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Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

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• (1100)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Ben Carr (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Good morning, everyone.

[*English*]

I hope everybody had a good constituency week back in their ridings.

Colleagues, we are here for the 128th meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. This will be our final meeting to review the members of the House of Commons workplace harassment and violence prevention policy.

As a friendly reminder, and as a piece of information for our witnesses, should you not be using the earpiece when it's plugged in, please make sure you have it placed on the sticker in front of you. Of course, if it's in your ear, there's nothing to worry about. That's done in order to protect the well-being and safety of our translators.

Colleagues, you know the drill. We have three witnesses with us here today. I would like to welcome them.

From Equal Voice, we have Chi Nguyen, executive director. From the Heritage Skills Development Centre, we have Madeline Nwokeji. From WomanACT, we have Harmacy Mendoza, executive director.

Witnesses, we'll turn the floor over to you momentarily for introductory remarks of up to five minutes, and then we will move to our line of questioning.

With that, colleagues, we are going to begin.

I'm not sure if there is a witness who has a preference for going first. In the absence of that, I will ask Ms. Nguyen to start us off.

Ms. Chi Nguyen (Executive Director, Equal Voice): Thank you very much.

My name is Chi Nguyen. I am the executive director, as Mr. Carr mentioned, of Equal Voice.

We are a multipartisan organization focused on electing women to all levels of government in this country. For more than 20 years, we have been advocating for gender parity by working with the parties and equipping women with the skills they need in order to help retain them in elected office.

We have been doing some work in this space and researching these issues. Our research shows that with the increasing and shifting culture of harassment and violence in politics, there are real challenges in recruiting people and supporting them so they stay engaged. We're very delighted that you have been taking a look at your own internal practices and are considering how to continue to create a workplace environment that's safer for all involved.

There are two pieces of work we've been involved in that touch directly on your area of study at the moment.

One of them is a piece of work on systemic change and how to create more gender-inclusive legislatures, which we released in 2020. One of the three pillars in that work is a focus on safe and respectful workplaces.

Following that work, we continue to explore and try to better understand the sexual harassment policies that are in play in some of the provinces and territories. We released a report this spring. It's called "Combatting Sexual Harassment in Canada's Legislative Assemblies". Let me tell you that it's a page-turner.

I would like to share a few of the findings from this work. There are eight key themes in it, but there are things most relevant for your context today.

The first is that there are certain risks that increase the likelihood of sexual harassment in Canada's legislative assemblies. We know we have under-representation in nearly all of the legislatures in this country, though we might see some changes in B.C., and that's very exciting, and in Quebec, of course, as well.

That under-representation means there isn't the mass culture or the numbers for women to feel safe. That is an area where we think we—

• (1105)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): On a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Would it be possible for the witness to speak more slowly? I don't want to miss anything she says.

[*English*]

The Chair: To our witnesses, respectfully....

It's totally understandable. I know you don't appear in front of committees very often. Could you try to slow your pace a bit? It helps the translators and in turn the members. I will make sure to be flexible on your timing in order to accommodate that. If you can be conscious of it, it would be much appreciated.

Thank you very much.

Ms. Nguyen, there are about three minutes left.

Ms. Chi Nguyen: Okay. I'm going to try to stay focused and slow down.

The other elements that we uncovered in our research—we did a fairly extensive study of qualitative and quantitative data—were that excessive alcohol consumption plays a role in the context of many legislatures and that the precarity of the nature of the work that happens in parliaments is something to note as well, in addition to the hierarchical culture of this particular kind of workplace.

We also know that sexual harassment and gendered behaviours impact different groups within the legislature differently. Different workers have varying degrees of power and differing employment arrangements and diverse norms. These characteristics mean that sexual harassment, along with other gendered behaviours, can manifest and affect different groups differently.

Many research participants in our work also talked about the potential ramifications on their own career and mental health. With respect to the question of training during an onboarding process, one person responded, “I don't think we've ever received any training on anything. We were thrown into the deep end, and it's trial by fire.”

Those who had witnessed sexual harassment in legislative assemblies were concerned about the personal and professional ramifications of coming forward. Many such witnesses were also personally impacted by these behaviours. Some experienced trauma, fear for their careers and worry about their safety and well-being in the workplace.

The last finding I want to point to is that many research participants who had used or considered using legislative policies found that they didn't always meet their needs. Anti-harassment policies that don't meaningfully support complainants can inadvertently cause harm to those who experience sexual harassment and protect the harassers.

The policies can create a level of legitimacy to the efforts, but if there's not also a stream around prevention and mitigation, then we can create undue harms in other ways.

As part of this, when policies don't meet the needs of survivor-victims, including mechanisms to ensure independence and clear and consistent communication with complainants, those who experience sexual harassment are at risk of further harm.

I also want to speak briefly about some public opinion research work that we've done to understand the views of Canadians on these issues. I'll just note one particular stat, which is that as we interviewed and polled young women about coming forward and thinking about a career in politics, we've seen an increase from 75% to 82% of women saying that they were concerned about on-

line safety and harassment as issues if they thought about pursuing politics as an opportunity.

We also want to note that many Canadians actually talked about harassment and physical safety as concerns keeping them from stepping forward as potential candidates. Therefore, when you think about your long-term recruitment strategies as political parties and about having strong, great candidates, it's part of the piece that I think we need to pay attention to.

We regularly work with women and gender-diverse people across the country. We've been running campaign schools now for the last several years. This past year we've run campaign schools with more than 250 participants, and we know that we hear from them directly about their concerns about these issues. We talk about them, but that doesn't mean that talking is the solution. People being aware of the challenge means that they're better equipped to face it, but it doesn't get to the prevention and the other work that needs to happen. I'll—

• (1110)

The Chair: Ms. Nguyen, I'm afraid I'm going to have to end there.

Ms. Chi Nguyen: Okay.

