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• (1535)

[English]

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

Welcome to meeting 108 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women.

Before we begin, I would like to remind all members and other meeting participants in the room of the following important preventative measures.

To prevent disruption and potentially harmful audio feedback incidents that can cause injuries, all in-person participants are reminded to keep their earpieces away from all microphones at all times. As indicated in the communiqué from the Speaker to all members on Monday, April 29, the following measures have been taken to help prevent audio feedback incidents.

All earpieces have been replaced by a model that greatly reduces the probability of audio feedback. The new earpieces are black in colour, whereas the former earpieces were gray. Please use only the black, approved earpieces. By default, all unused earpieces will be unplugged at the start of the meeting.

If you're not using your earpiece, please place it face down on the middle of the sticker for that purpose that you will find on the table as indicated. Please consult the cards on the table for guidelines to prevent audio feedback incidents.

The room layout has been adjusted to increase the distance between microphones and reduce the chance of feedback from an ambient earpiece.

These measures are in place so that we can conduct our business without interruption and to protect the health and safety of all participants, including the interpreters.

In accordance with the committee's routine motion concerning connection tests for witnesses, I am informing the committee that all witnesses have completed the required connection tests in advance of the meeting.

I'd also like to make a few comments for the benefit of all members and witnesses.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For members in the room, please raise your hand if you wish to speak. For members on Zoom, please use the "raise hand" function. The clerk and I will manage the speaking order as best as we can, and we appreciate your understanding in this regard.

All comments should be addressed through the chair.

When there are 30 seconds remaining, I will raise my 30-seconds card. When your time is done, I'll raise another card suggesting that your time is done.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, November 27, 2023, the committee will resume its study on coercive behaviour.

Before we welcome our witnesses, I would like to provide a trigger warning. We will be discussing experiences related to violence and coercive control. This may be triggering to viewers with similar experiences. If you feel distressed or need help, please advise the clerk. For all witnesses and for members of Parliament, it is important to recognize that these are difficult discussions, so let's try to be compassionate in our conversations.

At this point, I would like to welcome our witnesses.

From the Salvation Army, we have Barbara Ridley, executive director, governing council at Sudbury Cedar Place; and Taylor Briscoe, assistant director, public affairs.

As an individual, we have Carmen Gill, professor, department of sociology, University of New Brunswick, joining us by video conference.

From the Women of the Métis Nation, we have Lisa Pigeau, director of intergovernmental relations, also joining us by video conference.

Each organization will have five minutes for opening remarks followed by a round of questions.

At this point, I will give the floor to Ms. Ridley and Ms. Briscoe.

You will have five minutes to share. Please go ahead.

Ms. Barbara Ridley (Executive Director, Governing Council, Sudbury Cedar Place, Salvation Army): Good afternoon, Madam Chair and committee members. On behalf of the Salvation Army, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak with you on the committee's study of coercive behaviour. We are honoured to represent the voices of the women and families we serve who too often have found themselves without a voice.

My name is Barbara Ridley. I'm currently executive director of the Sudbury Cedar Place women and family shelter in Sudbury, Ontario. Prior to this, I worked in community and hospital settings, providing training across the province on the subjects of women, addiction, mental health and trauma.

At Cedar Place we provide shelter to 28 women, children and families. Each night our beds are full. Nearly all individuals we serve have experienced coercive violence, children included. In our city, with a population of over 168,000, police respond to an average of eight intimate partner violence-related incidents a day. These numbers have climbed steadily since 2013, with the Greater Sudbury Police Service responding to 2,846 incidents annually.

When these incidents occur, the police call us. We do everything we can to meet the increasing demand on our emergency shelter. This represents similar trends across the country. The Salvation Army provides nearly 4,000 shelter beds nightly, with 439 serving women and 79 serving families across Canada. When a woman or a family arrives at our door, there is a unique history of trauma that arrives with them. Coercion is undoubtedly a part of their history. These acts become particularly egregious when children are involved.

I think of Mary, who finally had the courage to leave her partner after 10 years of extreme isolation from family and friends and continuous daily rants. How would you feel as a mother, hearing your partner call you a slut or an idiot every day in front of your children? These types of rants were coercive behaviour to ensure that she would stay. Sadly, she arrived at the shelter without her children, wrongfully believing she would not be able to financially provide for them. All she knew was that she feared for her life.

Coercion creates generational trauma. As the committee considers changes to the Criminal Code of Canada, we hope that a re-examination of family law is not forgotten. Children deserve their own legal protection. We would encourage the creation of a stand-alone law that further punishes the coercion of children through threats, manipulation, intimidation and isolation.

Concurrent with legal changes, there needs to be a substantial investment in an educational campaign, created and distributed in partnership with social and legal service providers, to empower individuals with the knowledge that such laws exist and how they can seek protection.

