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• (1720)

[*English*]

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

Welcome to meeting number 121 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women.

Before we begin, I would like to ask that all in-person participants read the guidelines written on the updated cards on the table. These measures are in place to help prevent audio and feedback incidents and to protect the health and safety of all participants, including the interpreters.

I'd also like to remind all members of the following points.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. All comments should be addressed through the chair, please.

Members, please raise your hand if you wish to speak, whether you're participating in person or on Zoom.

I would also like to acknowledge our regret for the meeting starting a little bit tardily. It was out of our control. I extend that regret to our witnesses who have been extraordinarily patient while we have been in the House, and also to those who are online watching.

As a reminder to all, we do have a short, 15-minute segment at the end of today's meeting to go over the subcommittee's report and a couple of other administrative items. Therefore, we will close off with witnesses with about 15 minutes remaining, so that we can go in camera for that.

Pursuant to standing—

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Dominique Vien (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis, CPC): I don't know if my device is the problem, but I can't hear anything, even though the volume is all the way up.

Ms. Andr anne Larouche (Shefford, BQ): I can hear just fine.

Mrs. Dominique Vien: It's not working for me.

The Chair: I think this is the same problem we had the other day.

Mrs. Dominique Vien: I'll try another one.

[*English*]

The Chair: I will continue to speak for a minute in English and see how the interpretation is.

Lisa.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Dominique Vien: It's good.

[*English*]

Ms. Lisa Hepfner (Hamilton Mountain, Lib.): You might want to advise our witnesses that we have another vote that may interrupt our meeting, just so that they're aware and not surprised if we break again in the middle of our testimony.

The Chair: I appreciate the heads up.

What Lisa acknowledged is that there may potentially be another vote in approximately 30 minutes. At this point we don't know, so we're going to carry on until the time. Indeed, if the bells do start to ring, then we'll deal with it then.

There is audio feedback. I don't know if anybody else is hearing it.

If I'm speaking, I'm just going to take my earpiece out so I don't hear myself, but if I need interpretation, I'll put it back on.

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

Before I welcome all the 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 indeed you feel distressed or need help, please advise the clerk.

For all of the witnesses and for members of Parliament, it is very important that we recognize that these are very difficult discussions. Let's try to be as compassionate as we can with our conversations.

At this point, I would like to welcome, from the Canadian Centre for Women's Empowerment, Meseret Haileyesus, founder and executive director, who is in the room.

We have the following witnesses by video conference.

From Horizon Women's Centre, we have Linda Lafantaisie Renaud, executive director.

From Juripop, we have Sophie Gagnon, executive director, and Justine Fortin, director of legal services.

We have, from Peel Regional Police, Nick Milinovich, deputy chief of police.

From Persons Against Non-State Torture, we have co-founders Linda MacDonald and Jeanne Sarson.

We also have, from Toba Centre for Children and Youth, Christy Dzikowicz, chief executive officer.

We will hear opening statements of up to five minutes from each organization represented here today. The opening statements will then be followed by rounds of questions from all members.

All of the witnesses who are online are here and we will be doing one panel this afternoon.

Mr. Marc Serré (Nickel Belt, Lib.): Can we see them?

The Chair: We don't see them online here.

At this point, let's welcome Ms. Meseret Haileyesus for the five minutes.

While we're hearing you, we can sort out the other witnesses so that we're able to see them online.

Please go ahead with your opening remarks. You have up to five minutes.

Ms. Meseret Haileyesus (Founder and Executive Director, Canadian Center for Women's Empowerment): Thank you.

Good afternoon. My name is Meseret Haileyesus. I am the founder and executive director of the Canadian Center for Women's Empowerment. We are the only Canadian not-for-profit organization that focuses on addressing all forms of economic abuse and economic injustice for survivors through system change, research and advocacy.

We appreciate being included in this important conversation on coercive behaviour. We know that things are changing quickly, but speaking as a founder and executive director, having as much time as possible to prepare for this appearance not only allowed us to prepare our knowledge, but it was also for our mental health.

CCFWE generally agrees with the finding of the report of the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights in 2021 that criminalizing coercive control could contribute to earlier prevention and intervention of intimate partner violence. However, we doubt that an offence alone can achieve the desired outcome.

Dear members, as you may know, many indigenous, racialized and other marginalized victims don't report less hidden forms of abuse and violence to the police because of previous problematic and traumatizing experiences with law enforcement. While this proposal may help, it leaves many without solutions, while potentially adding to it.

Reports from Australia on criminalizing coercive behaviour shows an increase in misidentifying aboriginal women as aggressors due to the systemic racism among police and the court system. Shockingly, the Queensland domestic and family violence death review found that almost half of all aboriginal women killed by inti-

mate partner violence were previously wrongly identified by police as the aggressors instead of their abusive partners when reporting violence.

As a Black-woman- and survivor-led organization, we strongly recommend that the federal government take a survivor-centred approach to any potential coercive control offence and let survivors with different intersectional realities, such as newcomers, immigrants, gender-diverse people, and indigenous, racialized, disabled, senior and young women, lead. I respectfully urge this standing committee to recommend a trauma-informed, anti-oppressive and feminist lens to any legislation on coercive control if its goal is to validate victims' experiences. The offence must be based on the notion that domestic violence and coercive control are rooted in gender inequalities and are predominantly committed by men against women.

Dear members, economic abuse is a very common but often overlooked form of domestic abuse. It's part of coercive controlling behaviour by an abuser to restrict a victim's financial independence through economic control, employment sabotage and economic exploitation. A lack of access to finance is commonly the main reason that victims stay in an abusive relationship or return to them. They cannot afford to leave. There is also the long-lasting impact, as economic abuse follows victims through poor credit scores, debt and other financial impacts.

Our organization's research, conducted in the Ottawa region in 2021, highlighted that 95% of victims experienced economic abuse, similar to findings in the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom. In addition to that, abusers demanded that 86% of victims quit their work; 93% of their abusers did not allow them to have their own money, taking away paycheques and financial aid; 90% of victims had decision-making power taken from them by their abusers; 90% of abusers threatened physical harm if the victim paid rent or other bills; and 84% of abusers had built up debt under the victim's name.

These reported tactics serve as crucial indicators of coercive controlling behaviour and must be included in any legal or policy measures. To raise awareness of this often hidden type of coercive control, CCFWE recommends that the government must declare November 26 as a national awareness day.

CCFWE believes the criminal justice system should be the last mode of intervention. It doesn't address the systemic issues that prevent abuse from happening or prevent victims from leaving abuse. Therefore, systemic change is needed before we criminalize coercive control.

We urge the federal government to show its commitment to ending gender-based violence and validating survivors' experience by adequately funding social services; providing additional shelters and affordable housing; increasing access to legal aid; investing in ongoing training and awareness-raising campaigns on the signs and nature of coercive control behaviour; and collecting disaggregated data on various forms of coercive control, including economic abuse.

Once again, I would like to thank the committee members for the opportunity to speak on this important topic.

• (1725)

I also want to congratulate you, Madam Chair, on your appointment to this role. We look forward to working together.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Point of order, Madam Chair.