The Chair: We have a tight timeline today. However, there will be lots of time for questioning, and hopefully then you'll be able to get to the points that you wanted to make.

Thank you very much. I apologize.

Madam Nwokeji, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Ms. Madeline Nwokeji (Program Director, Heritage Skills Development Centre): Good morning to distinguished members of the standing committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

My name is Madeline Nwokeji. I'm the program director at Heritage Skills Development Centre, a non-profit organization in Scarborough, Ontario.

HSDC was established in 1993 with a mission to promote the social, cultural, health and economic integration of women, low-income marginalized individuals and newcomers. Through skills development, social programs and capacity-building programs, we work to support high-risk youth, low-income disadvantaged individuals, families and more. We do take pride in being a trusted service provider and have served the community for over 30 years.

Today I would like to address a critical issue that impacts all workplaces across Canada: workplace harassment and violence.

As an organization deeply committed to providing safe, equitable and respectful environments, we recognize the profound impacts that workplace harassment and violence can have on individuals, organizations and society as a whole. Workplace harassment in all its forms, whether it be verbal, physical, sexual, emotional, microaggressions or even cyber-bullying, can have severe consequences for victims. This includes affecting one's psychological well-being, leading to anxiety, depression and diminishing self-esteem. As we know, victims may also struggle with chronic stress that can affect their overall productivity and well-being.

At HSDC we see the ripple effects of such trauma among the marginalized groups we serve, including women who already face multiple barriers and challenges in the workplace. Harassment can compound feelings of alienation and isolation, which delays their path to self-sufficiency. Beyond the personal toll, workplace harassment can also impact team dynamics and morale and undermine organizational culture. We also know that it can invite serious legal and financial repercussions.

Employers and leaders are obligated by law not only to provide a safe working environment but also to foster a culture that values inclusivity, respect and dignity. To address this, policies and proactive measures are essential.

For example, at HSDC we have implemented a comprehensive workplace violence and harassment program that not only meets the legal requirements but goes beyond them to foster an inclusive culture of respect. This includes training for staff and volunteers, clear reporting mechanisms and safety procedures, such as an emergency response plan. We believe that creating an environment where employees feel safe to speak up and are supported is the key to preventing and addressing harassment.

In addition to this, we also have an upcoming project that will train our employer partners in Scarborough, Ontario, on workplace harassment prevention strategies, with a focus on microaggressions that women face in the workplace.

Furthermore, a solution to the issue of workplace harassment lies not only in creating a policy but also in regular training. An effective training program should educate House members and employees on recognizing all forms of harassment and understanding how it impacts us in and outside the workplace.

It's also important that all members and employees have an active role in maintaining a safe workplace. We recommend an open door policy to the reporting of workplace harassment, as well as putting specific measures in place for taking immediate action, including conflict resolution strategies.

An additional recommendation is cultural competency training for House members, staff and leadership. We do believe this is important, given the diverse members of the House of Commons who come from all walks of life. Cultural competency will help to improve understanding and sensitivity towards the diverse cultures, as well as toward behaviours or language that could constitute workplace harassment.

I also want to add that it is vital to note age gaps and generational differences within the House. Thus, as everyone brings their own unique lived experiences, everyone should be treated with the same dignity and respect, regardless of age or gender.

It is not enough to simply react to incidents. We must create an environment where harassment and violence are not tolerated and where employees and members feel empowered to raise concerns without fear of retaliation. By fostering open communication, diversity and inclusivity, we create workplaces that respect the dignity of all individuals. Failure to do this can have detrimental mental health impacts, as well as affect our ability to thrive in our role as public servants.

• (1115)

Members of Parliament are representatives of the people and also serve as our role models. Community members and youth look up to their MPs, including what they will do to address workplace harassment. Especially in this Internet age and social media age, members do have an obligation to portray a strong image as leaders and what it truly means to be Canadian, which is a respect for differences.

In conclusion, workplace harassment and violence have far-reaching effects on individuals, organizations and our communities. By investing in prevention, education and accountability, we can create workplaces where everyone feels safe, respected and valued. I urge the committee to consider the importance of strong policies, robust training programs and a comprehensive support system to ensure every Canadian workplace remains a space of dignity and respect.

Thank you for your time.

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

Ms. Mendoza, the floor is yours for five minutes.

Ms. Harmy Mendoza (Executive Director, WomanACT): Thank you.

Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Harmy Mendoza. I am the executive director of WomanACT.

I want to thank the committee for the opportunity to speak today.

WomanACT is a charitable organization advancing gender equity by mobilizing research, policy and education.

Why is it essential to have a strong workplace harassment and violence prevention policy? Well, the pervasive nature of gender-based violence and harassment across all sectors is glaringly evident.

Let me share my first statistic with you. One in eight women reported that they have been sexually assaulted in a work-related context at one point in their working lives. This rate is four times higher than what men experience.

We cannot discuss this without acknowledging intersectionality. For example, women with disabilities face inappropriate sexualized behaviour at a rate of 35%, compared to 20% for those without disabilities. This is why, at WomanACT, we advocate an intersectional and anti-oppressive approach.

Moreover, let's talk about workplaces and productivity. What is the impact of harassment on productivity? Well, 55% of those who experienced harassment reported decreased productivity, 70% missed workdays and 46% lost trust in their teams.

To address such a concerning problem, it is crucial to implement trauma-informed and organization-wide practices.

Now, on your current policy, we were thrilled to see that the current policy includes harassment and violence prevention training for all members and employees to maintain a culture of respect. Thank you for that.

This training curriculum should encompass bystander intervention training, including interactive exercises, role-playing scenarios and industry-specific examples emphasizing empathy, allyship and shared responsibility. Our newly launched WomanACT in the Workplace initiative is a great example of how partnering with community organizations can help assess your workplace's needs and develop tailored training and resources to foster a survivor-centred and inclusive workplace culture.

