusakkut*, Madam Chair, committee members, guests and staff.

My name is Rosemary Cooper. I am from Iqaluit, Nunavut, and I am the executive director of Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada.

Pauktuutit is a national voice for Inuit women, girls and gender-diverse Inuit wherever they live in Canada. We just celebrated our 40th anniversary gala in Ottawa with Her Excellency Mary Simon and members of Parliament. For the past 40 years, we have advocated for Inuit women, helping them escape the harsh cycle of poverty by increasing their economic independence.

Inuit values are the foundation of any economic development and what we advocate for. Our role is to ensure that the needs of Inuit women are met, from remote, fly-in communities to urban centres. We work to identify and address barriers to economic empowerment.

Today, I would like to highlight three of these barriers. They are access to employment, safe and affordable housing, and sustainable resource extraction.

In Canada, we consistently experience lower levels of economic participation in comparison to non-Inuit. In recent years, the national average unemployment rate was approximately 7.3%. For Inuit, the average unemployment rate was more than double, at 16%. Due to the lack of access to employment, Inuit women often need to create their own entrepreneurial opportunities. To address this, we have several initiatives to support Inuit women. One way we do this is with our Pauktuutit Inuit women in business network. This is a national initiative that provides workshops and resources to support Inuit women's economic empowerment.

Another barrier is access to safe and affordable housing. This is key to the health and well-being of Inuit women and our families. Recent statistics indicate that Inuit face the most overcrowded living conditions in Canada. This has a direct negative impact on several health concerns, such as tuberculosis, family violence and the wellness of our communities. As the committee heard from previous witnesses, access to safe and adequate housing is key to addressing gender-based violence, a major barrier to economic empowerment. If we want better economic equity for all women in Canada, access to safe and affordable housing for Inuit women cannot be forgotten.

Pauktuutit continues to advocate for increased and safe participation of Inuit women in the resource extraction industry. As further investments and jobs are created in our communities, they must be rooted in our Inuit values and principles. Otherwise, we risk unsustainable practices in resource extraction and employment. This industry must be developed in a way that ensures equitable access and safe employment. This is done through research, community consultations and valuing lived experience. We underscore the need for consultations to be done in a meaningful way, which is why our appearance before this committee is deeply appreciated.

In closing, I wish to thank the committee for the invitation. We value our partnership with the Government of Canada and appreciate being engaged in your study.

Nakurmiik.

● (1545)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Rosemary.

We are now going to pass online to both Kathy and Meltem.

I'll let you two figure out your timing. You have five minutes.

Ms. Kathy Slotsve (Director, Communications and Stakeholder Engagement, YES Employment and Entrepreneurship): Thanks so much.

My name is Kathy Slotsve, and I'm the director of communications at Youth Employment Services Foundation, also known as YES Employment and Entrepreneurship.

YES is a charity organization based in Montreal that provides English-language employment and entrepreneurship services across Quebec. Our offices are located in Tiohtià:ke, the traditional territory of the Kanienkehaka people.

Our organization has been active since 1995, supporting more than 60,000 job seekers, entrepreneurs and artists in finding sustainable economic success within Quebec. We do this primarily through one-on-one coaching, mentorship, skills-building workshops and networking events, in addition to niche programming developed to support populations experiencing multiple barriers to success. Our services, which are funded through a variety of streams, including by the Government of Canada, are free or low-cost and are offered in person or online.

The full participation of diverse groups in Canadian society is a core value from both an economic and a social cohesion perspective.

The English-speaking community of Quebec is the largest linguistic minority in Canada and represents almost 16% of Quebec's labour force. However, the 2021 census confirmed that the community continues to lag behind their French counterparts economically, with both a higher unemployment rate and a lower median income, and these gaps are growing.

It's important to note that the English-speaking community in Quebec is also incredibly diverse, and that's represented in our clients. Last year, this included 67% who self-identified as women and 3% as non-binary. In addition, 34% of our clients self-identified as a member of a visible minority. The diversity of our community dictates that we must view economic outcomes with an intersectional lens, as many members of our community experience multiple barriers to success.

The lasting impacts of the pandemic have had a disproportionately negative impact on women-led businesses. The impact of the gender equity gap was further emphasized for women entrepreneurs who identify with other minority groups. Further, scaling and growing a business is more challenging for women entrepreneurs. While improvements have been made regarding seed funding, women continue to comprise only 15% of overall financing.

To better support women's economic success within Quebec, and with the support of government funding, we began offering niche programming tailored to women in 2012. Some highlights include several programs to support the retention and advancement of women in STEM through supports like networking, mentorship, and the development and recommendation of inclusive corporate solutions. That program ran from 2012 to 2020.

In 2019, we introduced the ELLEvate women entrepreneurs program with the support of the women entrepreneurship strategy's ecosystem fund. This program created systemic supports to enable gender equity and entrepreneurship in Quebec. The women's employment readiness Quebec pilot program, funded by ESDC, ran from 2022 to 2023, focusing on creating systemic change for gender inclusivity in employment.

Our employment program is popular and successful, averaging an 80% success rate; however, further support is needed to continue to integrate more women into the economy, with an additional focus on those facing multiple barriers to employment. Funding to support the development and execution of long-term niche programming is needed. While pilot programs have been overwhelmingly successful, financing has not been sustainable to build and to grow these programs long-term.

Finally, wraparound program supports, such as wardrobe allowances and technology allocations, go a long way toward ensuring inclusion and access.

I'd now like to introduce my colleague, Meltem Kilicaslan, who led our ELLEvate women entrepreneurs program for three years and who will speak to some of the additional opportunities for support.

The Chair: Meltem, you're going to have about one minute and 20 seconds.

Ms. Meltem Kilicaslan (Project Manager, ELLEvate, YES Employment and Entrepreneurship): Thank you, Madam Chair.

My name is Meltem, and I'm honoured to have led the ELLEvate program, supporting 600 diverse women entrepreneurs annually. At YES, we value our community's diversity. Each client has their own unique background, business sector and even personal definition of success.

Today, I would like to shed light on three important areas that are crucial for the continued success of our initiatives and for the empowerment of women entrepreneurs.

First, these programs are only available because of the available government funding, yet their success also relies on collaboration with corporate partners, community organizations and volunteers. Financial incentives and recognition of their commitment are vital in fostering successful, ongoing partnerships.

Second, two-thirds of supported women prioritize sustainability and social responsibility over scalability, yet funding often doesn't cater to these solopreneurs. Addressing this gap requires tailored funding mechanisms.

• (1550)

Lastly, the landscape of work is evolving, with freelance remote work emerging as a new norm. At YES, we proudly support freelancers, and I'm hoping that, through government programs, we can continue to provide communication platforms, documentation management systems and so on.

Thank you for your time and for your commitment to this cause.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Thank you to everybody for being so good with your comments.

We're going to start with our six-minute round. Each party will have six minutes. I'm going to turn the floor over now to Michelle Ferreri.

Michelle, you have six minutes.

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

Thank you to all of our witnesses for being here today at the status of women committee as we study the economic empowerment of women. A wealth of information has been brought forward by our witnesses.