There's no interpretation.

• (1730)

[*English*]

The Chair: I will continue to speak in English for a bit while we see if the interpretation is working.

Thanks you, Meseret, for attending and sharing your testimony.

Next, I would like to welcome Ms. Linda Lafantaisie Renaud. You have up to five minutes.

Thank you.

Ms. Linda Lafantaisie Renaud (Executive Director, Horizon Women's Centre): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would first like to thank the committee for allowing me this opportunity to speak today.

My name is Linda Lafantaisie Renaud. I am the executive director of the Horizon Women's Centre, or the Centre Horizon pour femmes, in Sturgeon Falls, Ontario. Ours is the only fully bilingual shelter in our region that offers francophone services 24 hours a day. Our services include a 10-bed emergency shelter, outreach and a transitional housing program. We are very unique in the fact that we offer in-house, trauma-based therapy in both official languages to women in our community who are survivors of partner violence.

I have worked at this agency for 34 years, and I have seen first-hand the detrimental effects that abuse has on women and their children. However, I have also seen many women and their children be able to live the life they truly deserve. Our work in violence against women's agencies can be very difficult, dangerous and discouraging, but it can also be the most rewarding at the same time.

Most women are now struggling to find affordable housing, and have been since COVID. They now face living a lot longer in shelters and long waiting times for social housing, even when they are approved for abuse priority by the housing authority. In our district, women have abuse priority. They now have a waiting time of well over one to two years. This contradicts the reason for instilling this abuse priority in the first place. The reality is that women and children are now finding accommodations that are not the safest but are

the most affordable for them, and/or they are now returning to their partners.

I have noticed through my experience that more often than not, some women do not realize the danger they are in. I believe we need more public awareness campaigns on coercive abuse so that women can escape these types of abusers earlier and so that women can see the warning signs. Most of the time, the abuse escalates from emotional to physical abuse and even threatening or killing their partner, as well as their children, when the abuser realizes she is leaving.

Women often arrive at our shelter truly broken. Many women have a hard time expressing—

Ms. Leah Gazan (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): I have a point of order, Madam Chair.

I apologize to the witness, but I'm having trouble hearing her with the headset. I'm a bit hard of hearing. I'm wondering if we can turn up the volume in the room so that I can hear her.

The Chair: Could we try to have the volume turned up in the room? Please make sure that no other microphones are turned on.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I'm getting older and I'm not afraid to admit it. I'm sorry.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos (Saint-Laurent, Lib.): I think this place has deafened a lot of us, to be honest.

The Chair: At this point, we'll go back to the witness. I'll just ask everyone to turn off their mics if they're not speaking, and we'll carry on.

Linda, obviously, you'll get back the last 30 seconds or so.

Go ahead.

Ms. Linda Lafantaisie Renaud: Thank you so much.

Women often arrive at our shelter feeling truly broken. Many women have a hard time expressing their needs and wants because most of them have been dictated to them by their abusers.

We see mothers struggling with their children, who are mimicking what they have witnessed, and we are faced at times with children who are physically and verbally abusive towards their mothers. The effect on children can oftentimes be seen when children of past residents are now seeking our services as adults because they are now victims of partner violence themselves. It's imperative that we work diligently to offer the most empathetic, supportive and empowering experience and to help them in being able to realize that they have the right to be free from abuse.

Forty-four per cent of women who have been in an intimate relationship experience abuse, indicated a Statistics Canada report in 2008. This does not shed light on how many women and children have been victims of sexual luring or trafficking and those who have not come forward or pressed charges due to fear of repercussions.

The amount of control that one single person can gain over another person is unimaginable to many, and there is no time limit to heal from the extreme trauma, effects and even dehumanization they have lived through. I will quote one woman's words that she stated to me: "It's not the physical and sexual abuse that he put me through that traumatically impacted my life. It's the 13 years of mental, emotional and financial abuse."

Abusers need to be held accountable. Some ex-partners have such a high need to control that we are now seeing women—mothers, mostly—being put through the most cruel type of abuse, and it's being done through their children.

Some children are being coerced and influenced negatively by the abuser to refuse visitations with their mothers, and partners are refusing visitation rights to their ex-partners because they know that police will not get involved, as most custody orders do not have police enforcement clauses. This leads to mothers not being able to see their children for months and having long delays in the judicial system. The abusers are now utilizing parental alienation to their advantage.

Our work in violence against women is critical in protecting women's and children's lives. My recommendations are as follows: to increase annual funding to violence against women's shelters and agencies to reflect the actual cost of living; that coercive control be recognized in the Criminal Code; and that we fund public awareness campaigns on coercive abuse and what it is and how it affects women and children.

I would also suggest consultations with Pamela Cross, who is a Canadian feminist lawyer and a women's advocate, as I believe that could be instrumental in effectively describing coercive abuse in legal terms and advising the committee on potential underlying or detrimental actions that can be used against women.

Thank you.

• (1735)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next, I would like to welcome Ms. Sophie Gagnon and Ms. Justine Fortin.

You have up to five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Sophie Gagnon (Executive Director, Juripop): Good afternoon, Madam Chair and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

Juripop is an organization whose mission is to improve access to justice for vulnerable people. It has been working with women who are victims of domestic and post-separation violence for several years. More specifically, it represents these individuals in their fam-

ily law proceedings involving custody, separation, and protective measures.

We've noticed that the victims we represent have one thing in common: coercive control is part of their domestic violence experience.

We know that conversations around coercive control have recently focused more on criminalization.

Juripop would like to draw your attention to an aspect that we feel is still neglected: the impact of coercive control in family law, particularly in divorce cases. Almost every day, our lawyers see that family law courts misunderstand coercive control. This lack of understanding has real and significant consequences for victims.

Too often, the women Juripop represents are revictimized by judicial decisions that ignore patterns of violent and controlling behaviour that manifest as coercive control.

Family law courts can unintentionally perpetuate coercive control through different types of decisions, such as shared custody orders. Shared custody orders may seem common and trivial, but in a situation where coercive control is present, they allow the violent parent to maintain control over the mother and children. For example, the violent parent may refuse to co-operate on decisions related to the children's education, health and activities, or force the victim to remain in contact with them and constantly negotiate all of those things. The abuser may also use parenting time to interrogate the children about the victim's private life or try to turn the children against the victim, which is why we say that children are also victims of coercive control.

It's also important to know that courts tend to reject our requests for accommodation to ensure victims' physical and psychological safety during their testimony because the courts don't understand the difficulties related to coercive control. These measures, such as the presence of an intervenor during a discovery interview or the option to testify by video conference, are automatically granted in criminal matters.

All the situations I just described compel our lawyers to make considerable efforts to educate the court about coercive control: how it's defined, what it looks like and its consequences. The resulting legal workload is heavy, the emotional burden great and the financial cost to victims high, but we believe this could be mitigated if the justice system itself had a better understanding of the phenomenon from the outset.

That is why we believe that legislative reforms are needed at the federal level, specifically through the Divorce Act. We recommend explicitly including coercive control as a factor judges must consider when making decisions affecting children or separation. We believe that such recognition could build on the work that was done by recognizing family violence in the Divorce Act, and it would offer better protection to victims, including children.