There is also a need for the current policy to explicitly mention the need to respect the privacy and confidentiality of all persons involved and a statement forbidding any reprisal against a complainant following a disclosure. Research shows that disclosures can be accompanied by feelings of shame, stigma and fear of repercussions. In fact, studies tell us that survivors report that the outcome they most desire is confidentiality and to be shown concern.

The current policy briefly mentions voluntary and confidential support services through the employee and family assistance program. Complementary to these services, our research revealed the merits of counselling and peer support groups in healing and in maintaining employment.

What are our recommendations?

Well, it would be good that the provision of domestic violence leave, its eligibility criteria and the request process be readily available to all employees in a way that ensures the confidentiality and safety of the disclosure. Domestic violence leave should be explicitly mentioned in the policy and must be included as part of any related mandatory training and onboarding of employees to encourage survivors to feel safe and comfortable enough to disclose any instances of harassment and violence.

Additionally, we recommend adding trauma-informed gender-based analysis and anti-racist, anti-oppressive training to the required qualifications for investigators. This ensures that investigation procedures comply with the code and the Canadian Human Rights Act, reducing the risk of trauma and revictimization that may discourage disclosure and erode trust.

Finally, implementing a zero tolerance policy for sexual and gender-based workplace harassment is crucial for fostering a safe and inclusive work environment. Such policies protect employees from harmful behaviours and reinforce the organization's commitment to respect and dignity for everyone.

Thank you very much.

• (1120)

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

Witnesses, we are now going to move into our line of questioning.

We will begin with Ms. Rempel Garner, who will have the floor for six minutes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

In Canada, instances of criminal harassment are up 36% over the last decade, and that's just the incidents that are reported; countless other times, they're not. That's true for any Canadian, but particularly for elected officials. It's extremely difficult for victims to get justice. That's because of a lot of different issues: grey areas in existing laws, bail issues and lack of education in the judiciary and among law enforcement officials.

To end this problem, it's been suggested that the government should enact legislation that would create a so-called "digital restraining order". In this, a legal threshold similar to criminal harassment could be met. If it was met—not impinging on charter-protected speech—courts could require Internet service providers and other online platforms to both identify digital stalkers and require them to take measures to prevent these people from communicating with these victims. This would provide victims, including elected officials, the judiciary and law enforcement, with simple, easy-to-use tools to quickly end online criminal harassment.

Would you recommend that the government enact such a measure, Ms. Nguyen?

Ms. Chi Nguyen: Thank you for the question.

I feel that I would need to know a bit more context and specificity around how it was being rolled out. I think there are potentially great benefits to it, but I don't know that I can speak specifically to that approach.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: You would agree that there need to be more tools for law enforcement to end online criminal harassment, though.

Ms. Chi Nguyen: I think tools, not only on the enforcement side but also on the prevention side, are part of the mix.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you.

The distribution of AI-generated so-called “deepnudes” is already having a negative harassing impact on candidates and on elected officials the world over. To date, Canada's federal government has failed to close a loophole in Canada's laws that prevent the non-consensual distribution of intimate images to include deepnudes.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union, in its 149th general assembly last week, passed a resolution regarding the impact of AI on democracy and human rights and called upon government to take action in this specific regard.

Would you recommend that the government update Canada's Criminal Code sections regarding the non-distribution of intimate images to ensure that it's illegal to distribute highly realistic AI-generated deepnudes without consent?

Ms. Chi Nguyen: Yes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you.

Do you realize that there is a bill in front of Parliament that asks for both of these things to be done?

Ms. Chi Nguyen: I'm aware that there is legislation moving through the system.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Do you think it would be helpful for the federal government to enact these measures prior to the next federal election?

Ms. Chi Nguyen: I do think that signals to potential candidates—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: This is Equal Voice. These are non-partisan issues. I would just like your opinion as Equal Voice on whether the government should enact these measures prior to the next federal election.

Ms. Chi Nguyen: I would welcome clear action in these spaces as soon as possible.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you.

Today is the 10-year anniversary of the shooting on Parliament Hill.

Physical safety in our workplace is important as well. Would you recommend, Ms. Nguyen, that the committee overseeing the renovation of Centre Block make specific recommendations to keep MPs physically safe in their workplace while allowing law-abiding citizens access to the grounds?

• (1125)

Ms. Chi Nguyen: Yes. I think everyone who's serving on the Hill deserves to feel safe in their workplace.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Right now, if a candidate for federal office has to make expenditures during the writ period for security, like campaign office security systems, panic buttons or

hired security guards, these expenditures must be included in the spending cap for a campaign, which can disproportionately affect women. Would you recommend that Elections Canada undertake a review to have certain types of eligible security expenses fall outside of the election spending cap?

Ms. Chi Nguyen: I think that would be a welcome review.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you.

The other thing I'll mention is that there have been instances of political parties knowing about candidates who have been under investigation for things like sexual harassment or criminal harassment and still allowing them to run. They then ended up sitting in the legislature.

Would you recommend that political parties review their candidate selection processes to ensure that people who are under sexual harassment investigations would not be greenlit to run for their party?

Ms. Chi Nguyen: I believe it would send a very clear signal to Canadians that folks under investigation for these allegations need to be properly vetted.

The Chair: You have about 90 seconds.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you, Chair.

The other component that I think we'll be faced with in this committee in making recommendations is how to deal with MP-to-MP harassment. However, I do feel that part of the problem... Other colleagues have talked about enacting workplace measures to ensure that these types of harassment situations are taken seriously. They're inevitably politicized in Parliament.

Would you recommend that any measures to deal with MP-to-MP conflict are handled by completely neutral arbiters, such as law enforcement or other officials outside of the party system, or even the parliamentary system, as it is under the role of the Speaker? The current Speaker has been accused of partisanship. Would you say or recommend that it is important to have a neutral arbiter to eliminate politicization in workplace harassment issues in Parliament?