I want to start with the witness from the riding I come from, Peterborough—Kawartha, from Curve Lake First Nation in particular. Emily Whetung is a star, and you just have to google this woman's name to see what she's achieved. I'm a big fangirl of what she's done for Canadians across the board and for her community.

I've had the opportunity to chat with her multiple times, and I thought that, with International Women's Day around the corner, this would be a great opportunity to revisit a conversation we've had before.

The three things I heard you say when you gave your opening statement, Emily, are child care, clean water and partnership. These were the things that jumped out in terms of helping women achieve their economic empowerment, so to speak.

I want to touch on the partner aspect, because you and I have had this conversation. As women have really found their stride and have been elevated in society and able to sit at the tables that they had not been invited to sit at, where do men fit into that? We've seen a lot of breakdown in families because sometimes the roles become confusing for some people. One thing I've always said about feminism is that it's really about women needing to know that they need men as much as men need to know they need women. We need each other fully.

What is your take on that in terms of the role of the partner and a message for the upcoming women's day and our roles together?

Ms. Emily Whetung-MacInnes: Thank you, Michelle.

I think this is something that I often breeze over, because it is such an integral part of the culture that I come from. In Anishinabe culture, men and women are equal but satisfy these roles in different ways. Without a partner who was at home supporting me in going out, making these changes and having this career, I certainly would not be able to take the time away from family to attend the

things that I do attend. It's remembering that starting place of balance in our communities.

Curve Lake elected the first female chief in all of Canada in 1958 with Elsie Knott, and that's the community I come from, a community that empowers women and supports women. The men in our community consistently advocate for and support women in leadership and women in all roles. We opened the first child care facility in a first nation in Canada many years ago. My aunt was a big part of that. She is a role model of mine, and it allowed women in our community to start to have jobs in the community and to have somewhere safe to leave their children during the day in order to be able to go out and participate and have that independent economic opportunity. It's allowed our community to support many women going through this.

I think that's a really integral part, having a group of men, having men in our communities and in Canada know that supporting women is the way we're going to achieve better things, and building policies around that is going to be very important.

Thank you, Michelle.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: I love that, and I think it's a powerful conversation, because nobody wants to be displaced. I think you can elevate women while empowering men and kids, especially the boys who are watching those relationships at home, which sets the future of the next generation. I've always said that our boys in our generation won't know any different. They won't know any different than a mom who is a leader, a mom who is out working, a mom who is sitting at the table. I think it's really interesting.

I would love you to share—and you've shared this with me before—your culture in terms of how it views the role of men and women and how they are so linked.

Ms. Emily Whetung-MacInnes: In our culture, men are typically responsible for the fire and the food, and women are responsible for the fruit and the water. If you lose one half of that equation, the world is not in balance and you're not feeding your family. If you don't have water, you don't have food. If you don't have shelter and fire and the care that women provide.... All of those things have to come together, and they lean equally on each other. That's the cultural understanding that we have and the approach to the world that I was raised in.

I come from a family of five girls. My dad was probably the best girl dad you could ever imagine. He always made us feel like we were important, empowered and an equal party in anything we did. He treated my mother that way, and that's a really refreshing cultural approach that I don't hear about in a lot of communities or a lot of families across Canada. Understanding that you can be partners and that you each have an equal role to play is the foundation for building better relationships and empowering women to participate in economy and industry roles.

Michelle, I know that you and I talk about this all the time. We are sitting at this table as mothers, and it is a really important place for the next generations to see us in.

• (1555)

The Chair: You have 40 seconds.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: In my 40 seconds, I would just say thank you for being here. Thank you for what you do and for finding that balance. We were joking before and we had this back-and-forth saying, “Women get to have it all. Isn't that great?” Some days it's good, and some days it's bad.

Thank you so much, Emily. Thanks for being here today, and thanks for the work that you do.

The Chair: That's wonderful. Thank you so much.

I'm now going to pass it over, for the next six minutes, to Sonia Sidhu.

Sonia, you have the floor for six minutes.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses for their insightful testimony.

You were talking about how you have four siblings. It's nice to see when there are girls in the family—I have twin girls—and you talked about equity.

Ms. Cooper, how do you think the federal government's child care agreement with the provinces, especially with Ontario and Nunavut, helped indigenous women in the workforce? What more can be done to better implement these agreements?

Ms. Rosemary Cooper: I think you're referring to the \$10-a-day day care. Can I get clarification on that point? If that's the point, for Inuit Nunangat, our challenge is infrastructure—housing infrastructure, generally. If we don't have the infrastructure to provide day care, our limitations are real for Inuit women to participate in the economy. It's a real challenge for Inuit. We're still very dependent and reliant on home day care providers to ensure that Inuit women are participating in the workforce.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: My next question is for YES Employment and Entrepreneurship.

Your organization has also collaborated with the federal government on your ELLEvate program, particularly and interestingly on your e-learning platform. How are such digital resources useful to advancing the economic empowerment of women entrepreneurs, especially on that point?

Ms. Kathy Slotsve: Meltem, cut me off if you'd like to speak to this as our ELLEvate project manager.

E-learning is incredibly important, especially when dealing with women entrepreneurs. As much as we can make our programs and our content accessible—and that means available at different hours and different locations—it only helps build the success of the program. Our offices are open nine to five. We have a physical office that people can come into, but that's not always realistic for entrepreneurs in general and women entrepreneurs specifically, so e-

learning platforms allow people to learn content and take their skills to the next level on their own schedule.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: Thank you.

My next question is for Ms. Whetung-MacInnes.

I know you did a lot of work in advancing the rights of indigenous communities, including those who face unique barriers on reserves. Could you elaborate on what the challenges look like for the economic empowerment of indigenous women on reserve, and how the federal government can work to remove those barriers and empower women on reserves, where they have unique barriers?

• (1600)

Ms. Emily Whetung-MacInnes: Absolutely.

There are a number of unique barriers to indigenous women, status Indian women, living on the Indian reserves across Canada. There is an inability to leverage the equity in our assets, like our homes, in order to get loans to participate in the economy. That's a huge barrier. We can't get a mortgage on Indian reserve land without permission from the Minister of Indigenous Services. It really limits our ability to explore options that other women in Canada have the opportunity to pursue. It limits our ability to invest capital in something that can give back. In terms of looking at systemic barriers to women participating in the economy, I think that's a very significant one.

However, we are facing a good benefit. We have an opportunity in child care that is available in our community to status women. Child care is at no cost, and we've seen the benefits of that no-cost child care in our community in allowing women to go out and participate in the economy. However, it's only as employees, not as entrepreneurs, as much as it would be beneficial to see that.

There are a number of issues that indigenous communities face under the Indian Act, and the more we see off-ramps without wholesale removal of the provisions that also protect our communities and our people, the more we're going to start moving in the right direction.

Hopefully that answers your question. Thank you.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: Yes.

I want to go back to YES Employment and Entrepreneurship.

In your view, how does the 50-30 challenge help ensure that more women, gender-diverse people and other under-represented groups are in positions for leadership, and how can they get more help?

Ms. Kathy Slotsve: I think the challenge is great, because it encourages organizations to make a public commitment to diversity.