I think of Susan, who arrived at our shelter with a lack of knowledge about her rights and services that kept her prisoner within her own home. She represents the thousands of women who remain hopeless without knowledge.

It is an incredible act of bravery to seek protection from abuse. We must ensure that the act of reaching out in itself does not deter or retraumatize the individuals. Healing from coercive abuse requires long-term, continuous support services. Every step in this process increases the risk these women face.

The women we serve ask for the steps to be centralized for ease of access, safety and rapid response. Legal protections and survivor support services are critical, but they also represent that abuse has happened. The Salvation Army advocates for a root cause approach with increased investment in housing and social service provision

so that dignified and appropriate services can be provided to survivors and families in a timely and robust fashion.

In closing, I would like to share the story of every woman and child who enters our shelter and has suffered from coercive behaviours. They're all hoping for a fresh start. The average length of stay at Cedar Place has grown from 16 to 53 days over the last five years. The lack of rent geared to income or deeply affordable housing forces individuals to move out into the community into shared accommodations. Ultimately, many of them return to homelessness. In the rush to find safe housing, many find themselves in financially unstable situations. They too return to homelessness.

The lack of appropriate housing demands swift and decisive action, with legislation requiring capital investment to mandate, grow and preserve deeply affordable safe homes, including rent-geared-to-income housing.

● (1540)

Taylor and I are happy to provide further details and answers to any questions that you might have about the needs and the trends across the community.

We want to thank this committee for the opportunity to be a part of this study, and we look forward to the members' questions.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, and you're right on time.

Next I would like to welcome Carmen Gill.

You have five minutes.

Professor Carmen Gill (Professor, Department of Sociology, University of New Brunswick, As an Individual): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the members of the committee for inviting me to present in this meeting on coercive behaviour.

My research focuses on the police response to intimate partner violence, IPV, especially coercive control. As such, I conducted a survey with police officers on their perception of IPV involving coercive control. IPV is multi-dimensional in nature and encompasses numerous forms of violence. It is often seen as an episodic and a one-term event, failing to address the complexity of an issue involving repetitive tactics used by abusers.

Violent behaviour does not necessarily involve physical violence or a single incident, but instead consists of a repeated and continuous pattern of behaviour that occurs over lengthy periods of time. Regardless of the violence, when the violence starts, whatever it looks like, it is the abuser's way of maintaining control over his partner.

Since the criminal justice system primarily places emphasis on the evidence of physical violence, first responders are to find evidence of such violence. Consequently, there is neglect in questioning the context of the abuse and the harm caused within the situation, which results in coercive control being unaddressed or dismissed. It is almost impossible for police officers to recognize a deprivation of rights to freedom, the obstruction to liberty and the control situation.

The recognition of coercive control as an offence would finally be a recognition that power and control over an intimate partner is a crime against the person. This would allow those caught in an abusive relationship to report when they are experiencing abuse, even if it's not physical violence.

Police officers must assess whether a situation is considered as IPV and potentially criminal. At the same time, we're asking them to recognize the signs of coercive control. Their assessment is twofold. On one hand, police officers are to determine if it is an isolated incident that is situational and caused by tension that led to a conflict escalation. On the other hand, they must assess if the situation involves a controlling pattern from the abuser, which would not be an isolated incident.

Coercive controlling behaviour is not always visible to outsiders and demands a deeper interaction with the survivor to determine the pattern in place. These patterns are built up over time and characterized by a combination of different tactics to control the intimate partner. It encompasses three pillars under which various behaviour can be identified. The first is the denying of resources or rights. The second is surveillance and micro-regulation. Finally, it is the manifestation of violence.

Coercive control blends into intimate relationships and is normalized in our society. It appears so normal that even survivors may consider that they are not abused because they were not physically assaulted. Identifying coercive controlling behaviour is like putting together a puzzle. It makes sense once the pieces of the puzzle relate to one another. Every professional working with survivors is in the delicate position of going beyond what they see on scene or what they consider what is IPV to ensure that they have a broad understanding of the context of the situation.

I think the revised Bill C-332 illustrates some of these tactics that can allow identification of such behaviour. How do you read a situation without visible physical violence? To optimize their response, police officers need to have a clear understanding of those behaviours and what they look like. They need to gather evidence that would not be looked for, and it starts by allowing identification of coercive control behaviour.

We have to remind ourselves that an enactment of coercive control offence will only be successful with support and adequate training of those who are going to implement it.

Thank you.

• (1545)

The Chair: Thank you very much for that.

At this point I would like to welcome Lisa Pigeau to speak for five minutes.

Ms. Lisa Pigeau (Director of Intergovernmental Relations, Women of the Métis Nation): Good afternoon.