Ms. Chi Nguyen: One of the recommendations from our review of the provincial and territorial legislatures as a best practice is an independent review place for that and a stream of—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I would suggest that it's not the Speaker's office or the whip's office. Would you concur with that assessment?

Ms. Chi Nguyen: I—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I'll just be blunt. I would feel completely like there's no way I would report something to the Speaker, so where would I go?

What I'm trying to say is this: Would Equal Voice suggest that it would benefit everybody if there were a truly neutral arbiter of any sort of dispute?

Ms. Chi Nguyen: I'm going to confess that the scope of this particular piece of research didn't look at the federal context and where it should sit.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I'll go to Ms. Mendoza.

Would you suggest a neutral arbiter?

The Chair: I'm sorry, Ms. Rempel Garner; answer very quickly, Ms. Mendoza.

Ms. Harmy Mendoza: I need more information to elaborate on that.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

Mrs. Romanado, the floor is yours for six minutes.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado (Longueuil—Charles-LeMoine, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Through you, I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here today.

As my colleague Ms. Rempel Garner said, today is the 10th anniversary of the attack on Parliament Hill. For those who were there that day, it's a pretty tough day.

With that, the reason we brought forward this study is that currently there are two policies that deal with harassment of parliamentarians. One is the sexual harassment policy and the other one is the harassment policy.

Currently, the sexual harassment policy does cover sexual harassment between two members of Parliament, but the harassment policy does not. Currently, the harassment policy does cover harassment between an employee and a member of Parliament or between employees, but it does not protect MPs from MP-to-MP harassment. We're looking at that because obviously there is an impact.

Currently, there is no mechanism for a member of Parliament who is going through psychological harassment—I assume physical harassment would come under the Criminal Code—to get some relief when going through such a difficult moment.

The nature of the job that we do is very adversarial. We're not talking about debate in the House; what we're talking about is someone who is being bullied, isolated, intimidated and so on and so forth.

In that regard, I'd like to ask Equal Voice if you have done any research in terms of that. You mentioned a little bit about recruitment for people considering this line of work. Have you looked into any research that would identify this as an impediment for people considering this role?

• (1130)

Ms. Chi Nguyen: We have not done that specifically.

One thing that came out loud and clear in this review was that many harassment policies across the country are not necessarily delivered in plain language that is easy to digest. Of course, going from jurisdiction to jurisdiction means that each context is going to have its own realities, and of course where you sit within that legislature matters immensely.

Plain, level information and clear and plain language and accessibility around the delivery of these harassment policies are critical for people to feel trust in them so that they can come forward and come forward safely.

When we looked at Newfoundland's workplace harassment policy, we found it to be very comprehensive. There are a lot of very strong practices there that are worth taking a look at.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: We also heard from colleagues that the reason some colleagues are deciding not to re-offer.... We've seen this quite a lot in Quebec with female politicians who've decided to not run again, especially at the municipal level. We're losing great colleagues and great parliamentarians across this country due to harassment and intimidation, especially in the online world. We're seeing more and more the politics of agitation, as we call it.

What would you recommend? This is something that's sort of outside the scope of what we can control, but what would you recommend in that regard?

Quebec did pass legislation to increase fines for those who harass elected officials. Do you have any recommendations for us?

Ms. Chi Nguyen: I think in the space around digital, there's work to be done to work with the social media providers to make sure that they're getting out in front of things sooner. In terms of volume, there's the role of bots in creating the quantity of the harassment that's happening. These are all dimensions where I think we can find some mechanisms.

In addition to this, I think what you're missing is the positive feedback loops: "Thank you for the service that you do every day, every single one of you." You need to hear from many of us who believe strongly that you should be able to come to work safely and be protected in your digital space. That's really critical.

I think part of this is a news story that's a good news story about the positive work that's coming out of legislatures and governments across this country.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: At the end of the last...I won't say the "session", as we're still in the same session. At the end of June, some parliamentarians around this table decided to bring forward a parliamentary pledge. Ms. Mathyssen is spearheading that initiative with a senator colleague. It's for parliamentarians from all parties, in both the House and the Senate, to make a pledge. That comes out of Halton, I believe. It's a commitment to call it out and to stand shoulder to shoulder when they witness somebody going through an episode of harassment, or to call out the bad behaviour if you're a bystander.

We're all very busy, but we're hopeful that with that movement, more and more people will recognize when someone's in the middle of a situation and step forward to say this is not acceptable behaviour, in the absence of a policy change.

Would you have any other recommendations for us as well in that regard?

I'll ask Ms. Mendoza.

Ms. Harmy Mendoza: Yes, I will definitely elaborate on that.

Absolutely, and that's why we talk about bystander intervention. Research tells us that it's not that people don't care; it's that they often don't know what to do or how to respond. Having proper mechanisms that are clearly available to people is very important. It's crucial, and so is the training to be able to respond. First it's to identify it and to respond to it and know that you're doing the right thing.

I always compare it to CPR training. We get trained every year, just like you have your training and your policy, and you're supposed to repeat it every year. The training has to be really on what to do when you see it.

Absolutely, I will definitely second that.

To your question earlier, I believe there should be a mechanism. I believe there should be a mechanism so that everybody feels safe but also so that what people can do when they are experiencing harassment is clear.

• (1135)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Romanado.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gaudreau, you have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

First, I'd like to sincerely thank the witnesses for being with us and presenting their reports and statistics. I'd be grateful if they would send us the documents they've talked about. We could talk about this for hours.

Ladies, as my colleague mentioned earlier, we're talking about modernizing the policy for preventing harassment between MPs. I don't know if you've ever compared Question Period in the House of Commons, which can be seen in person or on television, to those that exist elsewhere. Of course, I'm very familiar with the Quebec National Assembly. It's respectful. Members listen to what others have to say. There's no shouting. There's no fuss. In fact, it's healthy.