In terms of getting additional support, I think that if you can incentivize any program, it's always going to be more successful. Incentivization could be in the form of marketing or in the form of opportunities for partnership and networking within, but in general I think it's a great opportunity to boost the profile of including more diverse leadership.

The Chair: You have 10 seconds.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: That's all.

The Chair: Perfect. Thank you very much.

We're now going to move on to Andréanne Larouche.

Andréanne, you have the floor for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

I'd like to thank the witnesses for accepting our invitation.

We're wrapping up our study on women's economic empowerment. As was said earlier, March 8 is around the corner. We realize how important our study is when it comes to giving women more economic power and greater equity.

Ms. Whetung-MacInnes, on Monday night I was at a parliamentary reception with the National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association. One thing I took away from that evening was the issue of access to credit. We've already talked about it at this meeting. Funding remains particularly difficult for Indigenous communities that want to help women start up businesses and carry out fine projects.

Do you have any recommendations for us in that regard? What could we do to improve access to credit?

[*English*]

Ms. Emily Whetung-MacInnes: Currently, under the Indian Act, women—Indigenous people—can't borrow against the equity in their homes. We can't leverage any property that's held by a status Indian on Indian reserve land. Until we find a mechanism to enable credit for Indigenous people who are living on Indian reserve land, that's going to continue to be a problem. Canada is one of the few countries that have this kind of Indian Act that prevents the social and economic empowerment of Indigenous people.

Until we've found effective ways to address that, while also protecting the unique rights of Indigenous people, the unique relationship to the land.... It's an incredibly complicated question, but this is certainly a barrier to Indigenous people, and Indigenous women in particular, being able to find that entrepreneurial aspect in who they want to be.

I don't know that I have solutions, except that they have to be intentional and well thought out. It extends to Indigenous nations and communities as well not being able to borrow against their assets. There are things like the Indigenous loan guarantee program that's being talked about right now, which is an incredibly positive opportunity for Indigenous participation in large-scale infrastructure projects. Something like that at an entrepreneurial level would be incredibly beneficial.

Thank you.

• (1605)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: On Monday evening, I really enjoyed hearing from the National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association, which works on economic development for Indigenous peoples. Also, I hear what you're saying.

We talk about the importance of reconciliation and dialogue between nations. With that in mind, is the Indian Act not archaic? Doesn't it contribute to keeping women in precarious situations? Perhaps we should question the almighty Indian Act. What do you think?

[*English*]

Ms. Emily Whetung-MacInnes: The history of the Indian Act is that in 1857 it was the Gradual Civilization Act, and then it was consolidated into what is known as the Indian Act now. The entire foundation of that was to subvert the Indigenous population in Canada and integrate them into the Canadian body without that Indigenous identity attached to it.

The history of the Indian Act is very much that systemic removal of our identity and our ability to have socio-economic drivers in our own communities and an ability to determine who we are as individual communities, as nations, as people. That's a pretty horrific history, and to think that we still have legislation to that effect on the books.... However, it is also the act that protects the rights of Indigenous people in unique ways. It's certainly not something that can be removed wholesale, but there are a number of opportunities to create off-ramps that Indigenous nations can opt into instead of the Indian Act, to replace that legislation.

I think that's probably the best opportunity that we have right now to start to address these issues, but potentially finding ways to create credit opportunities with the equity that we have in things like our homes and our land in order to participate in the economy would be, to me, the next stepping point.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: That's interesting. You've just provided some very useful insight. As my colleague said earlier, you have quite an impressive résumé. You're working on electrification and the energy transition in Ontario.

Last Thursday evening, I attended an event organized by the Réseau des femmes d'affaires du Québec for International Women's Day celebrations. It was at the Business Development Bank of Canada, or BDC, in Montreal. It was great because, in that discussion group, the director of the BDC, a representative of EVOL and the director of the Réseau des Femmes d'affaires du Québec, Ms. Vachon, all said how beneficial it was to have women start businesses too, because their vision includes sustainable development and they have very promising projects for advancing technologies.

How do you see the role of women in terms of the need to advance technologies and begin a much greener transition? What's your vision of women's leadership?

[English]

The Chair: You have about 30 seconds.

Ms. Emily Whetung-MacInnes: I see a great opportunity. In the energy transition conversations that I've been a part of, women have a different perspective on long-term planning. I think that's a real opportunity that needs to be leveraged and included.

My experience has been—not wholesale, but mostly—that women are looking to plan for their children, their children's children and many generations into the future. This culturally resonates with me as an important aspect of what energy planning needs to look like. We can't focus just on 2035 and 2050. We have to continue to focus on what comes next and innovate to make sure we are being respectful of climate change and creating that space.

The Chair: Perfect. Thank you so much.

I'll now move it over to Leah Gazan online, for six minutes.

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

My first question is for Ms. Whetung-MacInnes.

In the last Parliament, we passed Bill C-15 to make sure that all legislation going forward is compatible with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Since its passing in the last Parliament, at every angle the current government has tried to fight against it. The first example was with the child care legislation, to include free, prior and informed consent of indigenous peoples on all decisions or matters impacting indigenous children. We managed to get that through committee in spite of the Liberals.

The most recent example actually happened this week. It was with a private member's bill, Bill C-318, which I attempted to amend so that it would be consistent with Bill C-15. It was to change the adoption framework to include kinship and customary care. In Manitoba, for example, 90% of kids who are currently in the child welfare system are indigenous. Many of them are cared for in kinship and customary care arrangements, such as by grandmothers or aunts.

How is supporting kinship and customary care through EI regimes, and including that as part of shifts in EI regimes, important to supporting indigenous women in the workplace?

• (1610)

Ms. Emily Whetung-MacInnes: Thank you, Leah.

I think it's incredibly important that we have the opportunity for kinship care and recognition of the cultural relationships within family that we already have, that exist, and be able to support those women and recognize that they also need access to things like child care and the support of community and policies that support the ability to continue to do both. There is not an indigenous person in Canada who isn't in some way impacted by the child welfare system. It's just a fact. It's a fact we all face on a regular basis.

Indigenous governance, indigenous chiefs and councils and first nations governance are consistently dealing with how we ensure that there are connections between children from our communities and their culture. How do we maintain that? The more support there is for kinship care and child care in our communities, the more opportunity there is for that to continue to be done.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Following up on that, we know through the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls that the child welfare system is a direct line, a “pipeline”, into becoming murdered or missing. I see that in the community I represent in Winnipeg Centre, when we had the tragedy that started the whole national inquiry. Young Tina Fontaine was murdered in our community.

How is a failure of governments to deal with things like amending the Indian Act, as they're doing right now with Bill C-38, incrementally, to ensure that indigenous women have the same rights as other women in the country, and not including us in EI regimes...? I say “us”, because the care is done primarily by indigenous women. It impacts indigenous women. How does this place us at greater risk for things like gender-based violence, difficulties with obtaining employment, difficulty with obtaining housing and so forth?

Ms. Emily Whetung-MacInnes: For indigenous women as primary caregivers in our communities, for indigenous people generally, for our children, it's a real struggle. I don't know if you've had an opportunity to read the book *If I Go Missing*. It is incredibly impactful, and it's a demonstration of this real fear for every indigenous woman across Canada—the fear that I might be next, so please treat me with the same respect with which you treat non-indigenous men when there are issues, and please search for me in the same way. It's incredibly powerful and impactful.