My name is Lisa Pigeau. I'm the director of intergovernmental relations with Les Femmes Michif Otipemisiwak.

I'd like to acknowledge that I'm joining you today from Spencerville, and that I humbly reside on the traditional territories of the Anishinabe, Huron-Wendat, Haudenosaunee and Oneida peoples.

Les Femmes Michif Otipemisiwak, also known as LFMO, advocates nationally and internationally for the rights, needs and priorities of Métis women, youth, children and 2SLGBTQIA+ Métis.

Verbal assaults; threats; humiliation; isolation from friends, families and support networks; exploiting, spying, denying, blame-shifting, intimidation, punishment, tracking, a pattern, not a single incident: These are all terms that can be included in the definition of coercive behaviour. Is this an inclusive list? No, it's not.

The problem is, how do you prove a pattern of controlling behaviours when the impacts are insidious and one may not realize they're experiencing coercive behaviour and report it. More often, it may not be realized until physical violence ensues. Almost two-thirds of Métis women self-report experiencing physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. Nearly half are survivors of intimate partner violence.

Canada has used as an example a bill passed in the U.K. about controlling and coercive conduct. What the U.K. bill does not consider is the specific implications around Métis women and the historically strained relationship with police and other colonial processes. Pair this with the fact that systemic racism is still rampant in all structures that are intended to protect us.

Upon criminalization of coercive behaviour, will police officers be able to assess intimate partner violence situations that do not present the physical violence when they arrive on scene? Will they have enough understanding of the dynamic to see whether someone is in a potentially harmful situation?

It must also be asked in what scenarios outside of intimate partner violence women and gender-diverse folks face coercive control. Can it be experienced in an employment scenario or in health care systems? Yes—we see this in the case of forced and coerced sterilizations and in other systems.

The burden of proof will always fall upon the victim, who must try to convince authorities that they have been coercively controlled.

The emphasis on physical violence and injuries in risk-assessment tools leads to the minimizing of non-physical violence. Interpretation is further complicated by systemic racism and further compounded by the individual biases of persons in positions of authority.

At the same time, we hear of an increase in threats utilizing technology, such as text messaging and social media channels. A fundamental concern that has been raised by Les Femmes Michif Otipemisiwak is that reports of IPV are often weaponized against women and gender-diverse folks. This is the case when child welfare is brought in. The victims have already been threatened by the abuser that if they call the authorities they will lose their children. One may not feel that their interests will be protected if they report physical violence let alone coercive behaviour. Further to this, LFMO supports a ban on parental alienation accusations in order to protect women and children in family court. Parental alienation is used to silence mothers and children who report family violence.

What is required to counteract coercive behaviour is a vigorous plan for information sharing, training, education and awareness. Solutions to coercive behaviour require broad investment in the transition health sector, health care and education systems, community services, housing, and justice.

LFMO has several recommendations with respect to combatting coercive behaviour.

We'd like to see a scaling-up of distinctions-based, wraparound cultural supports; a guaranteed livable income with no service cuts; expanded access to secure, no-barrier housing; increased access to food security, transportation, holistic health care, education, and child care; access to free, responsive legal services; the decriminalization of survival; and the banning of parental alienation accusations against the mother in family violence cases.

LFMO remains committed to pushing back against wider systemic oppression that supports conditions for violence to flourish and that makes access to justice and care for Métis women and gender-diverse people even more difficult.

Thank you.

• (1550)

The Chair: Thank you, all, for your opening remarks.

We will now move on to our first round of questions.

[*Translation*]

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

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

Ladies, thank you for taking the time to enlighten us on the subject of coercive behaviour.

Ms. Gill, since we began the study, everyone has told us about the difficulty regarding the burden of proof, which rests on the shoulders of the victim. It's extremely difficult, because it's hard

enough to identify these behaviours upstream and to prove them in a court of law. The very fact of reporting it to the police is already a challenge, and submitting the evidence in the judicial process is another.

To your knowledge and from all your research, will criminalizing coercive control really make things easier? We currently have Bill C-332 on the table, which is very interesting. Will its adoption make it easier for women to denounce behaviour, to be believed by the police, to win their cases and to convince a judge that they have been victims of coercive behaviour?

• (1555)

Prof. Carmen Gill: First of all, if the bill says that a certain number of repeated behaviours must be determined, police officers are going to have the precise tools to better investigate this type of offence and ask a certain type of question. The burden of proof won't rest solely on the victim, but also on the police officer, who will be able to gather evidence that doesn't necessarily involve injury or property damage. He will ask more targeted questions about coercive behaviour. Body language can also be analyzed. If police officers are wearing body cameras, a number of recorded elements can be used later. Crown prosecutors, among others, in Quebec—

Mrs. Dominique Vien: Excuse me for interrupting, Ms. Gill, but are you talking about cameras in the house? I may have misunderstood.