First, I'd like to know what you think of the climate in the House of Commons. I'd call it a lot of nonsense. I'd like to hear your comments on that. What do you think of the way we behave?

[*English*]

Ms. Chi Nguyen: I want to note that Prince Edward Island has anti-heckling legislation in place in their legislature. It does not mean that the tone of parliamentary approach is what one might desire. I have spent a bit of time in the north and I have seen how con-

sensus governments comport themselves, and it's a different perspective.

I also want to note, though, that much of the very important work that happens at the House of Commons happens in committees, and there is great space there for great collaboration and really strong recommendations, but because the media spotlight isn't on this work, we are losing out on the storyline of really thoughtful legislative expertise.

Yes, it might be helpful to have a different approach in question period, but we also know that it's sometimes a bit of theatre.

Ms. Madeline Nwokeji: Yes, I want to second that.

I absolutely do agree that there should be a review of certain guidelines for members of Parliament and behaviour in the legislature. There's a lot of work to be done, and with the changing environment, as things keep changing, we particularly talked about cyber-bullying and online harassment, as everything is now posted online.

I think we should keep in mind, as I mentioned earlier in my speech, that members of Parliament are role models and have to portray themselves in a manner that the community will respect and youth will look up to, especially young people who are looking to be in Parliament. The policies and behaviours that are acceptable or not acceptable among peers in Parliament are things to constantly think about.

• (1140)

Ms. Harmy Mendoza: I wasn't impressed. I have watched a few times, especially when there is legislation that is important for the line of work I do, and it did seem, for lack of better words, a bit too much for me. I was expecting a different type of behaviour from those who are representing our country and doing this important work.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Have you had the opportunity, by any chance, to view the documentary entitled: *Backlash: Misogyny in the Digital Age*? I invite you to do so. Every time I take part in international missions, all the women's groups, even Equal Voice, give a presentation. This documentary focuses precisely on the problem you're talking about.

As a member of Parliament, I can denounce what I see because I find it unacceptable. We talked about a process. In your opinion, is this a first step in reducing the animosity or lack of respect we see here in the House of Commons?

[*English*]

The Chair: For witnesses, we have about 60 seconds left, so whoever responds should please be mindful of that.

Ms. Madeline Nwokeji: I do believe that there should be stronger procedures in terms of MP-to-MP interaction and, as I said, in terms of language and behaviours that are acceptable or unacceptable, whether it's in the House, outside of the House or online.

I do believe that stronger measures and maybe potential consequences will help to deter certain behaviours, and I think that would be a great step toward having more respect and treating everyone the same, regardless of age and gender, and respecting everyone's opinion. As I mentioned earlier, members come from all different walks of life, and we need to be respectful of that.

I think training and a revision of certain policies will help to at least provide a little bit of a deterrence for certain members of Parliament in terms of communication and behaviours in the House.

The Chair: Ms. Mathyssen, the floor is yours for six minutes.

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you as well to the witnesses for appearing on this important study today.

As a staff person who worked on the Hill 10 years ago, which is very strange to me to say, I want to acknowledge the 10-year anniversary of the death of Nathan Cirillo and the impact it had on us here.

We spoke a little about the pledge. One of the reasons I thought about bringing it forward here is that it concerns me that we can and should have a lot of rules and regulations that are clear and that are well communicated, as you said. I understand that entirely, but it doesn't necessarily get to what is needed, so I thought that the pledge would be more peer pressure. The second a member signs it, they think twice.

How effective do you feel that peer pressure can be if we all take that moment and we're consistently talking about it here on the Hill?

That's to all of you, or any of you.

Ms. Harmy Mendoza: I think it would be very effective. You are right. I think one of us spoke about that in terms of prevention and preparing ourselves to learn about that and recognize the signs and speak about it.

I talk about bystander intervention and role-playing. I also talk about research we undertook at WomanACT. On top of your supports through the different services that you have, peer support is very important: Survivors told us that when it comes to bringing forward a complaint, the best outcome is not only confidentiality but feeling safe. I think peer support is very important when it comes to the response on this key issue, so I highlight it as an important part.

We talk about all of the different legislation and really good work that you are doing, including restraining orders. They are tools, but that's it. We're not going to solve it with that alone. We need prevention and training, and everyone, everywhere, needs to do it.

● (1145)

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen: To build off of that, having sat on the status of women committee, on the national defence committee, we saw at the veterans affairs committee that they were discussing military sexual trauma and the impacts on veterans. We soon—hopefully—will be dealing with a bill that tries to change some of the rules around military sexual trauma.

Some of those committees received trauma-informed GBA+ training so that when witnesses come forward, there aren't additional retraumatizations and there's an understanding there.

However, it strikes me that all members need to receive that training. What would you say about that, in terms of those proactive tools?

Ms. Harmy Mendoza: Everyone, everywhere, absolutely needs to be aware of how trauma impacts, how we don't want to retraumatize by implementing policies in a way that is not appropriate. The policies will, hopefully, take you one step further, but you need to make sure that all the frameworks are properly applied to the procedures so as to not retraumatize people, lose trust or lose really important politicians, women who could be at the front.

You talk about different sectors. That's actually part of the work we have been doing at WomanACT. We have been going out and knocking on different doors from different sectors that are, as I'm going to call them, the “non-social services sector”, just for lack of.... I don't want to go into it specifically, but yes, especially for male-dominated workplaces, we need to start having conversations about this problem that we all have.

The statistics are there. It's very clear that there is a problem that continues to exist. We can only hope to eliminate it if we work in different areas of the spectrum. Legislation, the work that you do, is very important, but other areas of work are as crucial and critical.