We also recommend that training for new judges include a component on coercive control. The current lack of training creates significant gaps in assessing the situations experienced by victims and often makes it impossible to take this reality into account in judicial decisions.

In conclusion, Juripop believes that family law should be a component of the committee's study on the criminalization of coercive control.

Thank you.

• (1740)

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

Next we have Mr. Nick Milinovich.

You have up to five minutes.

Deputy Chief Nick Milinovich (Deputy Chief of Police, Peel Regional Police): Good afternoon, and thank you.

My name is Nick Milinovich and I'm the deputy chief of investigative and emergency services command at Peel Regional Police.

I'd like to start by thanking the chair and members of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women for inviting us to participate today. I would also like to thank all the witnesses for sharing their perspectives and stories.

For those unfamiliar with Peel Regional Police, we are the third-largest municipal police service in Canada, serving the communities of Mississauga and Brampton as part of Peel Region. Peel Region is one of the most diverse communities in the country, with over 1.7 million residents. It is home to one of the largest international airports in North America, Pearson airport. Our community is also one of the largest transitory hubs in North America, with billions of dollars in goods transported through our region daily.

Because of this, issues such as intimate partner violence, human trafficking and gender-based violence collectively are a concern for our community. They are also prioritized by our police service through enforcement, prevention and making some of the largest investments in those spaces that any police service has in Canada. We have specialized human trafficking investigators who comprise our vice unit. It is one of the only services delivering specialized training for all of our frontline officers to enhance capabilities in identifying, preventing and safely intercepting incidents, with the victim's well-being and support as the main priority. Further, our vice team works with local colleges, community organizations and law enforcement agencies—including Pearson airport—to effectively monitor, stop and intervene in human trafficking across our region, the province and the country. In the last five years, our vice

unit has charged over 150 people with human trafficking-related offences.

Another primary focus of our police service is intimate partner violence. In 2023, our officers responded to over 9,500 incidents of family and intimate partner violence. That is the equivalent of almost 26 unique incidents a day.

I'm going to pause here and ask the committee and everybody participating and watching today...26 unique incidents per day. Now imagine all of the reverberating impacts on family members and the community from that 26 per day. Then you begin to understand the scope of this issue.

As I said, we laid 9,540 charges. The top five charges were assault, uttering threats, failure to comply with release orders or conditions of release, assault with a weapon, choking, suffocation or strangulation. Our data shows that roughly one woman a day in Peel is strangled by her partner. From January 1 to August 31, we had 297 strangulation occurrences. Of the 15 homicides we've had this year, three—20% of those—have been femicides. These are just the incidents that are reported. As everybody participating today, other witnesses and certainly police know, a greater number of incidents are occurring and continuing to be unreported.

At Peel, we have taken a survivor-centric approach to gender-based violence, inclusive of intimate partner violence and human trafficking. These are tragic, unacceptable incidents that carry unimaginable trauma for victims and survivors. Those victims and survivors are predominantly women and girls. This disproportionately impacts racialized women and girls, as well as members of our LGBTQIA+ community and people with disabilities. Each of these incidents is representative of the vulnerabilities we are seeing in our current system and the need to prioritize survivors in a system we ask them to rely on for protection.

In Peel, we have integrated our intimate partner violence unit with a variety of specialized, trained officers within the Safe Centre of Peel—I believe the committee heard testimony from its members before. It collaborates with 24 community partners who provide wraparound and integrated services and supports in one centralized location. This ensures victims and survivors are receiving the help they need for themselves and their families.

• (1745)

In April 2022, the joint deputation of our police service and Safe Centre of Peel also provided information to this committee for your study of intimate partner and domestic violence. It included a series of recommendations to address the gaps in the current system that were barriers and that were also creating risks for victims or survivors.

Presently, violence in family and criminal law is narrowly defined as physical—

The Chair: I'm sorry to interrupt.

Could I have you wrap up in the next 10 or 15 seconds? Then, if you have anything that you're missing, try to include it in any of the questions that are posed.

Thank you.

D/Chief Nick Milinovich: Absolutely. Thank you.

In conclusion, it is incumbent upon all of us, as a community that really cares, to ensure that the right measures and safeguards are in place, where survivors can feel safe and supported to remove themselves from these types of environments.

Currently, there are gaps, and there are reasons that legitimately concern survivors about coming forward. We need to begin addressing those.

Thank you again for inviting the Peel Regional Police to appear before the committee. I'm happy to take any questions.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

At this point, I would like to welcome Ms. Linda MacDonald and Jeanne Sarson.

You have up to five minutes.

Ms. Linda MacDonald (Co-Founder, Persons Against Non-State Torture): Thank you.

Jeanne Sarson and I are feminist grassroots activists working in Nova Scotia, Canada and globally, with 31 years of expertise in supporting women who have been subjected to non-state torture. We are also members of the NGO, the National Council of Women of Canada.

Coercive control is often a very large component of non-state torture. Keeping women captive and the coercion of older women is very invisible.

As a nurse, I supported a woman in her 80s who had been tortured and trafficked as a young mother, with her two little boys present, by men in a Nova Scotia fishing village where she lived. Escaping this torture, she brought up her family and remarried. After retiring, her second husband began coercing her by taking control of her money, isolating her from her family and friends, making intentional medication errors, dehumanizing her with constant psychological abuse and terrifying her by claiming she had memory loss.

These coercive control tactics triggered her into previous non-state torture flashbacks to the point that she became constantly triggered, losing control of her independence and eventually having to be placed in long-term care.

Coming from Nova Scotia provides our voices extra weight because we were participants in the Mass Casualty Commission inquiry after one man shot and killed 22 people, including 13 women.

Earlier this month, the Nova Scotia provincial government passed a bill declaring domestic violence an epidemic in Nova Scotia, which flows from the Mass Casualty Commission's findings about Nova Scotia and Canada. Coercive control is often combined with other forms of male violence against women, intimate partner or domestic violence, and if considered a serious crime, it can prevent suicide and fatal crimes such as femicide and even mass shootings.

As participants of the Mass Casualty Commission, we heard about the extensive coercion that the gunman forced onto his partner, making her terrified to leave him. She was also strangled by him, but this crime was not taken seriously.

Jeanne and I joined with other Nova Scotia feminists, recommending that coercive control become part of the Criminal Code of Canada. As persons against non-state torture, we recommended that strangulation and femicide, as distinct crimes, be added to the Criminal Code. We submit these recommendations again today.

As Anne Frank said, "What is done cannot be undone, but one can prevent it happening again."

• (1750)

Ms. Jeanne Sarson (Co-Founder, Persons Against Non-State Torture): I'll follow Linda.

Furthering our brief recommendation, promoting a victim-centred approach relating to children means creating the social-legal environment wherein children can speak of the impact that non-state torturers' coercive control manipulations have on them, on other children and against animals. Their safety is always threatened, creating never-ending vulnerability as described in Bill C-332.

Our brief introduced Carrie, whose father forced her to drown her pet kitten and threatened to drown her if she told of his torture trafficking.