I'm not sure that I've captured your question there, Leah, but it was something that came to mind. I hope you have an opportunity to read it.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Absolutely.

I want to move on to Ms. Cooper.

Thank you so much for being here today as well. You spoke about safe and affordable housing. I know my good colleague and very good friend Lori Idlout speaks a lot about the housing crisis in Nunavut. She gave an example of how one house in her community is being held together by duct tape—it's that severe.

How does this impact women, especially in relation to being able to participate economically, being able to flee gender-based violence situations if they occur? Would it help to have a mesh of a guaranteed livable basic income, in light of the high rates of unemployment that are a result of a limited job market, in addition to affordable and accessible housing in the community, if we're going to really deal with gender-based violence, with full participation of women in whatever way in communities?

• (1615)

The Chair: You have 15 seconds.

Ms. Rosemary Cooper: Thank you very much for your question.

Definitely housing is the foundation of any work that we do or any family situation that our communities are faced with. I did listen to MP Lori Idlout raise this in the House. If we don't have the foundation in housing that addresses health, violence and TB—all of these indicators that we see in Inuit Nunangat—we're going to constantly see Inuit women limited in their ability to be in the workforce.

I'm sorry, but I wish I had more time.

The Chair: I know. It's such an important answer.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I'll catch you after.

Ms. Rosemary Cooper: Thank you.

The Chair: Perfect.

We're now going to start our next round, and we'll begin with Dominique Vien for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Thank you to our guests for participating in our study today.

I will repeat my mantra: We have equal rights, but that has yet to translate into equality in fact. It's important to remember that, especially since International Women's Day is coming up. We're all very happy to talk about it, but from one celebration to the next, things are slow to move forward.

Ms. Whetung-MacInnes, you're a lawyer, you work in the energy sector and you're also an Indigenous mother. However, you didn't talk a lot about your role as chief of your community, which is a political role, if I understand correctly. How do you play that role as a woman on a daily basis? How do you use the leverage available to you to help women in your community?

I understand that you're probably in the same situation as all mothers in Canada, that is to say that you carry a huge mental burden, with everything you have to do at home. Even if they have a good spouse, the fact remains that women have the biggest mental burden.

So, as the leader of your community, how do you advance the cause of women on a daily basis?

[*English*]

Ms. Emily Whetung-MacInnes: Thank you.

I'm no longer the chief of Curve Lake First Nation. I stepped back from that role in 2022. When I was in that role, I had eight months after my election before we started dealing with the global pandemic and finding ways to support families through that. Mothers, in particular, had a significant cognitive role. It took a huge amount of energy and effort. Certainly it's an important thing to navigate on a daily basis, as leadership. Some of the most important things that I did were to demonstrate that with support and help you can continue to do both of these things. I think that it was an important time to have someone who understood the concerns of mothers and parents, bringing information into the community to support them through learning about the virus and the pandemic and how to navigate that process.

I'm hoping that I've spoken a little bit to your question, but I'm happy to answer more.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Dominique Vien: Personally, that's what I'm interested in, yes. I thought you were still chief, but that's neither here nor there. The experience you had was certainly important for the women in your community. For example, did you set up any organizations or services in particular? Under your leadership, did women in your community get any special help? There are probably not enough women like you leading communities.

[*English*]

Ms. Emily Whetung-MacInnes: I think there are a growing number of female indigenous chiefs, which is a phenomenal role to be a part of. When I was elected and I attended my first assembly of first nations, there were four other female chiefs sitting together, who took me under their wing and supported my growth in that role. Without such mentorship, I think we would not have women in leadership in the way that we do. It's an incredibly important part.

My community, as I said, has always been incredibly supportive of women. I feel like the majority of supports for women in our community were in place by the time I was elected. We have a day care centre in our community, which takes children as young as six weeks and, without cost to indigenous women in our community, supports those children until they reach our school program. We have before- and after-school care at our day care centre for indigenous mothers in our community. Seeing the benefits of that is incredibly important, and I think it's one of the best things that ever happened to my community.

• (1620)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Dominique Vien: Lastly, you mentioned that women who own a house have to get permission from the minister to mortgage their house. Did I understand correctly?

[*English*]

Ms. Emily Whetung-MacInnes: They have to retain funding from Indigenous Services Canada, or they have to have a loan guarantee from the Minister of Indigenous Services to get a loan to purchase a home or build a home.

[Translation]

Mrs. Dominique Vien: Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We are now going to go to Emmanuella for five minutes.

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

I thank all of our organizations and witnesses for being here today and for doing the incredible work that they all do to support women.

I'm going to focus my questions on YES Employment and Entrepreneurship, an organization that I know does incredible work because I've seen the results of that work and I know there are people who benefit—some of whom I know—so I appreciate what you do.

You alluded to the fact that with every additional intersectionality there are additional barriers, so of course, not only do English-speaking Quebecers experience a gap in employment, but there is also the fact that being a woman will only make it more difficult, and then being of another type of minority community will make it even more difficult.

From what I understand, you did take advantage of the women entrepreneurship strategy between 2019 and 2022. Is that correct?

Ms. Kathy Slotsve: Yes.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Was that the ELLEvate women program?

Ms. Kathy Slotsve: Yes.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Then, from what I understand, you had some difficulty receiving the same funding in 2023. I'd like for you to explain to the committee why that is and what makes your particular organization different, in terms of why it wouldn't have received funding in this second round or in the last round.

Ms. Kathy Slotsve: We are part of the new funding structure, but we had to change our application and the way our program is rolled out in order to fit the guideline for the new funding call for applications. When the fund was released in the most recent version, it was for national initiatives, and while that works for other language minority communities.... French-language minority communities across Canada are dispersed across the country, so there was an ability to form national partnerships fairly easily with that. However, for us, our official-language minority community exists within the province of Quebec. We actually partnered with a number of universities and managed to still roll out our program, but we had to change it quite a bit in order to still access that funding.

Does that answer your question fully?

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: It does.

Actually, a follow-up question I have is what you can recommend to the government in order to make it easier for you going forward. Are there any particular exceptions that should be includ-

ed in the wording of a program, or should there be a specific type of program? What do you think are solutions to that going forward?

Ms. Kathy Slotsve: While I understand the national scope and the intent behind that, I think you have to look at the differences within communities and their ability to form national partnerships that will support those communities across the country. This is because certain communities might not be dispersed across the country.

When you're looking at offering programming that targets specific groups, such as linguistic minorities, it is important to take a lens for both official-language minorities that exist within Canada and really look at the unique characteristics of the community and what those communities will need. When you're looking at funding packages, make sure that you're making them accessible to all communities across Canada and their unique situations.

• (1625)

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Going forward, besides that particularity, is there any way the federal government would be able to help your organization and, I guess, all the organizations that are helping women out there, especially in terms of economic empowerment?

Ms. Kathy Slotsve: Definitely. We outlined some of the different funding opportunities we have, just in terms of the way funds can be structured.