I'm going to end by speaking about something that we talk about a lot at our end. It's called “climate assessments”. What that means is that when we knock on different sectors' doors.... Sometimes they actually come and knock at our door and say, “Hmm, we think we have an issue here.” We say, “Okay. How do you know?” They say, “Well, there was this complaint.” We say, “Okay, what else do you know? What else is happening in your organization?” Then we propose undertaking climate assessments. Why is that? It's because that will give a better sense of what and how big the issue is, and interventions can be tailored that are more applicable to that particular sector. That means, for example, what language do they use?

You talk about the military. You know, there are these rules of engagement that they talk about. How does that intersect or in any way align to anti-oppressive training? Maybe it doesn't—maybe not at all—but I think that it is important to start having those conversations. What are the areas where we could actually align, to some extent, to recognize that there is an issue here?

For us, for people like me who work in this sector, it's about women dying every day in Canada in the context of gender-based violence and IPV and women experiencing workplace harassment.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Mathysen.

Madame Vien, the floor is yours for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Ladies, thank you for taking the time to testify today.

I'll start by trying to reassure you about the ability of parliamentarians to work together, regardless of political affiliation. It's no secret that safety is a very important issue for the political party to which I belong.

Before coming to the Parliament of Canada, I sat in another parliament, that of Quebec. I ended my 15-year career there as Minister of Labour. I feel I left an important legacy in this last position. Among all the changes I made to labour standards, one has to do with time limits and what happens when you leave a workplace. We're talking a lot about what happens upstream this morning, but we need to talk about that too.

In Quebec, people were given three months to file a complaint, regardless of whether they were sitting MPs or former employees. To me, this timeframe was clearly insufficient. Indeed, we all know of cases of harassment or violence in the workplace that prove this. It takes time for people to understand what's happened and what's going on inside them. In Quebec, the law has been changed to increase the time limit from three months to two years. What I heard in terms of feedback from the groups that spoke out at the time was that the two-year timeframe was a good one and that it allowed people to take the necessary steps.

At the federal level, there is no issue for current employees, since there is no statute of limitations. In recent years, former employees have been given three months to lodge a complaint. Since 2021, there has been no time limit. I therefore tabled, with all my Conservative Party colleagues, Bill C-378. Ms. Mendoza, you seem to be familiar with it. I'm glad you are.

Thanks to this bill, we're going to take a step forward. We're going to increase the time limit from three months to two years, and we're going to allow former employees who have not received satisfaction following an incident notice to file a complaint.

I now come to your comment, Ms. Mendoza. There are, of course, times when we work very well together. The proof is that this bill will probably receive the assent of all parliamentarians, and it's a Conservative Party initiative.

In your opinion, will this two-year period that will be granted, God willing, as we say back home, be sufficient?

• (1150)

The Chair: You have 60 seconds left, Ms. Mendoza.

[*English*]

Ms. Harmy Mendoza: Yes, I would absolutely agree. The more time we can give those who are experiencing harassment to report, the better.

Ms. Chi Nguyen: Can I follow up on that?

We recommend against timelines so that people can come forward long after, because sometimes someone is too traumatized to come forward, and it is not the right moment, professionally, for them to come forward. In order for people to be able to seek remedies and work through the process, we recommend not having time limits.

Ms. Madeline Nwokeji: I would also agree with that.

Women already face tremendous barriers in the workplace, whether in terms of rising up or, for example, in the case of a new MP who has just begun their career. Having all those barriers in the workplace and having a short time frame might not necessarily be conducive to their reporting.

Also, we talk about whom they're reporting to, which was mentioned earlier. The person they're reporting to also has a big role in this. If there is some form of intimidation or a fear of reprisal, it may not necessarily come out. It might be four or five years before they're able to speak out about their trauma.

We recommend a little bit more time and flexibility in the harassment reporting procedures.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Vien.

Ms. Fortier, you have the floor for five minutes.

Hon. Mona Fortier (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ladies, thank you so much for being here this morning. We're having a really good conversation. I really like what I'm hearing from Mrs. Vien, because I think we need to put mechanisms in place that move us forward.

First of all, I want to say that I remember where I was ten years ago to the day. I was at La Cité college, which is 10 kilometres from here. There was a lockdown during the situation, and I have clear memories of it. We must recognize the memory of Corporal Nathan Cirillo and all the people who lived through the situation, not only in the Parliamentary Precinct, but throughout the national capital region.

I also want to thank MP Lindsay Mathysen and Senator Marilou McPhedran for their parliamentary engagement initiative. For our part, MP Pam Damoff encouraged us to make this parliamentary commitment. In my opinion, it's important to be even more aware of what's going on, and that's why I signed this parliamentary commitment.

Ms. Nguyen, I'd like to continue the discussion on the study conducted by your organization, Equal Voice. We talk a lot about recruitment, but I wonder if you're also interested in retention. I must admit that, as an elected official and as someone who has been recruited, I have a lot of questions. How can we make sure that women who get involved in politics, like me, want to stay in politics?

Have you conducted any studies on ways to encourage women, among other things, to stay in politics?

• (1155)

[English]

Ms. Chi Nguyen: I spent the day on Saturday having conversations about this at the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, looking particularly at retention and recruitment of diverse candidates. I think the piece that's really compelling for women is to be reminded over and over again of the powerful work that they're able to do, and that the reason they're here is that they see an opportunity for change and they want to contribute to that.

Every time we've spoken to a woman in office, governing anywhere, from every political party, they've talked about their achievements, and despite all of the burdens and the challenges, they have things to be very proud of. That's absolutely critical to reminding people of why they're here in service. That's how we shift the narrative to help women stay—and men. We need great people doing the phenomenal work that you do. It's thankless, and we appreciate it.

A huge piece of this work is to be reminded and to share it with each other. Those success stories are what are going to continue to propel your efforts forward.

[Translation]

Hon. Mona Fortier: In addition to what's happening at the federal level, we also talked about what's happening in the provinces and territories.