Carrie is not alone. Alex's father took her to see baby rabbits. Hugging one, her father then took the rabbit and broke its neck. His message was clear. Alex said she knew never to tell that he was torture trafficking her. Alex was six years old.

The knowledge is that these perpetrators inflict coercive control within and outside of their home. Children's victimization can include the harming of animals. Non-state torturers' coercive control of their children includes intentionally inflicting no-win victimization ordeals in and out of their home.

Hope described how her father used to blackmail her by forcing her to allow him to orally rape her so her siblings would be fed. She wondered what choice she had.

Carrie described being forced to smear Margaret, another little girl, with perpetrators' body fluids so she would not have to consume their body fluids, saying that there was no way she could win. The decision left her feeling like she had harmed Margaret. She felt so guilty, ashamed, humiliated and terrified.

To end the epidemic of intimate partner violence against women, red flag indicators will be preventive interventions available to children if the torturer's m.o. of coercive behaviours is understood as involving their exertion of absolute domination, power and control in and out of their home; inflicting torture, terror, horror and dehumanization on their children and other children; and the harming of animals. As well, it is the possible involvement of organized criminal torture, trafficking and formal networks.

To Linda's recommendation I add support for Bill C-332 and the criminalization of non-state torture to expose the perpetrators' criminality.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, kindly, for your testimony.

Next, I would like to welcome Ms. Christy Dzikowicz.

You have up to five minutes.

Ms. Christy Dzikowicz (Chief Executive Officer, Toba Centre for Children and Youth): Thank you to the committee for providing me the opportunity to speak on such an important topic. My name is Christy Dzikowicz, and I'm the chief executive officer of Toba Centre for Children and Youth, a charitable organization and Manitoba's only child advocacy centre.

Child advocacy centres are child-friendly spaces in which law enforcement, child protection, prosecution, mental health, medical and victim advocacy professionals work together to investigate abuse, help children and their families heal from abuse and hold offenders accountable.

The first child advocacy centre was established in Huntsville, Alabama, in 1985, and the movement has been growing ever since. There are over 900 accredited child advocacy centres in the United States. We have over 40 in Canada, and there are centres in over 20 countries around the world. These centres are recognized around the world as the leading practice in responding to child abuse cases. However, I would suggest we have a long way to go in Canada in supporting these centres and ensuring the best outcomes for children.

Before I go further, I'd like to speak directly to the issue of child maltreatment. At our centre, we serve children, youth and their caregivers who experience child sexual abuse and physical abuse, and children who witness IPV and significant violence. There are approximately 200,000 child abuse investigations across Canada each year, and these are only the cases we know about—the ones that are reported. There are significant barriers to reporting, coercive behaviour being just one of them.

While I speak to issues impacting children, youth and their caregivers, as it is the focus of my life's work, I'd like to note to the committee that the majority of my comments today also speak directly to the experiences of vulnerable adult populations also impacted by interpersonal violence.

Child abuse is anything that intentionally endangers the development, security or survival of a child: the act of emotionally, physically or sexually harming a child. To be very clear, coercive behaviour is central to almost all of this criminal behaviour. A further impact of that coercive behaviour and inevitable abuse can be set-

ting children, youth and adults up for additional challenges in dealing with the criminal justice system. Abusers work very hard to silence their victims, take away their voice and disempower them. The system that is set up to respond must understand this and work in a coordinated fashion to ensure we are meeting the needs of the survivors.

Child advocacy centres are designed for this purpose, but in Canada we do not have any mechanism to enforce internationally recognized standards of practice.

In the United States, child advocacy centres must be accredited and prove that they are meeting minimal standards, which include a multidisciplinary response from the point of report, child forensic interviewing standards, inclusivity and diversity standards and victim support, amongst others.

At this point in time, it is up to folks like myself to convince partner agencies like law enforcement, child welfare agencies and medical centres that working together and demanding standards is a good idea. While I have no doubt that all folks working in this area would say they want to put children first, it is no easy task to change these old, large and institutionally based systems. It requires a great deal of humility for folks to step back and say they need to work differently and better.

All levels of government have tools at their disposal that can and should be used to demand that these standards be met through legislation; professional standards, like policing standards; and through funding of child advocacy centres to ensure all children in Canada have access.

When considering this testimony on coercive control, I also reflected on how poorly children, youth and those impacted by interpersonal violence fare in our criminal justice system. I believe that significant reform is both needed and possible. Again, victims in these cases have often been stripped of their voice and their confidence. Our criminal justice system is not set up to consider the needs of these vulnerable populations.

Child advocacy centres across Canada are working with their local prosecutors to try and facilitate closed-circuit testimony being offered from their centres. In Calgary and Edmonton, this practice is happening. In each jurisdiction, though, we have to start from the beginning to create precedent and enable this option. When we consider the coercive abuse endured by the victims we work with, we're struck by the horror of asking that child to enter into a room with their abuser and speak their truth in front of their abuser, their families, and strangers, and it seemed inhumane.

Psychologist Rachel Zajac has published a great deal of research outlining the failures of the courts to meet the needs of children.

She wrote:

Recent research has made it clear that cross-examination is unlikely to be the truth-finding technique that many believe it to be. Instead, the style of questioning typically used during this process directly contravenes almost every principle scientifically established over the past 30 years for obtaining complete and accurate evidence from any witness, particularly a child.

There are countries we can learn from in this area, with innovations like intermediaries in the U.K.

● (1755)

I cannot imagine anything more important than ensuring safe pathways, so victims of child abuse and IPV can come forward and proceed through a criminal justice process. Our failure to create environments that can effectively hear their outcries and respond with safety can be devastating. We are not just risking survivors being retraumatized by our response or disbelieved by our systems but also empowering those who are engaging in the coercive, abusive behaviours. A child or person who makes an outcry of abuse and then recants, either out of fear or coercion, is often more at risk. Offenders tell their victims they will not be believed.

While we must always seek the truth, we must do everything we can to create the safest possible pathways for our vulnerable populations.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you, all, for your opening remarks. At this point, we will move to our first round of questions.

We'll start with six minutes for Michelle Ferreri.

● (1800)

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

Thank you so much to the witnesses for being here today on our study of coercive control at the status of women committee. I see many familiar faces here. It's great to see some of you. I know this is a very tough topic. Thank you to those of you who have been here before and are testifying again.

Deputy Chief Milinovich, the testimony you provided here today was pretty shocking—9,500 IPV calls for Peel Regional Police, and 26 choking incidents every single day. Among these women being choked—they're primarily women—how many of the men choking them are out on bail?

D/Chief Nick Milinovich: Thank you for the question.

Certainly, in my opening remarks.... One of the things you might notice is that the issue of bail and repeat offenders continues to create some barriers for us as a police service when it comes to protecting survivors of intimate partner violence and a variety of other offences, as well. It's not the only issue, but it's certainly one of them. It creates some issues of confidence for survivors coming forward, and also for the police response.