Meltem brought up a very good point about a lot of funds being structured around the scalability of businesses, but that's not necessarily the reality or the goal for many women-led business ventures. A lot of them are focused more on sustainability or social responsibility, so make sure the funds are inclusive of that.

I also think offering holistic or wraparound supports really helps us create accessible programs. Earlier, we talked a bit about e-learning. Technology investments are very important in creating accessible programs, but also in creating funds that allow us to allocate technology to participants so that they can access them. This is because not everybody has access to the Internet or computers all the time, or they might have access to the Internet or computers, but not any that can run at the level we need for e-learning programs.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to continue with our final two questioners. We're going to pass it over to Andréanne Larouche.

You have two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I too would like to thank the witnesses. Thanks to them, we're learning new things again today.

Ms. Cooper, in your opening remarks, you talked a lot about housing, safe housing, and fighting violence and poverty.

We recently learned that cutbacks were made to the only federal program addressing the issue of homelessness, called “Reaching Home: Canada’s Homelessness Strategy”. At a time when homelessness is a problem across the country, we should invest more in social and community housing and to fight homelessness. You’ll tell me that the issue of housing and homelessness is also important in your communities. Therefore, what message is the government sending by making cuts to this program, which has helped so many people out of homelessness?

[English]

Ms. Rosemary Cooper: Pauktutit has been involved in the last couple of years with shelters and transitional housing with CMHC and Indigenous Services Canada. We’ve made every effort to make sure that we provide supports to Inuit women in Inuit Nunangat.

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami also has, through its Inuit-Crown partnership committee, the establishment of a homelessness caucus or membership there. It ensures that they support, through the four land claim regions, efforts to address homelessness.

Going back to the question of Ms. Gazan, I’m very happy to respond in a written format. I know time is very sensitive today.

Again, housing is the foundational issue for Inuit, and if we’re going to combat this, it means partnership at all levels of government. We’ve seen examples of P3 initiatives that ensure we are building successful infrastructure, yet we’re still way behind in Canada when it comes to housing and homelessness.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We’re on our final line of questions, with Leah.

Leah, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you.

I’d like to allow Ms. Cooper a chance to finish the question I asked in the first round.

Go ahead, Ms. Cooper.

Ms. Rosemary Cooper: Again, violence against Inuit women is not new. It’s all related to colonization and residential schools.

If we’re rooted in Inuit values and principles, everybody always has a role and a place in our culture. There’s somewhat of a loss in our cultural values today. How are we going to ensure that we’re rooted in the work that we do or the community that we affiliate with?

Entrepreneurship has always been a part of Inuit culture in supporting our needs. The workforce is just not there for a lot of our communities, especially the smaller communities, where it’s predominately government. Our pivot is towards entrepreneurship and mining sectors to ensure that families are being fed.

• (1630)

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much.

My last question is for Ms. Slotsve.

You spoke about intersectionalities. I’ve been very concerned about the attacks on trans women, particularly by elected officials lately, and how that might impact participation in the workforce or

place them at risk in the workforce of harassment or being unsafe. Could you share your thoughts about that?

Ms. Kathy Slotsve: I’m not sure if I have any specific feedback. I could say that, in terms of our programming, we’re always looking at building the most inclusive programming we can. The way YES offers its support is very holistic. We look at the needs of the individual and try to build programming and supports around that. A lot of our programs are one-on-one, but they also involve workshops and networking. We really try to focus on 360 degrees of support.

In terms of attacks in workplaces, I don’t have statistics on that right now to offer. I would say that it is very important to us as an organization to make sure that we’re inclusive in supporting all communities, including the transgender community.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Now we have to wrap up our first panel.

I would really like to thank all of the witnesses today for bringing their voices and their strong testimony.

We are going to suspend and come right back.

• (1630)

(Pause)

• (1635)

The Chair: The committee will resume the meeting and the study of women’s economic empowerment.

For the guests here, I remind you that you have French, English or auxiliary, so you can listen to the floor. Make sure that your mic is on and off, and that your earpiece is not too close to the mic, due to interference.

I am very pleased to welcome our next two speakers. We have Wendy Cukier, founder and academic director of the diversity institute for the Ted Rogers School of Management; and Paula Huntley, who is a business owner.

I will be providing each of you with five minutes for your opening remarks, starting with Wendy.

Wendy, you have the floor for five minutes.

Dr. Wendy Cukier (Founder and Academic Director, Diversity Institute, Ted Rogers School of Management, Toronto Metropolitan University, As an Individual): Thank you very much. I am really pleased to be here today and very grateful to have an opportunity to speak.

My name is Wendy Cukier, and I am a professor of entrepreneurship and strategy at Toronto Metropolitan University. I have also founded several start-ups, as well as social ventures. I've been on the board of a number of tech companies.

What I'm going to talk about today is primarily our work at the Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, and I welcome questions about that, but also the broader approach, which I really hope the committee will think about in deliberating on this issue.

Some of you may have seen the article that Morley Gunderson, an economist at the University of Toronto, and I published recently in *The Globe and Mail*. I reference that because I think we need a fundamental paradigm shift in Canada in our thinking about economic development and innovation. I say that as a former president of research and innovation at the university.

My observation is that a lot of our strategies are derivative. We look at what the U.S. does and we say, "Oh, our productivity is lower. Our investments in research are lower. We don't invest enough in skills", without understanding the differences in the economy. In the United States, 50% of employment is with large business, and 50% of private sector employment is with small business. In Canada, large businesses account for only 10% of private sector employment. Small and medium enterprises account for 90%. When we think about where we're putting our money, what we're investing in and whom we're supporting, we have to be laser-focused on small and medium enterprises. That's the first thing I wanted to say.

The second thing I wanted to say is that the Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub, which has 10 sites across the country, very deliberately took an ecosystem focus. Rather than just looking at supporting organizations targeting women entrepreneurs, we look at what financial institutions are doing, what the regional development agencies are doing, what the Business Development Bank of Canada is doing, what our legislative policies and practices are, and what large businesses are doing. They say they support women entrepreneurs, but they don't dedicate any of their expenditures.

That's the other thing I wanted to say, because from what I've heard of the testimony, quite rightly, there's been a lot of discussion about how to dedicate funds, specifically for women entrepreneurs. What I would suggest to you is that the bigger and the more impactful strategy is to remove the barriers in the mainstream funding, because there's way more money in the government and in the private sector that we could be leveraging to support women entrepreneurs.

Out of our research have come a few insights that I think are fairly important. There are still limitations in the data. The disaggregated data that people have referenced is super important. We are encouraged that, based on the data that is available, it does appear that women are gaining traction both in terms of being majority owners of businesses and also in terms of narrowing gaps. Women are now almost as likely as men entrepreneurs to export. If you look at innovation, women are actually more likely to innovate in terms of products.

We still know that women-led businesses are underfinanced, that they are smaller and that they tend to be concentrated in some sectors and not in others. That's very much a function of a long-standing problem around the under-representation of women in science, technology, engineering and math. I've been working on women in technology for 30 years. I can tell you that today there are fewer women in computer science and only marginally more in engineering since the Montreal massacre. It's moved from 20% to 24%, in terms of women in STEM. That has an impact, obviously, on women's ownership of high-growth companies, which we tend to be pre-occupied with, but it also means that women are excluded from strategies that focus on tech start-ups and tech incubators—tech, tech, tech.