Prof. Carmen Gill: No, I'm talking about the cameras worn by the officers of certain police departments on their uniforms when they intervene. That can provide evidence. Evidence can also include emails, statements from relatives showing that the victim is no longer in contact with them, or testimonials from friends. So the burden of proof won't necessarily rest solely on the victim.

Mrs. Dominique Vien: You talked about a series of tools, investigative strategies that could be facilitated. I'll have several questions for the Salvation Army later.

A woman, whose name I've unfortunately forgotten, was talking to us about training for Crown prosecutors and judges. Yet on Tuesday, we heard some pretty startling testimony from a victim, who said she didn't know if this training would change anything. Personally, do you believe in the training?

Prof. Carmen Gill: It's essential, that's obvious. We won't be able to enshrine an offence of coercive control in the law if we don't train the people who work in the justice system. It starts with police officers, so that they know what coercive control is. It will also have to be done for Crown attorneys, defence counsel and judges.

Mrs. Dominique Vien: Thank you, Ms. Gill.

You spoke of three pillars: deprivation, surveillance and the manifestation of violence. You confirm that my notes weren't bad. Do these three pillars necessarily have to come together, or is one of them enough to say that we're dealing with a case of coercive behaviour?

• (1600)

Prof. Carmen Gill: You can do micromanagement and surveillance, and there may not be any manifestation of physical violence. When I say coercive control, it implies both non-physical violence and physical violence. All three elements don't have to be present to be in the presence of coercive control; even if there's only surveillance, that's enough.

Mrs. Dominique Vien: Time goes by so fast, Ms. Gill. I've taken up all my speaking time to chat with you.

I had a lot of questions for the other witnesses, but I'm sure my colleagues will raise them.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Dominique.

Anita, you have six minutes.

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

I want to thank all of the witnesses for being here.

I'd like to start my questioning with you, Ms. Gill. You were talking about the research you've done, particularly on perceptions and with police. One thing we've heard in this committee on the issue of criminalization of coercive control is that without the wraparound services, it could actually backfire and be used against the women.

You mentioned that sometimes the survivors themselves are not even aware that they are victims of this until maybe afterwards, when they start seeing others. In that case, how difficult would it be, if there were a criminal offence, for that kind of enforcement by the police? What would we need to have, if we did do that, to make sure that it didn't get used in ways that would actually harm women?

Prof. Carmen Gill: Thank you for the question.

I think more and more as we're talking about coercive control we're raising awareness within the population. What I'm seeing is that women are calling me and asking when this will be criminalized. I already know, from doing round tables with police officers, that they are looking for something. They understand that there's something happening when they respond to a scene, but the situation is not criminalized because they don't have the evidence that they are supposed to find—physical violence, injuries, damage to the property. They are left with nothing.

Whether we criminalize coercive control or not, police officers need to better document the situation even if it's not criminalized. If they are to understand what coercive control is, they can better support the victim and also potentially refer the perpetrator somewhere.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Thank you very much.

I have a question for Ms. Ridley and the Salvation Army.

You're seeing these women, these survivors, very quickly, and the children as well, when they're trying to get out of these situations. What do you see as the gaps in being able to help people who have been subject to coercive control, not just to get out but also to be able to stay out and not go back? More importantly, how do we prevent it in the first place?

Ms. Taylor Briscoe (Assistant Director, Public Affairs, Salvation Army): Thank you for the question.

I think, as you said, it's a systemic approach to creating a sustainable solution. As Barb said, for many of the women who enter our shelter, their length of stay has increased. We've gone from 15 or 16 days to up to 53 days that they have to stay, because there is that gap in the spectrum of housing supply in that supportive, deeply affordable space.

That is the space these women need to enter, because there is an aspect of financial control. They haven't had access to the funds. They haven't been allowed to work. They need an affordable rental, and that supply has been drying up. We need increased investment in that space, absolutely. We don't want individuals to stagnate in their survival process. Once they have reached out for help, if there's not continuous momentum, there is a real danger that they will go back to their abuser. That's why we need to have the supply, so that they can move quickly through.

The other side of that is the support services. These are lifelong support services. This is an abuse that puts a mark on your soul for the rest of your life. It opens up on a random Tuesday. It opens up on special occasions. It's a piece that will live with you.

What we're seeing for the immediate service need is that we're looking at a community hub model. We spoke about the dangers: I'm having to go to a lawyer to seek custody; I'm going to the shelter to see how I can have housing support; I have to go to someone else to see an employment counsellor. Every time I leave, my life is at risk. How do we centralize these services into one location, or somehow into a community hub model, so that there's one place I can go and access all of my services and I'm not at risk long term?

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: It sounds like these women are very courageous. Thank you for for that.

Ms. Barbara Ridley: Can I add just one more thing?