I don't have exact numbers. However, what I can tell you anecdotally—I've been involved in this for 25 years—is that one of the concerns survivors have, at least among those we've dealt with, is this: When an offender is ultimately released, how are survivors go-

ing to be kept safe? Unfortunately, it's a legitimate concern, one we've seen play out tragically here in Peel—Darian Henderson-Bellman being a great example of that.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Would you be able, Deputy Chief, to table those numbers for the committee, if you have them? I think it would be very valuable for us to have them on record for this study.

I'm curious about whether you know this or have numbers—if you don't, could you table them?: You're the third-largest detachment in Canada. How many violent repeat offenders are at large? I know you said that, of the five primary calls you get, number three is violating bail or release restrictions.

How many are at large, and you don't know where they are?

D/Chief Nick Milinovich: That is a number, again, that would be large. It would be very difficult for us to collect that, because people can attend courts in other jurisdictions and be released here in Peel.

To help frame that up, we have a specialized unit that focuses almost exclusively on violent repeat offenders in possession of firearms involved in a variety of things—everything from human trafficking, drug trafficking and carjackings. Of the percentage arrested by that unit, roughly half of them have already been released since their arrest. That's in 2024.

Among high-risk violent repeat offenders currently in our region, there are approximately, I want to say, in or around 790. Those are offenders who, in our region alone, have been released from the federal system. However, I can absolutely collect and confirm those numbers.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thank you so much for that data. It's truly shocking. It's a public safety crisis at large.

I had the pleasure to meet two lovely women, Linda and Jeanne. They have a very powerful book. Obviously, it's very upsetting testimony they provide. One of the shocking things they said to me was that parents are trafficking their children. Parents are torturing their children. I think that is a very hard fact for a lot of us to comprehend or believe.

I had the privilege of touring the Toba Centre. It's an incredible centre. Everybody from across Canada should go and see what Christy has done. She is a remarkable human in what she has done.

Christy, how do we hold these parents accountable? To your point, for so many victims and children you see, it is in fact a parent or someone they know who is abusing them. What are the best consequences in those instances? We know parent reunification is often ideal, but these children are being abused and tortured.

Ms. Christy Dzikowicz: Thanks for the question.

I think we do know that the vast majority of abuse takes place by someone a child knows. Whether it's a parent or somebody in their family or in their network of care, it's typically a person the child trusts.

In terms of centres, I'm not really speaking for our centre here in Winnipeg, Manitoba, specifically, but having access to these types of environments across our country is essential. Most kids don't have access despite the fact that we have great centres in most major cities. Our criminal justice system, although this is not a critique of the individuals within it, is not a friendly environment for kids to come forward. In order to provide kids with the best chance to share with us what's going on, so that we can uncover what's going on, we need to—

● (1805)

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Christy, I'm so sorry. I have only 30 seconds left, and I want you to tell them the set-up you have there where those children are able to testify. I just want you to put that on the record. What I witnessed there was remarkable. They didn't have to go into court and face their abuser. I'd like you to put on the record what you've set up at the Toba Centre.

Ms. Christy Dzikowicz: We have closed-circuit testimony set up, as do Calgary and Edmonton. One of the comments in my remarks was that it's an uphill battle to create precedent within each jurisdiction, but we do have the environment where kids can come back to the safe space. They can provide their testimony remotely and not have to enter into a courtroom with their abuser. They can return to a centre like ours, where they provided their initial statement, and have some sense of safety.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Christy and Michelle.

Marc, you're next. You have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

I'm sincerely grateful to the six witnesses who are with us today.

It has already been pointed out that some of you have testified before the committee in connection with other studies, but what we're hearing today about coercive control is troubling. We need to do better and find ways to look at the specific things that have been discussed today.

My first question is for Ms. Lafantaisie Renaud. I salute the Horizon Women's Centre for the work it has been doing for some 30 years in West Nipissing. I've visited the centre, and I know how dedicated you and your staff are to the community.

We tend to hear from a lot of witnesses from urban centres who have access to many nearby resources. It's a little different for you, because your centre is located in a small municipality. Not only

does it provide services in English and French, but a large proportion of its clients are first nations. So you have three specific types of clients.

Can you tell us about the challenges in terms of resources or the lack thereof to help people? The centre is located four hours from Toronto, and Sudbury and North Bay are pretty far away by road.

What challenges do you face when you're trying to help women and children, in terms of housing or any other services you provide?

Ms. Linda Lafantaisie Renaud: Thank you for your question, Mr. Serré.

I appreciate your very compassionate way of talking about our centre.

The centre is located in a small community, so that's challenging. Most of the services our residents need are usually provided in North Bay, which is half an hour from our centre. There are no services for them in the small town of West Nipissing. For example, there are not enough French-speaking child therapists, so the waiting list is really long. That's why we turn to our employees and people in the community for their knowledge and partner with other agencies to provide services to the women and children who need them.

[*English*]

We also advocate a lot for children's services. In terms of our indigenous community, at least 18% of our residents from Sturgeon Falls are from our local reserve. We also have a few other reserves that are close to our town. They have so many disadvantages from being from a small town that we really need to look at all of the services that we could provide to them, either virtually or through finding another way to offer them. They do have the right to all of the services that someone from a big city has.

● (1810)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Serré: We've heard that there's a lack of training, not only for judges, but systemically. Do you find that, in a small community, people in a range of jobs and professions need better training?

Ms. Linda Lafantaisie Renaud: Absolutely.

[English]

I think it is really imperative that in any educational system—in medical school—there be almost a forced curriculum. They need to educate our future lawyers, our future police officers and anyone in the judicial system about what types of abuse there are, how these women and children have been affected and how the abusers are using this against them.

It's really important that we start education when children are very young. We need school boards to have curricula that are appropriate and designed by professionals who work in violence against women to teach children from an early age what good relationships are and about abuse, and to teach them to be able to not treat their partners....

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Serré: Thank you, Ms. Lafantaisie Renaud.

Ms. Gagnon, we've heard that defining this is tricky. Do you have a definition of coercive control? Also, what role should the federal government play in training?

I have about 40 seconds left.

Ms. Justine Fortin (Director, Legal Services, Juripop): I can answer that quickly.

Regarding the definition, what matters most to us is that it be included in the Divorce Act, whose comprehensive definition of family violence doesn't include deprivation of liberty and micro-regulation of daily life, which are the hallmarks of coercive control. To us, that's crucial, and it has to be added to the Act next time it's amended.

Regarding training and knowledge, improving the definition in the Act would provide guidance not only for judges, but also for the professionals who work with this Act. It would add to the available information that can be used to provide guidance to the courts, as well as to lawyers and litigants.

As my colleague said, mandatory training will definitely have to be added so that this information doesn't simply exist in the Act, but is also understood and applied.

[English]

The Chair: Perfect. Thank you.

[Translation]

We'll go to Ms. Larouche for six minutes.

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I thank all the witnesses for their contribution to this extremely important study. Actually, it's a crucial one.

My first questions will be for Ms. Fortin and Ms. Gagnon, from Juripop.

Either one of you can respond.

Since your organization is in Quebec, you're no doubt aware of the recently published "Reb tir la confiance" report, which is the result of the Government of Quebec's all-party study on sexual assault and domestic violence.