Those are just a few key points that I wanted to make.

• (1640)

The final one I'd like to end on—and this has been said by others, but we have the data—is that Black women, indigenous women, racialized women, immigrant women, women with disabilities, those who identify as 2SLGBTQ+ and so on face more barriers, and we can talk more about that.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

I'm now going to move over to Paula Huntley.

Paula, you have the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Paula Huntley (Business Owner, As an Individual): Thank you, Madam Chair and committee members, for the opportunity today to speak on this topic, women's economic empowerment. Any topic that speaks to human rights, equality and family is a discussion that should always be at the forefront.

First, let me say what a privilege it is to be in this room today, to not only contribute to but learn from the different perspectives at the table.

Increasing the power of women has been a long-standing conversation for many years. As a woman who has had many paths through life, there are days when I see us moving forward and then days when we're still talking about the same issues—economic wage equality, removing barriers to work and making sure that we are represented at all tables when decisions are being made.

As we explore ways to expand women's opportunities, we also need to make sure that we are always focused on women's resilience.

For over 20 years, I have been a business owner, a sole proprietor of services. After COVID, my longest-running business could survive no more, and I closed the business after 20 years of work. I continue to run a second business, a consulting company, as a sole proprietor. It had its challenges through COVID, but over the past five years, I have looked at ways to recreate and combine services while also ramping up my brand of who and what I stand for in my community.

As a businesswoman, I still feel challenged to do more, so in October 2020, I decided to run for municipal government and became a councillor for the Town of Kentville. This gave me the ability to show women that all things are possible. I'll note that our council is a seven-member team with five women and two men. I continue to work at promoting women supporting women, creating sustainable programs to help women and children, and creating yearly businesswomen events to celebrate our successes, and I continue to be a mentor when an ask is called.

One of the things I wished for was a 1-800-number support system to help me with ways to look at grants and ideas for creativity, and to connect me to an economic partner who could cover all my inquiries in a one-stop conversation or conversations. Support systems need to be in place in every community, not just through our government, as they would help eliminate time challenges for help. In running a home-based business, I can tell you that the worries are very real, not about other employees, in my case, but about family, health care, the mortgage, and life challenges. I think that all these challenges probably gave me a fear of showing a side of failure, and now I do not take time off work. I work every day to eliminate the fear of no income.

I also worried about this: If I had no work—and with my husband not being able to work anymore because of a disability—what would I do? The saying “the struggle is real” is one I lived with. I will add that, in addition to all of this, approximately eight years ago I had several concussions, and the last one affected my learning and thought process capabilities.

Challenges are good to keep us fresh, but knowing that there are easier options could move more women forward without worry. If there were any suggestions I could make, they would start here.

Give women a relief during maternity leave. The percentage of pay needs to be larger than 55%, and wait time needs to be decreased. If they decide to stay home for several years, whether it's due to a child care challenge or as a way to teach and be available to their families, love and care begin at home, and this can help children's growth in school.

With regard to equality of pay between women and men, many companies do not post a wage grid for their employees. This should be a must, as it will push companies to show diversity, equality and inclusion while being fair to all employees with regard to wage paid for number of years worked.

Another suggestion is free training for all courses that employees may want to take. This will allow all parties to make their own decisions on whether they want to move ahead. It will eliminate barriers of time and money, while showing a commitment from employers to associates. It is becoming more challenging for employers to

hire for their needs, so this is an idea to create a proactive approach, rather than a reactive one, on how to keep employees.

Another suggestion is a female mentorship program in schools in grades 9 to 12. I have the opportunity of being in a mentorship strategy program in which we visit schools, and I see so many opportunities to speak, teach and learn from the next generations. To carry it further, it should be a course built into the curriculum. Here is where we also have an opportunity to build sustainable volunteerism for our communities. Moving forward, it would be great to see road show meetings to do focus groups for our female youth. Their opinions matter in helping us create future policies and change current policies.

● (1645)

Thank you so much for this opportunity to share my voice.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I will remind the committee that we do have some committee business. I'll try to maximize the time we have for questions and comments.

We will begin our first round of six minutes with Anna.

Anna, you have the floor for six minutes.

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

Thank you to both witnesses for being here this afternoon. My first questions will be for Paula.

Paula, thank you for coming. You come from one of the best parts of the world—Newfoundland. My late husband was from there. I love visiting it every time. Welcome.

What was the impact that COVID had on the business that you had to close?

Ms. Paula Huntley: I think some of my thoughts will be like those of many employers, for sure.

As a sole proprietor, I found that COVID took away, first of all, the plan I would have had. Maybe I wanted to hire employees to help my business grow. It stopped that whole plan completely. There was a second piece I was looking at. It was a slow growth, but it was the time in my business to raise what I would charge as an hourly rate. When COVID hit, the first thing I had to do was put everything on hold. I had to think about there being no growth in that piece, but also about where I was going to be able to get funds to carry the household.

I'm an extrovert. I love to be around people. It really put me in a quandary. People say to try to think outside the box. Well, my thought was that, I guess, moving forward, there's no box anymore. I took two weeks to put my head down and think: What talents do I have? To give you an example, I did 40 years of hiring, coaching and training staff before what I do now. I wanted to be able to bring that talent and show people how to apply for work. When COVID hit, employers didn't have people to work. What was happening was that employers had so much work to do but fewer employees. I then said to them, "Let me help you. I will do your interviewing. I will do what you need."

I was able to put a few pieces on the plate with that. Did it help through all those COVID bumps? It wasn't bad, but I think the biggest thing for me was the fear: Where do I go from here?

Mrs. Anna Roberts: You ran a second business.

Ms. Paula Huntley: Yes.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: I'll jump to my next question, just because of my time.

How has the cost of living affected your business? You talked about hiring. How has that impacted your business growth?

Ms. Paula Huntley: For the type of business that I have as a consultant, a lot of times for the jobs I do it's an hourly wage. You have to speak to a client about what your charge is per hour. Initially, that cost should have been raised a bit so that I could cover the cost of living for my own household. However, as soon as you mention that it's gone to \$25 more an hour—that's just to pick a number—whereas before it was, "Yes, we'd love to have you help us", now it's, "Let me think about it", because that business owner or that homeowner has their own worries about what things cost.

So do I. I have lost business. We have fewer clients. I think it's on both ends when it comes to inflation.

• (1650)

Mrs. Anna Roberts: I understand that you're part of the Mentoring Plus strategy. Can you tell us a little bit about that program?

Ms. Paula Huntley: Sure. I was introduced to the Mentoring Plus strategy almost three years ago. The goal is that we go into schools. I thought, yes, this is where it's happening. Get into schools and see where the ideas are and whom you can help.

I think I probably get more out of it than the students do, even though I know they have fun. They are listening. We go in as mentors and they get to ask us questions. They think that when they come out of school, they have to go to university, but many of us did not go to university. We chose a path, which could have been eight or nine paths, to get us to where we are today. It opens their minds and shows them where the possibilities are.