Are you also interested in what's happening between elected officials in the municipalities? Just across the river, in Gatineau, Mayor France Bélisle has stepped down, for all sorts of reasons. I know that other mayors in Quebec have been in a similar situation. We've heard a lot about it. I imagine it's also the case elsewhere in Canada.

Can you give us any information on this subject? Do you have any food for thought that would enable us to continue this study, also taking into account what's happening in municipalities?

[English]

Ms. Chi Nguyen: That's a great question. I think it's really critical. Another woman mayor was elected. There are still women who are prepared to come forward.

I think it's about the kind of peer support networks and ways in which we can resource the opportunities around safety. I know that for some communities, having caucuses of community members that look more like them allows them to unpack the additional intersectional barriers that some elected officials face or carry with them. That's really important work as well. Creating those safe spaces, formally and informally, for parliamentarians to be able to connect and to talk through things that are really tough is really im-

portant. I think those are really important mechanisms that could help in this area.

[Translation]

Hon. Mona Fortier: Thank you.

Ms. Mendoza, earlier you talked about mechanisms that should be put in place, which should be based on certain principles.

Could you elaborate on that? What kind of mechanism should we adopt, in this context?

What are the basic criteria that would enable us to put in place the best possible mechanism in the context of this study?

[English]

The Chair: Again, I'm sorry.

Ms. Mendoza, please answer quite rapidly. Thank you.

Ms. Harmy Mendoza: Okay. I have a couple of words on frameworks.

Intersectionality is an important word, and I talked about an example of that. In an anti-oppressive approach, please don't forget that your training needs to include role-playing and bystander interventions.

I would strongly encourage you to work with community organizations to support that. They are the experts. They do this work every day, and they are aware of the trends we're facing or seeing in our communities.

• (1200)

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Fortier.

Ms. Gaudreau, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I thank the witnesses for their comments.

We are in a democracy. We parliamentarians represent the people. Scandinavian countries, Quebec and a few other countries have succeeded, in practice, in establishing parity. For my part, I see even further ahead. I'm talking about representing the whole population.

We can solve problems between MPs. We can help each other and remain vigilant. However, in a minority context, if we experience discrimination or intimidation, do you believe that achieving parity or representativeness of the population could change our democracy and the way we act?

[English]

Ms. Madeline Nwokeji: Our population is definitely changing in terms of diverse individuals, and even representatives in Parliament as well. I believe that as things changed, with Canada being a country that is very accepting of immigrants from all places, many have come here and have been able to become members of Parliament and even go higher.

With the changes in the representatives, as well as with the appropriate training.... I also mentioned earlier cultural sensitivity and cultural competency training as a recommendation. The reason is that this training will create a better understanding of the different diverse cultures that are part of the members of the House of Commons. This kind of training and understanding of the different languages and different behaviours that people bring would also create a better working environment.

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Your words are music to my ears.

I don't have much time left, but I'd also like to hear what other witnesses have to say about this.

[English]

Ms. Chi Nguyen: Yes, we want our parliaments to look like our communities, so seeing more diversity, more women represented and people with different lived experiences around the table will strengthen our democracy. We know that diversity in business creates better business outcomes. That diversity in thinking will also help.

Ms. Harmy Mendoza: Absolutely, it will. Yes.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gaudreau.

[English]

Ms. Mathysen, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: I have way more than two and a half minutes' worth of questions, so I'll try to put them together

The first question I want to ask is specifically for Equal Voice. It's about the comparison of legislatures that you did. I too am worried about the impacts that this level of hate has on the people who serve within them, and not just the elected officials. I'm wondering whether you surveyed people who work within those institutions about the impacts of harassment and what they're seeing in that hate coming toward them.

If you can, I would also like to talk about how we were seized in this Parliament with foreign interference and the roles of foreign governments in disinformation and that fuelling of hate, and what that all leads to. We're certainly seeing that internally and nationally.

I wonder what certain groups' end goal is. Especially for the extreme right, what is their objective in undermining our democracy in that way?

Ms. Chi Nguyen: On the first question around whether or not we also surveyed staffers and folks who aren't elected, yes, the survey

also included them in our data. We want to make sure that the committee has a copy of that report so that you can dive more deeply into that.

On the question around the place of hate in this kind of work, I think that in all of this work, it's making the conditions for everyone a bit more challenging. Certainly many people just look at this work and ask why on earth they would sign up for this.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Are there benefits, though, for certain groups from undermining democratic institutions? What do they look like?

Ms. Chi Nguyen: Do you mean from within the legislatures themselves?

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Yes.

Ms. Chi Nguyen: I don't know that I can speak to the agendas of those folks.

• (1205)

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: I don't know if the other witnesses want to try to tackle it.

Ms. Madeline Nwokeji: I'm sorry. Was it related to members of the legislature undermining...?

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: It can be. There are certain movements in terms of that....

In the undermining of a democratic institution through disinformation, in using that hate to push people out, do you think there's an agenda there?

The Chair: Be very quick, please.

Ms. Madeline Nwokeji: I believe there could be. People come from all walks of life and people have beliefs, whether they're personal or cultural. However, we do have to recognize that this is Canada, and we are all governed by our Charter of Rights and Freedoms. We do have the freedom of expression; however, we definitely cannot undermine the country we're in. I think it's important to be mindful of that.

I think there could be individuals with certain agendas. I'm not too sure what those agendas could be. However, we do have to be mindful, regardless of the country we're in, and be respectful of everyone and not undermine the democratic process.

The Chair: Thanks very much, Ms. Mathysen.

Ms. Rempel Garner, you have five minutes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Colleagues, I don't come to this committee often, so I'm going to use this time to give you my recommendations as an expert in this field, having been here a hot minute.

You guys are going to want to recommend to put the MP-to-MP harassment within the existing code, but we all know the reality of what's going to happen with that. It's going to be politically weaponized. Even if it goes through House of Commons administration, I know that many of you, if we had a Conservative Speaker, wouldn't feel comfortable putting it through there. We've seen leaks happen through that process. It's just not going to work. Let's be realistic.