Members of the National Assembly reached out to me, and we had a conversation about criminalizing coercive control. They recommended it to the federal government because it's not in their jurisdiction, so it's up to the feds to deal with it, taking into account what Quebec found in its study. What are your thoughts on that?

What can you add? Have you spoken with MNAs in Quebec City about this?

Ms. Sophie Gagnon: Thank you for your question.

Juripop does not practise criminal law, so we haven't had any discussions with MNAs about criminalization. What we're seeing is that the civil law system is not really part of the conversation about domestic violence and coercive control. Our intention today is to broaden the conversation and enrich the committee's report. We want to make sure that the Divorce Act and training for judges in civil cases are part of the conversation about ending coercive control in Canada.

• (1815)

Ms. Andr anne Larouche: As you said, the Divorce Act does not mention coercive control. For the reasons you described, both that concept and the concept of domestic violence must be included. That's important. At the federal level, we focus on criminal law, but for you, incorporating it into civil law is important, too.

You're an expert on coercive control. In fact, in your opening remarks, you encouraged the committee to consider this aspect as part of its study on putting coercive control in the Criminal Code.

How does that fit with what we've heard? In other words, there's no reason to think a wave of the wand will fix everything. Instead, we need to zoom out and think about a continuum of victim services. In addition, as you said, we'll have to think in terms of cooperation between civil law, criminal law and community-based victim support groups.

How do you see this continuum of services being structured to meet the needs you're seeing on the ground?

Ms. Sophie Gagnon: I can touch on that, but my colleague, Ms. Fortin, may want to talk to you about another aspect of that afterwards.

The first witness who testified in person before the committee—I've forgotten her name, unfortunately—gave examples of several women who are victims of intimate partner violence and coercive control and who, for a host of reasons, will not report it to the police. Changing the Criminal Code will not help these people.

This evening's witnesses have shared some examples of victims of intimate partner violence and coercive control. Criminalizing coercive control could backfire against such victims; they could end up being accused of such a crime by the person perpetrating the violence.

We see family law as a complementary tool that would ensure the justice system recognizes these women's experiences. They can also turn to the civil law system for safety orders. Juripop goes through the civilian justice system to get civil protection orders, which are the civilian equivalent of a “section 810”, a peace bond. It's not a perfect tool, but we use it to keep the people we represent safe.

In my presentation, I talked about how a shared custody order can exacerbate coercive control. Conversely, a sole custody order or protective measures for the exchange of children can end or mitigate coercive control. That's how family law can help us.

I will now let my colleague, Ms. Fortin, explain how the authorities can work together.

Ms. Justine Fortin: I'll give you a very brief but concrete example of people who will not seek help from the criminal justice system.

At Juripop, we often see this when we deploy a “cellule d'action concertée”. These are crisis response teams made up of institutional and community partners on the ground, who come together to assess whether there's a serious and imminent risk of homicide, that is, a risk that a woman and her children will be killed. In many of the cases we've seen, family law is a factor. During the post-separation period, coercive control manifests in different ways. Coercive control is about isolating, controlling and terrorizing a person and their children. The idea is to get various stakeholders talking to each other: police, youth protection, shelters, crisis centres, correctional officers, family law attorneys and Crown prosecutors.

The common denominator in all of this is the facts reported by the family law counsel, who identifies the elements of coercive control.

[English]

The Chair: That's excellent. Thank you.

Leah, you have six minutes as well.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you.

Thank you so much to all the witnesses today.

My first question is for Madam Haileyesus.

You spoke about the importance of criminalizing coercive control but said that this needed to be implemented through an anti-oppressive, trauma-informed and intersectional lens. This is something that I've often pushed for in committee.

You spoke specifically about indigenous and Black women. It's really important when you look at the stats. Indigenous and racialized women experience the highest rates of violence in the country, but you said that often in these cases of coercive control indigenous and Black women are accused of being the aggressors in those situations. Can you expand on that?

• (1820)

Ms. Meseret Haileyesus: Yes.

Thank you so much for this important question.

Probably, to start, I can give you some statistics. According to Stats Canada, which conducted this in 2020, in the general social survey—social identity, one in five, which is 21% of Black and 22% of indigenous people, have little or no confidence in the police. This is a statistic that we need to keep in our minds. As I said, before we criminalize coercive control, we need to make sure that our justice system is equitable for the Black and indigenous communities. We learned it from Australia. Actually, I already mentioned in my statement that it also perpetuates indigenous women because of the lack of trust in our police system. That's why I try to explain.

For victims, especially racialized victims, there is also a study that explored gender-based violence and specialized in the courts and racial minority women. It shows that the justice system is already unresponsive, and many racialized Black and indigenous victims are revictimized during the court proceedings and face discrimination. Some of the services are culturally insensitive, which is affecting women and is stressing the system.

We support that coercive control must be because it's part of economic abuse, and it must be criminalized. However, we want to make sure that our justice system is a service for women and gender-diverse folks, especially for BIPOC.

Ms. Leah Gazan: If I understand this correctly, what you're saying is that because of ongoing systemic racism—and we certainly know that through the red dress study—to put in place the criminalization of coercive control would be premature before we deal with issues of systemic racism, particularly because the majority of victims of violence come from indigenous and Black backgrounds. Is that right?

Ms. Meseret Haileyesus: Yes, that's correct.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Okay.

You also spoke about 95% of the victims of coercive control, and a big part that is financial abuse. Is that right?

Ms. Meseret Haileyesus: Yes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Not allowing access to bank accounts...financial abuse....

I put forward a bill for a guaranteed livable basic income. One of the reasons I put it forward was in response to the national inquiry. We know there's a direct correlation between intimate partner violence, gender-based violence, and economic abuse or not having access to proper economic resources. Unfortunately, it was voted down.

I know you're quite supportive of a guaranteed livable basic income. Why is providing a guaranteed livable basic income critical in truly addressing one of the root causes of coercive control?

Ms. Meseret Haileyesus: As you know, the abuser's best friend is isolation. Coercive control isolates the victim to make them financially dependent, so the victim cannot live. She doesn't have the power to even access social services. The most important thing is empowering women economically. It may be from a livable income or by creating a job opportunity. For a victim, it is very critical not only to empower but also to break the cycle of coercive control. I personally support it. Women should have a livable income because that breaks the cycle of coercive control, and that also breaks the cycle of isolation.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much.

I have a deep concern about this because we also have witnesses.... Linda MacDonald, you indicated at the beginning of this session that Nova Scotia has declared gender-based violence as an epidemic. There are multiple cities across the country that have also declared gender-based violence as an epidemic, yet it seems we're not really at a place where we are willing to take the actions necessary to deal with it.

Do you think we currently need to look at systems that are in place to ensure that we are creating a society that does protect women and gender-diverse people from violence?

• (1825)

Ms. Linda MacDonald: Yes, but I think women and girls deserve much more respect than we're getting. A lot of what we're saying is not new. For whatever reason, there's still a lack of political will in all parties to really take on the seriousness of the misogyny and the patriarchy in our culture. I know that education is important, educating children, and changing the structures, but if we're all still working in a misogynistic judicial system or political system or health care system, we're still all walking around as victims who are trying to heal. Coercive control is really difficult.