It's totally amazing, after Mentoring Plus is over, how many students come back and ask, "Do you think you could mentor me? Could I be a co-op student for you?" That's what it's about. It's the success of knowing that you've helped somebody. The mentoring piece is a huge factor for our students in schools.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: During your business experience, were you able to access any government programs?

Ms. Paula Huntley: I have two comments on that. One is that I was not able to because I don't have any employees and a lot of that was just not applicable.

Second, when I was growing up, my mother always told me, "Paula, you are a Canadian citizen. You work hard. You pay your taxes. Nobody owes you anything." What it did was make me think that I had to do this on my own. I had to try to figure this out before pushing the button and asking somebody for help. That's a hard pill to swallow when you're not used to doing it. I think there was a fear of asking, first of all, because there was the unknown of whether I will get it, and if I don't, what happens next? At the time, no, I was not able to get anything.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're now going to move on to our next six minutes, with Lisa Hepfner.

Lisa, you have the floor for six minutes.

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

I want to thank the witnesses for being here to talk to us today. It's really important to hear from you, and it's been very interesting so far.

Wendy, you were talking about the Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub quite a bit in your opening statement. I think it's a really valuable tool. I think it was in our last session that a constituent of mine was here testifying, and she'd never heard of this. She thought these were assets or resources that she could really use, but she didn't know where it was and she had never seen it before.

How do we reach people? How do we reach business owners across Canada and let them know what resources are really available and what they can get out of them?

Dr. Wendy Cukier: That's a really important question.

Just to clarify, the knowledge hub is focused on linking ecosystem players. For example, our focus is on connecting the women's enterprise organizations of Canada, financial institutions and so on. We don't actually provide the direct services to the entrepreneurs. That's what the local women's entrepreneurship organizations are doing.

I just wanted to clarify that we do have some assets that we developed during COVID, because these were such desperate times, such as the “See it. Be it.” campaign and the Ask/Give platform. However, generally we work with the organizations that are serving the women—Coralus and so on.

I would say the biggest problem we observe is fragmentation of the information. While there is a fantastic Innovation Canada website where you can go and type in some information and it will tell you where things are, we need intermediaries that are in the local community that can connect women's organizations to the assets that they need. Having worked with a lot of those organizations, what I would observe is that the exception might be Atlantic Canada, where people seem to play nicely in the sandbox and they are all connected together. If you go to Volta and you don't belong at Volta, they'll send you to the women's entrepreneurship centre at Mount Saint Vincent University. There's a lot more collaboration among the ecosystem partners that I observe in Atlantic Canada than, say, in Ontario. I think B.C., Alberta, and Manitoba have their own particular ecosystems.

Knitting those things together so that if anyone comes in one door.... If you go to BDC and they say you don't earn enough money so they are not interested in you, they would say, this is the community you're in and here are the resources. If you go to the Mount and you go in the door and they say, no, you're not for us, they would tell you where to go. We need a better mechanism, in my view, for knitting the assets together, because I agree with you that there is a ton of stuff out there to support entrepreneurs generally, women entrepreneurs, Black entrepreneurs and so on, but lots of people don't know yet about the sources of those services.

Does that answer your question?

• (1655)

Ms. Lisa Hefner: Absolutely.

Sort of in the same vein—and this is probably a question for both of you, because you both touched on mentorship and training—another thing we heard is that women feel isolated, particularly women entrepreneurs who are running their businesses. They're often in their own homes. They don't have access to a wide network of coworkers they can get information or support from or even just chit-chat with, which is also important in our day-to-day lives.

Paula, I was really interested in your idea of having a class specifically on mentorship, but maybe both of you can talk about how we can alleviate some of the problems of isolation among women entrepreneurs.

Dr. Wendy Cukier: You go first.

Ms. Paula Huntley: Thank you. I love that question.

I think the one thing we have to remember is that we have to lift each other up, and it has to be intentional. It's not just about, “I have two friends who just started a business. Did you hear?”, and then you say, “Oh, great.” No. What you need to say is, “Let me connect you.” For example, I'm part of a connector program. That allows me to introduce three of the people I know who are very closely related to the person the connector program wants me to meet. That's how it's shared.

Moving forward, what happens is that, for the next three to four months, we say, “It's coffee time. Where are we going?” Everybody got the email. We keep connected, because if you succeed, I succeed. I'm going to share your success with everybody I know. That is how I win in helping us move forward. That's how I feel.

The Chair: Wendy, you have about 30 seconds.

Dr. Wendy Cukier: It's eharmony for women entrepreneurs.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Dr. Wendy Cukier: Someone else can ask me more.

I do think that we need a combination of face-to-face and electronic connections. Someone may be in Hamilton and doing something that is relevant to someone in Cape Breton, and we need better ways to link those things together. I think COVID helped with the shift to digitization, but we haven't exploited it to the extent we could.

Ms. Lisa Hefner: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We're now going to pass it over for the next six minutes to Andréanne Larouche.

Andréanne, you have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Ms. Huntley and Ms. Cukier, thank you for being with us. This is our last panel for this fascinating study on women's economic empowerment. You're the cherry on the sundae of this study. You've raised some points that are somewhat new, or at least you've addressed some points from another angle as part of this study. I'll try to ask both of you questions.

Ms. Huntley, you touched on something that hasn't come up a lot in this study. You talked about relieving the burden on women during their maternity leave. It reminded me of a ruling by the Social Security Tribunal of Canada in early 2022, which struck down certain provisions of the Employment Insurance Act that were found to be discriminatory against women who had lost their jobs during or after maternity leave. Under the rules at the time, a mother who lost her job during her maternity leave or shortly after her return to work could not accumulate the number of hours needed to qualify for employment insurance benefits. I remember that even the government wanted to appeal that decision, and that really shocked me.

The reason I come back to this is that it's a federal program. We're currently calling for a complete overhaul of the Employment Insurance Act because it discriminates against women for many reasons.

How important is it to have measures to relieve the burden on women during their maternity leave and to review federal programs like employment insurance to ensure that we break down the barriers women must overcome in the labour market?

• (1700)

[English]

Ms. Paula Huntley: Thank you for that question.

When I think about maternity leave and I think of moms at home with their children, if we could go back to the basics and think about the value of what the children are receiving by being home longer with their mom...who has no stress, first of all. Once the children get out and they start in kindergarten, I think they're probably way more ready to face new friends and be more confident if we allow moms at home to feel like they are fully with their children and they do not have to worry about time and finances.

Think about all the things that are affecting youth today—mental health, peer pressure and all these things—and now go back to the value of what happened when children were raised by a mom and a dad who had no worries. Family was the most important. I think the value of family has to be elevated to way more than what it is now, because parents, right now, are pressured. Some are actually working two or three jobs, and they don't get to spend as much time at home as they need to. Something has to give.

I've often said that if you go back to the basics and start thinking about it simplistically, sometimes a light bulb will come on and you'll think, "You know, we've been working so hard on other issues that we didn't even see it, and it was clearly in front of our face." I think this is one of those topics.

[Translation]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: As a woman in politics and the mother of a two-year-old daughter, I face challenges, but I meet them with my family's help.