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Yes. Then I have a question for Ms. Pigeau.

Ms. Barbara Ridley: I'll make it quick.

What we do know for sure is that the police definitely need further education on this. I also know that we need a really robust education plan throughout our country so that women know what it is and actually feel safe enough to get the help they desperately need.

Thank you.

• (1605)

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: It's very important.

Ms. Pigeau, very quickly I want to go back to the idea of criminalization, because, of course, that would require law enforcement, and I know that the relationship between indigenous peoples and Métis peoples and law enforcement is sometimes one of distrust. Do you think that criminalization might aggravate that relationship with the police?

Ms. Lisa Pigeau: I do think that historical trauma and that relationship with policing will be impacted by criminalization. There's already an existing fear that women and gender diverse folks have, so when police intervene in probably one of the most difficult scenarios in a woman's or a gender-diverse person's experience, they will be leery of disclosing everything.

When you talk about a pattern of coercive behaviour, how can we get one, two, five, 10 or 50 years of experience with an abuser out in the very short scenario that the police officer is intervening in? I do think that the relationship will complicate that further in allowing a woman or gender-diverse person to speak their truth.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Thank you very much, I appreciate that.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

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

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

Ladies, thank you for your testimony today.

To the ladies representing the Salvation Army, I'm still a little shocked by these figures you provided in your opening remarks. On the other hand, as more and more cities and municipalities declare intimate partner violence to be an epidemic, it's not all that surprising. These figures confirm that the situation is a plague. Perhaps they even represent only the tip of the iceberg if we take into account all those women who dare not denounce the violence they suffer.

Ladies, we've met a few times and I've seen all the work you do, including on the matter of human trafficking. Last night, I attended an event and came away with a document that explains all the work you do to help victims of human trafficking and domestic violence escape. On the same occasion, you invited me to visit a Salvation Army shelter in Montreal in the near future. If I were to visit this shelter, what more could I learn about coercive control that might be useful to our current study?

[*English*]

Ms. Taylor Briscoe: Thank you very much.

I'll [*Inaudible—Editor*] as well, but I think especially coming to see.... We encourage all to visit with their local.... We're in 400 communities—

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Madam Chair, could you please stop the clock? I can't hear the interpretation.

[*English*]

The Chair: Please continue speaking, just random words, so we can see if the translation is working.

Ms. Taylor Briscoe: Yes, absolutely.

As I was saying, we're in 400 communities, so we encourage everyone in this room to reach out and visit with their local Salvation Army footprint—

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Ms. Larouche, is the problem solved?

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Yes.

The Chair: All right.

Ms. Briscoe, please continue.

[*English*]

Ms. Taylor Briscoe: —to see the human impact, because we speak to trends, but there's also power in individualized stories. It speaks to the need for a robust, systematic approach to housing and social services, because each woman's need and each child's need are different. There are trends that we speak to and we encourage, but that would be the power in visiting the shelter.

I'll allow Barb to share the true power of visiting.

Ms. Barbara Ridley: Well, you certainly would be welcome, first off.

Madam Chair, through you, there's a lot to learn when you enter a shelter. I've been working in the shelter for a year and a half now, and it has been an awesome time of learning. What I know is that many of the women do not even know that they're being abused. They just see it as somehow they've done something wrong or they're not enough, and that is why this coercive behaviour has continued.

I think the other part is that there are many women who are in the shelter who have experienced physical violence, and it's easier to see, but what's not so easy to see is the impact that it's had on the children who enter our services. They're many times quiet, shy, tearful and cranky at times, and these children have been impacted to the point that sometimes, when they have to go to visit their parent, their behaviour changes the following day, and it can be long term.

The impact is huge, and you'd be more than welcome to come to visit us.

Thank you.

• (1610)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Thank you very much, ladies. I'll try to get back to you later, as I have more questions.

Ms. Gill, in response to my colleague, Mrs. Vien, you were going to talk about an example in Quebec, but, in the end, there was another question. Could you come back to it and tell us a little more about it?

Prof. Carmen Gill: Yes, of course.

We were talking about training for police officers, Crown prosecutors and judges. In Quebec, the director of criminal and penal prosecutions has adopted a definition of coercive control, and Crown prosecutors must now take controlling behaviours into account. To better demonstrate these behaviours, coercive control training is offered in Quebec for better judicial practice. Unlike the rest of Canada, police officers are already being trained. The training is provided by the Regroupement des maisons pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale, which has also offered it to the director of criminal and penal prosecutions.

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: I know this was a recommendation of the "Rebuilding Trust" report. I've had exchanges with MNAs in Quebec City, who explained that training in coercive control was a recommendation, but that criminalizing these behaviours was more of a federal responsibility. I know there are specialized courts. So I imagine that this training, which is being tested in Quebec right now, stems from that recommendation.