The Chair: Thank you. We're going to have to leave it at that.

Thank you, Ms. MacDonald.

At this point, we will be starting our second round.

Dominique, you have five minutes.

[Translation]

Mrs. Dominique Vien: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Again, this study has been shocking and horrifying.

I would like to thank everyone here this afternoon, especially those who have shared their painful experiences.

Ms. Haileyesus, can you describe the typical victim of economic violence, economic control? Here's what I want to know. Are these victims necessarily women who are financially disadvantaged? You're very interested in empowering women, but can professional women be victims too? What is the typical victim profile?

[English]

Ms. Meseret Haileyesus: Sorry, but the audio was cut off. Could you repeat the question?

[Translation]

Mrs. Dominique Vien: My question is very straightforward.

What is the typical profile of a victim of economic violence? Are victims always financially disadvantaged or can they also be women or men who earn a good living?

[English]

Ms. Meseret Haileyesus: Economic abuse is a very hidden, under-recorded and under-reported form of violence experienced by 95% of victims of gender-based violence.

There are three types of economic abuse.

The first is economic control, which is when an abuser controls a woman's expenses, her budget and her entire life. It is coercive control.

The second type of economic abuse is economic exploitation. Usually this targets a woman who makes an income. An abuser takes advantage of her and destroys her economic life. It may involve stealing her bank account information, it may involve using her credit card for coerced debt, and it may also involve making a lot of financial obligations on her behalf. There is also fraud, and even tax fraud; you name it.

The third one is employment sabotage, like restricting a woman from going back to the workforce. It may involve hiding her car key and denying her buying basic necessities, for example, like medication, transportation and telecommunications devices, which are economic resources.

There is a cycle of economic abuse. First, the victim is isolated because of coercive control. Second, the victim doesn't have any idea or knowledge about her financial rights. Third, a victim usually doesn't have resources like telecommunications devices, for example, because her credit may have been destroyed. Finally, a woman will not have the right to access her bank accounts.

• (1830)

[Translation]

Mrs. Dominique Vien: Thank you very much.

Ms. Gagnon and Ms. Fortin, thank you for being here.

Have we come to an agreement on a definition of coercive control? We discussed this a little earlier and brought up how hard it is to properly define the term. Everyone needs to know exactly what we're talking about. I would like you to answer that question.

I would also like to look at training judges, because I think there is a problem in that regard. What would be the clearest definition possible?

Ms. Justine Fortin: I will certainly try to answer your question, and I will connect it to the examples given by the previous witness.

Coercive control has three stages.

The first is the deprivation of freedom, whatever the type of freedom.

The second is the micro-regulation of everyday life, meaning that every little aspect of a person's daily life is criticized. It can range from what they eat to the colour of their clothing to the shampoo they use. Their movements can be restricted, and they can be followed.

The third is related to types of behaviours, meaning all forms of violence up to physical violence. We are talking about a pattern of behaviour. The strategies used are designed to isolate, control and scare a person.

It happens bit by bit: A common metaphor is a cage or a web closing in on someone. The control will be total, to the point where the victim may no longer realize that he or she is caught in this pattern of behaviour.

Mrs. Dominique Vien: I've just been told that my time is up.

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

Next, I would like to welcome Anita.

You have five minutes.

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

There is such a wonderful panel with so much information that I wish I could ask you all questions, but I really do want to focus on the financial and economic abuse.

Meseret Haileyesus, I will be directing most of my questions to you. If there is time, I'll go to some of the others.

I know that the Canadian Centre for Women's Empowerment is really avant-garde. It was the first centre in Canada to even get statistics and research about financial or economic abuse.

One thing that you've testified before this committee before—and in this context I think it's very relevant—is that often women who are suffering from financial or economic abuse are not self-aware that this is a form of abuse and that it's happening to them, sometimes until many years later.

I think we've seen this similar thing with coercive control because it's not defined and it's not publicly visible. If someone hits you, you know that's abuse.

With coercive control and financial abuse, how do you get around that, when you have people who are suffering from this who might not even realize it themselves, especially when we're looking at the Criminal Code and looking at formalizing things?

Ms. Meseret Haileyesus: Thank you so much. I think that's why we are asking to have a national day. Having a national day would really help us to raise awareness.

What we have seen, sadly, is that our victims don't even know if they are experiencing economic and financial abuse because finance is taboo, especially in racialized cultures. Domestic abuse is also taboo. There is power and control, so as a tactic, abusers usually use that power to isolate and control them. That's why we have also mentioned having a national day.

Victims don't have a good understanding and even service providers sometimes don't, according to our statistics. It's very tricky.

This is a huge opportunity for abusers to perpetuate and to control others financially. However, once the victim moves out, they experience the impact of economic and financial abuse. Plus, as you know, the system is not designed to protect victims. Again, that's another form of systemic violence for racialized victims.

I think that in terms of legal proceedings, awareness is the most important thing to teach women. When we teach, we need to make sure that it is inclusive. It should be trauma-informed and culturally sensitive because talking about the economy and talking about finance is a very sensitive matter, which relates to trauma. That's why my organization right now has a trauma-informed approach to empower women because it's very triggering even to speak about that.

The other thing is that we need to conduct more research on coercive control. That would be a very good segue to mitigate the impact of financial and even economic abuse.

• (1835)

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: You're suggesting more research and more awareness.

Ms. Meseret Haileyesus: Yes, but the research must be aggregated data. Sadly, we don't have a lot of data.

We want to know how many indigenous people are impacted by financial abuse, as well as those who are Black and racialized. This is very important.

I was also asked about this and I didn't answer that question, but this form of violence affects everyone regardless of culture, race and identity. However, we know that Black and indigenous people, and even gender-diverse folks are at high risk because of the colonization and the history of what we've had in the past.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you. Those are very good recommendations.

One thing we're struggling with in this study is whether or not this needs to be in the Criminal Code, and if so, in what way.

We've heard already you mention that it has to be trauma-informed if it is an offence, but then you said something about needing to see systemic change first.

What would be the precursors? What are things that you think need to be in place before we criminalize?

Ms. Meseret Haileyesus: That's a good question.

We don't work here alone, so it really helps to teach and educate our lawyers. Education is most important, not only for survivors, but for people who are in the justice system. It is the most important thing for them in that system to change what we have.

The second system change is, of course, that access to justice must be very simple and the relationship between racialized people and the police or the justice system has to be smoothed. This is the precondition we are asking of the government before we move to criminalize coercive control.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: One thing that we've also seen about women who stay in these abusive relationships or go back to them is that financial abuse is, as you've said, probably the number one thing.

Is that the case and how does that impact coercive control?

You have 10 seconds left.

Ms. Meseret Haileyesus: Yes. From our consultations, when women experience domestic violence, they don't talk to police right away for many reasons. They don't talk to neighbours or family members because of the shame, the trauma and the guilt.

What we learned is that right away, most of them go to the bank and they have to make sure that they have enough money to leave that relationship. Unfortunately, our system—the financial sector—is broken. Of course the service is not integrated, so women prefer to stay at home because of this situation we are dealing with.

We have seen that finance is one of the reasons women go back to abusers.