I think it's about having options. That's why Quebec chose to set up a child care system. The economist Luc Godbout proved that this also allowed women to rejoin the workforce. So it's important to provide options. On the one hand, women who want to stay at home must be given maternity leave that doesn't penalize them. On the other, child care services must be available to those better suited to that model. I think that's the take-away from all of this.

Earlier, we discussed with you the impact of COVID-19 on women entrepreneurs. Recently, we talked about paying back Canada emergency business account loans. During the pandemic, the government had introduced this account and set a deadline for paying back loans. However, we realized that this put pressure on the smallest businesses in particular. I'm talking about small businesses with only a few employees.

In the second round of questions, I may speak with Ms. Cukier about those very small businesses. Women entrepreneurs often have very small businesses.

By setting a deadline, the government showed a lack of flexibility. If you or I are unable to pay the taxes we owe, at least we can talk to a Canada Revenue Agency representative to pay off our debt over time or come to an agreement.

Why wasn't the government able to show some flexibility instead of forcing women to take out a second mortgage on their houses to pay back the loan? It's a bit like forcing them to pay the balance of a credit card with another credit card. I'm very concerned that a number of businesses led by women won't make it. As I said, they found a very temporary solution, but it could be a dangerous one.

I only have about 30 seconds left in my speaking time, but I'd like you to tell me about the importance of flexibility. Too many federal programs are not flexible enough. Can you tell me how important the word "flexibility" is when efforts are made to help women?

• (1705)

[English]

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Ms. Paula Huntley: That's a hard call, this all-or-nothing choice: You can have the money now, and we'll wait until later and you'll pay it. I think there has to be a discussion right through the whole program, monthly, about what percentage you are going to pay, so it's not all loaded at the end. Right now, I'm sure there are companies out there that cannot pay it—I know there are—because of the pressures. Some have not bounced back from COVID.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going online to Leah Gazan.

You have six minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much.

My first question is for Ms. Huntley.

You spoke about the stresses of parenting, and then you spoke about some moms having to work three jobs. I have actually been that mom, so I know how stressful that is, although I have to say that I was very lucky because I had a post-secondary education. As a single mom, to provide for my son in the way I wanted to, as my son also has special needs, I ended up working three jobs. I had a full-time academic job, and then I took on other contract work to support my family.

One thing I have put forward, in light of the stress on families and in light of rising inflation—really, the financial stress on families is often borne on the backs of women, and I think we know that—is a guaranteed livable basic income, which is my response to the crisis of gender-based violence. We know that call for justice 4.5 of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls calls for the immediate implementation of a guaranteed livable income for all Canadians, in addition to indigenous people throughout the country, as a way to tackle gender-based violence.

We found, during the CERB, in terms of studies that were done, in terms of CERB payments, that in fact it did not make people lazy. Women, particularly, who wanted to go for training or wanted to change careers were able to when they were given a guaranteed livable basic income. I'm thinking of all the folks in the energy sector, which is shifting, who may want to shift but need a guaranteed livable basic income to actually be able to have a choice, in terms of what they want to do.

What are your thoughts about a guaranteed livable basic income, in terms of how it could potentially support families, but more specifically women?

Ms. Paula Huntley: Thank you for the question.

When I think about a basic guaranteed income, the first thing I think I would have to look at is the programs we have in place now. Who needs what first? That is the first thing we need to look at. I don't think everybody should get everything. I will go back to the words "back to basics". Look at the programs we have, and look at what's working and what's not. Some probably need to be eliminated and restarted.

That's the first thing I see. I know there's a conversation there on basic income, but we can't start it out for everybody.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I would agree with you, Ms. Huntley, that our social safety net is quite archaic and that we do need to shift. A guaranteed livable basic income is certainly one way of shifting it, in addition to current and future government programs and supports.

I can't see the floor anymore. I am just wondering—

The Chair: I can see you. I'm not sure why you can't see the floor.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Okay. I can see me, and then there's a reflection of me, so there are two—

The Chair: You are double beautiful, lady.

We're good again. Time's back on now.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I'm not that self-absorbed, people. I don't need to see two of me. I want to see the wonderful panellists here.

I want to move on to the discussion about STEM.

Ms. Cukier, you spoke about how there are now fewer women entering STEM than before. You spoke about the massacre that occurred at the École Polytechnique. I was wondering if you could expand on that. That's directly related to gender-based violence, and I'm wondering if you can expand on your analysis of that.

• (1710)

Dr. Wendy Cukier: Sure. I'll try to be brief.

My apologies if I misspoke, but I think what I said was that there are fewer women in computer science today than there were in 1989, and only marginally more in engineering. There has been an increase of women in STEM, but not at the level that we might have expected.

I would say two things, maybe three. One, why didn't it work? There were posters of astronauts and camps, and this and that. I would argue that there was no accountability. I would argue that or-

ganizations with levers of power, like Engineers Canada, which does the accreditations and so on, didn't have the right frameworks in place to actually move things forward. We see this a lot with good intentions that are not supported by clear targets, goals and accountability frameworks.

I think that is one big issue with women in science, technology, engineering and math, and the trades. If you do a Google image search on "carpenter", you will get Jesus, carpenter ants and Karen Carpenter before you see a woman carpenter, I kid you not. Those are very powerful images, and we obviously have to work on getting people in.

To your point, and the link with gender-based violence, which I see as a continuum, many of the science, technology and engineering environments are still toxic. What you see there are retention issues, not just recruitment issues, and there's a lot more that could be said on that.

It feeds directly into our innovation entrepreneurship strategy and where the supports are, because there is way more money if you have a quantum computing start-up than if you have a services-oriented business in a small community. That just doesn't compute.

The Chair: We are down to the end of the meeting. We all have so many questions, but I'm going to just take the chair's prerogative to ask if there are any last comments. We can give you a minute each if there's anything you haven't had a chance to touch on.

Ms. Paula Huntley: There's one thing I would like to comment on, and it came from the first group that spoke. It was Michelle who spoke about the partnership between a male and a female in the family. That was so bang on and it resonated with me when I heard it. Out of all this, running a business myself through COVID, my husband has been my rock. He is probably my biggest fan—in my own mind. Just when I think I can't take it anymore, he'll say, "So, you're going there today", and I'll say, "Yes, I am." I would like to thank him for that.

Dr. Wendy Cukier: I'll send some written comments, but there are several aspects that I would like to focus on. First, targets, transparency and accountability are absolutely fundamental. Look at the Investing in Women Code in the U.K.

Second, there are models of innovative practices. I am not sure if anyone from Coralus has testified, but \$5 million created 250 jobs with interest-free loans and a 100% repayment rate. There are some really powerful examples that aren't on people's radar, and that's why I think the valuation piece is important.

The last point is that more than 50% of businesses start with less than \$5,000. It is easier to get microfinancing grants and loans in Bangladesh currently than it is in Canada. Coming back to my starting point, which is that 90% of private sector employment is SMEs, I'd say we really have to invest.

• (1715)

The Chair: Awesome. Thank you so much for those wrapping-up comments.

On behalf of the committee, I'd really like to thank you for coming here.

Since we're still in public, I would like to say to all the women, on behalf of our committee, happy International Women's Day. Have a wonderful time.

We are going to suspend. I remind those people online that we are going in camera, so please switch to the proper link.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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