Prof. Carmen Gill: I don't know if it stems from specialized courts. Just about everywhere in Canada, there are specialized courts that hear cases involving family violence and domestic violence, and, in Quebec, sexual violence as well. Clearly, the professionals who work in these specialized courts are going to need to be trained to better understand coercive control.

[English]

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you.

Leah, you have six minutes.

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

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

My first question is for Madam Ridley or Ms. Briscoe.

We have a lot of shelters in my riding, and one of the things we've pushed for is low-barrier spaces, even for people fleeing violence. Is your space low-barrier?

Ms. Taylor Briscoe: Yes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: It is? So you can consume substances and still be allowed in?

• (1615)

Ms. Taylor Briscoe: Yes. We have lockers on the outside where individuals can put their paraphernalia or whatever, but they can come in. We only ask that they do not use in the house, because we do have children there.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Great.

I asked that because there's a lot of rhetoric right now. I know that, particularly for people who are dealing with violence, it's not uncommon to use substances as a coping mechanism, so I'm very happy that you provide that service.

You spoke a little bit about rent geared to income. I actually have a bill on the floor to put in place a guaranteed livable basic income. What I said in my speech yesterday was that we can talk in the House about wanting to deal with gender-based violence, but if we don't provide people with the resources they need when we know

there are real solutions, we are doing a disservice to people in the country.

Would you agree that one of the things that's needed, if we're really going to tackle gender-based violence, is a guaranteed livable basic income?

Ms. Taylor Briscoe: Thank you for the question.

Policies that put money back into the hands of those in need are the ones where we've seen the most success with moving our individuals to sustainability, whether it's a guaranteed basic income approach....

We've also seen the building-block approach. We have individuals in our shelters across Canada benefiting from the disability benefit. We've seen that provinces that have raised social assistance rates are seeing more success, so policies that do put the money back, versus a tax deduction at the end of the year, are more successful.

We have also seen that there's a lot of infrastructure that needs to go with that. There are automatic filing programs that we have partnered with. We file taxes every year to ensure that individuals do receive those benefits.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Madam Briscoe, I think you also spoke about the long-term impacts of gender-based violence, including coercive control.

I met a woman—I'm going to say this very quickly—who was fleeing violence, had her kids there and was not able to deal with her feelings about that violence because she had to work at a minimum-wage job. She just had to go to work to support her kids. She had no ability to deal with her trauma. She came up to me—actually, I hate these stories because they sound political, but it was true, because it was about a guaranteed livable basic income—and she said, "Thank you: I need that so I can heal."

Do you think that providing those kinds of financial supports is critical, in addition to things like rent geared to income, if we are going to support individuals so that they will actually be able to leave and then get the healing they might require to move forward in a way that is safer? I don't want to use judgmental terms, but "free from violence"....

Ms. Taylor Briscoe: Yes. It allows for more resilience, I would say. That's how I characterize it. It allows them to continuously access the services they need without having to compromise on their choices, the tough choices that a mother will always make. She'll always put her children first, so it will be, "I'll feed my children and I won't get the care I need." We can eliminate those decisions.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much.

My next question is for Madam Gill.

We know, for example, that police are often not allowed to drop people off at shelters because there are high rates of violence among police officers and often the shelters want to keep those locations secret. Did your research involve the amount of police that are actually involved in cases where they are the perpetrators of domestic violence?

Prof. Carmen Gill: That's an excellent question, but no, I have not studied the issue of police officers that are perpetrators themselves.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I ask that because what we've seen in other studies—and I'll follow up with you afterwards, Madam Pigeau—is that police are often not in a good position to make those assessments. They need training. I know you mentioned that.

What concerns me more is that they can often be involved in the violence. Instead of having police do it, do you think it would be more helpful to have mental health professionals make the assessments when they know there are cases of domestic violence, and to lead the interventions?

Prof. Carmen Gill: Not necessarily, because, for example, in some police agencies, they do have special units. They have special investigators who are going to work with victims, but we really need to be able to remove police officers when we start knowing that they are involved themselves in abusing their spouses. That's clear to me. This is something that police agencies are responsible for doing. Without removing those police officers, we're just jeopardizing the victims.

• (1620)

The Chair: Thank you. At this point, the time is up.

Terrific.

Next, we have Michelle Ferreri.

You have five minutes.

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

Thank you so much to the witnesses for being here today as we continue our study of coercive control.

For my first question, I'll go right to Ms. Ridley or Ms. Briscoe from the Salvation Army. One of the issues we have from a justice system perspective is that we don't actually have a definition, or a legal definition, of coercive control.

Based on your experience and the testimony you've provided today, you've brought up some very valid points. A lot of these survivors and people living in this right now don't actually know that they're in a coercive control relationship. Often, it's generational: That was the relationship that was shown to them as children. They think that is what is normal.