Let's think about what the impact of that would be. My colleague Mr. Gerretsen and I have had some pretty "rock'em, sock'em robots" conversations on Twitter. I know I blocked him on Twitter. That doesn't mean I don't respect him as a colleague, but what would happen if I put in a harassment complaint against him? All of a sudden, he is going to be tried in the court of public opinion, which I might like. I mean, that sounds really great, because it's a cheap political win, but it goes against the principles of good HR management, so we can't do this. Let's be realistic. That's not going to happen.

However, that doesn't mean, given the change in gender composition of Parliament, that we shouldn't have something, so this is what I would suggest.

Number one, don't put anything in this report that allows for the weaponization of HR. Don't do that—and we all know that it's going to happen. To give credit to our witnesses, they don't live in our world. They just don't. I used to manage a team of 40 staff in a unionized environment. That world doesn't apply here, because of political weaponization.

So what do we do? I think this is a question of privilege. I have the right to work in an workplace without harassment, so this is what I would suggest.

First of all, extend EFAP services to include a mechanism to de-escalate tension, particularly within caucuses. Liberal Party, you're about to go through a leadership race. That is an ugly time within a party. You need to have a process to de-escalate tensions.

Number two, make it a violation of privilege. Change the Standing Orders so that if somebody uses an EFAP process to de-escalate tension and they leak it to the media, there's some sort of House censure for that. Make it absolutely sacrosanct to not leak this stuff to the media, because it needs to be done in good faith.

Number three, make sure that there's training for party whips. We all understand that party whips are in a difficult situation because they have to maintain votes and adherence to party standards, but at the same time they're also managing HR in an environment where HR law doesn't apply. Perhaps there could be some training or some processes for that. I have only five minutes, so I won't suggest what that looks like.

The same goes for caucus chairs. Caucus chairs should be independent from the centre of a party. There should be rules in caucus meetings for party leadership, as well as for caucus chairs, on how to manage interaction in a caucus meeting so that you don't have people yelling at each other or berating each other.

Again, at the end of the day, there should also be some sort of process for vexatious complaints. If I go after my colleague Mr. Gerretsen with some sort of accusation, and it's completely bunk... We've seen this happen in this place. Reputations have been destroyed. Lives have been destroyed. What does that mean? There should be some sort of process to discourage that.

On the notion of the pledge that has been made, that's nice, but what we really need here is some sort of process that relates to the privilege of being able to be in a workplace without any sort of harassment that is not going to be weaponized for political gain. MP-

to-MP harassment absolutely will be weaponized, so don't do that. Do something smarter.

That is my two cents. Thank you.

• (1210)

The Chair: Ms. Rempel Garner, thank you for providing some productive and interesting guidance to the committee.

Mrs. Romanado, the floor is yours.

Mrs. Sherry Romanado: Thank you so much.

I want to thank my colleague for those excellent recommendations.

In addition to that, I would include in the current policy a reference to harassment between members of Parliament so it is specific about this being unacceptable behaviour. The appendix already has examples of behaviours that are considered unacceptable.

I like the recommendation about training. I agree about bystander training. In addition to the pledges, we need stronger mechanisms here in the House for that.

I agree with the idea that the Speaker shouldn't be the arbitrator of complaints with respect to sexual harassment. The reason, as my colleague mentioned, is that whoever is in the chair is also a member of a political party.

We already have a chief human resources officer who looks at complaints of sexual harassment or harassment between MPs and employees or among employees. This person is already trained and an expert in the field, in terms of human resources and in going through an EFAP process, a mediation process, and so on and so forth. I would say that it's similar to what we're trying to do with Bill C-66 for the military justice system in taking complaints outside. We don't want the military to investigate itself in terms of cases. Similar to that, I don't think political parties should be investigating themselves.

It's been 10 long years since a report came out saying that we need to get this loophole closed. Do you have any additional recommendations for us to make sure that this gets done once and for all?

Ms. Harmy Mendoza: I'll reiterate.

I feel we need to make sure this training is implemented and embedded. We need to make sure that it's clear and that people feel less scared to go through a process, especially as a complainant, and that they know they have certain venues, and it's clear to them what those venues are going forward.

I will reiterate to include an anti-oppressive framework and intersectionality. I think those are important areas to include.

I did provide other venues in my speech. Domestic violence leave is not in your current policy. That's an important area that would be good to include in there as well.

I don't have any other suggestions. I don't know if my colleagues do.

Ms. Chi Nguyen: I'm not sure if there's a piece around data and evaluation baked into the approach right now, one that is disaggregated, so that you can start to identify trends about complainants and what's coming forward. That would be helpful.

Also, you need some annual, deep survey work on whether people are familiar with the policies, and where education and training are coming from. I think that would also be useful in the rollout to make sure information is readily available to people.

Ms. Madeline Nwokeji: I would add this: It's about expanding the scope of what constitutes a form of harassment. For example, think about microaggressions that could be used, and how those can impact folks.

Also, use conflict resolution training so that these matters are part of the new policy and training on how MPs can handle issues among themselves. The training should have a trauma-informed lens with a gender-based analysis for perspective.

We also talked about bystander intervention, peer support and things like that. These would be very helpful to ensure this is effective.

It's also about having an open door policy. We talked about not having a term limit. You need an open door policy for these complaints, as well as a neutral party who can resolve matters.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mrs. Romanado.

Thank you very much, witnesses, for being here. Your testimony certainly adds important insight to our work.

We will suspend momentarily and give everyone a couple of minutes to reset. Any folks who are not staff or members of Parliament need to leave the room, as we're going to be heading in camera.

Colleagues, we have some committee business to attend to. I don't anticipate it's going to take us too long, although I may regret saying that. Nonetheless, we will be back in a few moments.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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