Often, you're dealing with highly manipulative people who tell you that you're good and who hang on to you, but then take that away from you. It's a difficult thing to describe to somebody if they've never dealt with it or experienced it.

My first question would be, how would you define coercive control? I can give you a reference that we have if you want it, but if you already have one, I'd love to hear it.

Ms. Taylor Briscoe: A reference would be fine. We can comment on that as well.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: There is a bill. It's Bill C-332, which is an act to amend the Criminal code. One part of it references coercive conduct as "including a fear of violence, a decline in their physical or mental health or a substantial adverse effect on their day-to-day activities."

Ms. Taylor Briscoe: In addition to that, part of the definition we provide is the inclusion of specific acts, such as threats, intimidation or isolation, as well as a separate piece for the application of those against children and weaponizing the removal of children.

We see that it does increase the education of what constitutes abuse for women. We don't ever want to be too prescriptive, because it simply gives the abuser a way to innovate. That's the balance of law that we need to be able to provide for all victims.

Those are incredibly important to include so that we do enumerate certain pieces. We extend that to the children as well to give them a lever to pull so that they can stand up and say, "This happened to me. It was a betrayal by my parent or protector, and this wasn't supposed to happen." They deserve that justice too.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Do you use the term "coercive control" with the folks using your services? Are they familiar with it?

Ms. Barbara Ridley: We have just started using that term. Before that it was "intimate partner violence" or "domestic violence". It is a new term, and we have been using it.

To the women and children who come to us, we explain it as repetitive behaviour that is silent and not an act of overt violence. It's controlling, such as needing the phone to see whom they called. That repeated behaviour is what we term "coercive behaviour". It's very effective, because that's when women start saying, "Oh, that happened to me."

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: They have to make that connection.

I like that you reiterated that it's a pattern. I think we've heard that from other witnesses.

Do you think it's beneficial to replace "domestic violence" with "coercive control", or do you think they're interchangeable?

Sometimes the wording in itself can create confusion.

Ms. Barbara Ridley: I see that domestic violence can include a child to a parent or a grandparent, aunt or uncle. It's familial violence, whereas intimate partner violence is between a couple who is intimate. There's also coercive control. I like the three terms, because coercion is that silent killer, that silent violence. Many people are unaware that it's wrong. They think, unless they've been hit, kicked or spat upon, that it hasn't happened, but, in fact, it has.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Can you just touch on your housing? I think that's critical.

Can we get on record your recommendations, that you'd like to see more affordable, safe housing, and what you'd like to see the government do to achieve that?

Ms. Taylor Briscoe: [*Inaudible—Editor*] we're talking about supply all across the country, and there's a large focus on supply for ownership purposes. There needs to be an equal focus now and investment on the creation and the maintenance of current affordable supply. That includes investments in the entire spectrum: emergency, transitional and supportive shelters. That's what we would be calling for.

● (1625)

The Chair: Thank you.

Emmanuella, you have five minutes.

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

I'd like to thank all of our witnesses for being here to answer some questions today.

I'm going to start with Ms. Pigeau.

You spoke about indigenous women, girls and gender-diverse people. You expressed some concerns with criminalizing coercive control. You also spoke about the different experience that indigenous women have had when dealing with the police. That's something we've heard many times at this committee.

I'm wondering if you can speak a little more to what particular recommendations you would make to our committee for us to put forward in this study on coercive control, in particular, with regard to the fact that when women sometimes go to the police or the authorities, their children may be taken away from them. That is also something we've heard from witnesses at this committee.

It is crazy that this happens in this day and age, and I'm wondering if you could speak a little to that and talk about what protections we can be recommending here to make sure that whatever it is we end up doing, doesn't negatively impact this community.

Ms. Lisa Pigeau: Undoing what's happened over 200 years is not going to happen overnight. The systemic oppression that we've experienced isn't going to go away with the criminalization of behaviour. Our recommendations would be around awareness, both for persons who may be experiencing coercive behaviour and also in terms of education within the systems, within the authorities, within policing, within justice, within health care. I think those are the primary recommendations to ensure that there are some other supportive safeguards around. There are other systems such as education and whatnot that would play an additional important role in curbing the coercive behaviours, but I think the issues that were raised as well by my fellow witnesses today, especially around housing and that barrier-free access...

The question of how you undo the 200 years, to undo the colonization, I'm not certain I could answer in this short of a time for you. I think the long and the short of it is involving us in the discussions, involving us in the change, involving us in the plans, and allowing us to find out the information, making attempts to repair challenging relationships. We see some movement towards that, but much more has to be done.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Thank you very much. I guess my question didn't really.... I didn't express it very well, but I appreciate your response.

I guess my next question is for Ms. Gill. You spoke about the fact that the criminal justice system needs to get more involved in order for this to be more effective, and you spoke about getting the police and the justice system to react to coercive control and to be able to act on it. Do you think that our criminal justice system is equipped to effectively respond to coercive control becoming a criminal offence?

Prof. Carmen Gill: Without training, without awareness about what it is, I'm not sure, but if you provide some tools, if you provide some information, if you do some sessions with different stakeholders, then you could be prepared for that.

I gave a presentation to the National Judicial Institute with judges. This is my third presentation in three years about coercive control, and they're looking at how they can see this in their profession. You already see there's a willingness to learn more about this, but we also need to recognize that it's not just the justice system that needs to be better equipped; it's also the health care system and social services that will need to be better equipped. I mean, everyone who is going to work with survivors and abusers needs to better understand what we're dealing with. It's a big undertaking, but it's one step at a time, and if I can surf on what Madame Pigeau was saying, we don't solve the issue overnight. We are dealing with systemic issues as well, so we need to take this into consideration.

● (1630)

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you.

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

[*Translation*]

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

Once again, I thank the witnesses for being with us today and contributing to this important study whose goal is to find a solution to the epidemic of domestic violence.

Ms. Pigeau, coercive control will obviously not be stemmed by a simple wave of a magic wand. We need to think about measures and the continuum of services that will need to be put in place.

We recently did a study on implementing a red dress alert. There's a lot of talk about training within police departments. Yet, to restore trust, it's essential to clearly explain what coercive control can be. As part of the study on the implementation of a red dress alert, I interviewed a witness representing indigenous people, who reminded me how important it was to work to rebuild trust with police officers and to train them properly so that they can contribute to this effort. What do you think?

[English]

Ms. Lisa Pigeau: I think it's an important step. We have to rebuild that trust with the system, especially policing. I think there has to be a shift from the view of policing being a punitive body, because that is the perspective of indigenous women. When police are involved, there's punishment involved rather than policing being a system that's there to support us and to bring us to safety.

How you make that shift involves many system players. It involves, really, just at the base, the involvement of all indigenous people and, more specifically, indigenous women.

[Translation]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Thank you very much.

I have less than 25 seconds of speaking time left, so I'm hoping someone can answer my question in 10 or 15 seconds: How can we address this issue? Some people, including Ms. Gill, have talked about Bill C-332. What could be complementary to our study and this bill?

[English]

Ms. Taylor Briscoe: There are the legal changes in the Criminal Code, but family law is not to be forgotten. It completes the circle, and, really, with the issues that we're seeing and the concerns that have been raised at the committee of this coercion being used against victims, closing the loop with family law is really what's critical to ensure those protections and to address the concerns of children that they won't be further victimized.

The Chair: We were a little bit lenient there. We'll probably take that into consideration and not go with the full third round.

Leah, you have two and a half minutes to finish this round.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much.

My last questions are for Madame Pigeau.

I have a bill that I put forward in the House. I began the first hour of debate on it at second reading yesterday. It's for a guaranteed livable basic income in response to call for justice 4.5 of the national inquiry.

Why is a guaranteed livable basic income so critical? Even in cases today, we're talking about coercive control, but I'm speaking in terms of assisting individuals trying to flee gender-based violence.

Ms. Lisa Pigeau: Part of that coercive control and behaviour is financial control that's held over our women and gender-diverse

folks. A guaranteed livable income would help to put women and gender-diverse persons on a good foot in starting out a life independent and free from violence.

We have to look at, in addition to the guaranteed livable income, those health supports that are required to make sure that they're in place, because all of those can be barriers.

• (1635)

Ms. Leah Gazan: I'm sorry, but I'll stop you there because I want to get to this point.

Would you recommend that a guaranteed livable basic income be put in place to support women fleeing abuse, including economic abuse and any other kinds of abuse, yes or no?

Could you respond, Ms. Pigeau? Ms. Pigeau, yes or no? Would you recommend that?

Ms. Lisa Pigeau: I apologize; my connection was unstable. I believe that, when I left, you asked me for my recommendation. It was yes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: As a critical piece for women fleeing violence, including economic abuse, coercive control and domestic abuse, would you recommend—

Ms. Lisa Pigeau: It's crucial.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Okay, thank you.

You can finish your last statement. I'm so sorry about that. I just wanted to get that on record.

Ms. Lisa Pigeau: On the guaranteed livable income, we look especially at M tis women having lower educational attainment and less of an ability to be able to earn a livable income while they're caring for their children. That includes multi-generational caregivers.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That will conclude our panel for today. On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank our witnesses for your sensitive testimony.

We will suspend for about five minutes to transition into in camera, the portion of the meeting to consider the draft report on women's economic empowerment.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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