The Chair: Okay.

That's excellent.

Andréanne, you have two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Thank you.

I get the feeling that some witnesses have left the meeting because it is getting late, but I will still ask my next question. I see that Ms. Fortin from Juripol is still here.

In my first round of questions, we got a good explanation of the blind spot in civil law and the importance of including the concept of coercive control in the Divorce Act. You did a good job of explaining how it affects families, an aspect we tend not to think about. My colleague asked you a question about one of your recommendations related to judicial training. I know you didn't have time to answer it, so I would also like to ask you that.

Can you take the time to tell us a bit more about how this could actually change our way of thinking about coercive control?

Ms. Justine Fortin: Thank you.

My colleague Ms. Gagnon had to leave the meeting at 6:30 p.m. She asked me to pass on her apology.

To provide any kind of training, you have to know what the issue is. Including a concept like coercive control or family violence in the Divorce Act while establishing a definition and limits is a good start. Then the people who apply those limits need to understand the concepts and the effect of family violence on a child, particularly in the case of the Divorce Act. In order to do that, they absolutely have to be properly trained. We are talking about judges, but also

all professionals who work with victims and survivors of violence, including children.

At the moment, unfortunately, what we are seeing before the courts in Quebec is a lack of knowledge of the law and of concepts that must be taken into account, such as family violence, when a decision is made in the best interests of the child. There is no framework that really takes that into account. For example, in the case of allegations of family violence, as lawyers, we will be able to plead that violence has an effect on children and show a pattern of violent behaviour and deprivations of freedom, but the orders made will not reflect that.

In our opinion, this is where training will be essential for the people who make these decisions. They have a major impact on victims and survivors, especially when it comes to custody. This has long-term effects on every aspect of a victim's life, physically and emotionally, but also economically. Right now, there is a gap between the advances made in the legislation and what we, as legal experts, can use to assert the rights of victims, as well as the decisions rendered by the courts.

• (1840)

[*English*]

The Chair: Excellent, and thank you so much.

Next is Leah Gazan.

You have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much, Chair.

I have a question for Madame Lafantaisie.

You spoke about how at the shelter you see all sorts of trauma, but you also spoke about the trauma experienced by children who are coming into the shelter and who are often abusive with the mother, just from modelling by the abusive parent.

What kinds of wraparound supports are required? Often when we talk about shelters, we talk about the victim, the first victim, but we often fail to analyze it as a family model. What kinds of wraparound supports are required for children, the children who are demonstrating impacts or vicarious impacts from the abuse of a parent?

Ms. Linda Lafantaisie Renaud: Well, I do know that in our district we have the child witness program, and our shelter offers it in French to children. It's an extremely well-designed program for children, and the mothers also attend, but they are in different locations.

That is one of the positive things that we do have for children, but the waiting list for children's counselling and trauma counselling is so long in our region that it's currently almost not available in their native language. That is another big concern.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I—

Ms. Linda Lafantaisie Renaud: We need to give funding to these agencies to be able to provide....

Ms. Leah Gazan: Yes, thank you.

Underfunding is certainly a theme of gender-based violence. Again, it's a demonstration of lack of political will.

Madame Haileyesus, we spoke before. One of the areas where there's a critical lack of funding is for Black organizations, particularly Black organizations that work in the area of violence—again, another demonstration of a lack of political will to deal with this crisis head-on.

Can you expand on that a little bit more for us?

Ms. Meseret Haileyesus: Yes.

There is a report. It was released in 2021, I believe. I'm not sure of the exact time, but it's in the middle of a pandemic. You can check it. It's called "Unfunded" and was published by the Network for the Advancement of Black Communities. It shows that less than 1% of Black-led organizations are funded. These are the statistics that we have.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I want to end just by saying that we have the highest rate of violence—Black and indigenous women—yet Black women get less than 1% of the funding. Is that correct?

Ms. Meseret Haileyesus: Yes, that is the statistic.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Okay, thank you.

The Chair: Excellent, thank you.

Michelle, you have five minutes.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thank you so much.

It's so hard to fit this all in because there are so many witnesses with so many great things to say when we're talking about what we need to do better in terms of preventing coercive control.

If everyone's okay with it or comfortable, could you table to the committee what you believe the definition of coercive control to be?

I think that's going to be one of the key things out of this study. What does that look like to you? What is coercive control to you?

The next question I would ask, if I can—

• (1845)

The Chair: I'm just going to interrupt you for one minute, Michelle.

What she means by tabling, for those of you who are not familiar, is to submit a written report to the clerk.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thank you, yes, email. I'm sorry. I should have said that.

I've been in this place for too long now.

Second, if I can just get a show of hands, how many of you would like to see coercive control criminalized?

I see one, two, three, four, five.

Christy, you do not have your hand up. Okay.

I didn't see.... Did we lose the deputy chief?

Deputy Chief, did you put your hand up as well?

You did, okay.

Christy, I'm going to try to come back to you to see what that is, or maybe you can put it forward later.

I'd like to go to the deputy chief again, if I can.

When we look at prevention, because I think that's a big piece of this, and especially when you talked about the calls, the 26 incidents a day.... My local police chief showed me on a board the calls that he was getting, repeat calls to certain addresses. It was confidential information.

I asked, "Why is a 10-year-old on your repeat call list?" He said, "Because that's a child that was in the home during an intimate partner violence call."

I can see the deputy shaking his head.

What training are you getting for intimate partner violence? I spoke with a parole officer last night who said that they aren't getting any training.

D/Chief Nick Milinovich: Thank you for the question.

Again, just to clarify, yes, absolutely, I would love to see coercive control as part of the Criminal Code, but as a tool and probably with a broader assessment of where the gaps are. Without that, I don't see that it will have the desired impact.

Specific to the training, the training that we've developed is trauma informed and is really done in partnership with our community partners. We have here a unique model. It's one of the largest, centralized, off-site intimate partner violence units in the country. It consists of 24 different partners, all of whom are experts in the space. They're providers who have identified the type of training that they feel our police officers should have. Traditionally, policing has a very proprietary approach, where we try to tell the community what we think is best and how services should be delivered.

We've moved away from that here in Peel. We rely heavily on our partners to help develop that training, identify training that we should be participating in and work on really the.... It's an opportunity for the community to provide those perspectives.

I'll give you an example. Again, I want to go back to the unit because I do think it's important. The imagery of a police officer who's dressed like me in Peel, responding to and case managing a call, doesn't exist in Peel. We have, I believe now, almost 20 languages represented in our intimate partner violence unit who work with service providers. We have a tremendous amount of diversity in that unit. In fact, it's one of the most diverse units that we have, responding to the community in their need. We even have survivors of intimate partner violence who have had their own experiences.

I really think that is one of the crucial things. You need an advocate who understands and is interested, engaged and willing to defend our survivors out in the community. For training, we have an endless number pieces. I don't want to take up too much time.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thank you. I appreciate it.

When I brought up the 10-year-old, what I was trying to get at, too, was the long-term impact and the prevention end. If children are growing up watching IPV or are part of multiple calls, the likelihood of their going on and having unhealthy relationships is critical.

I'm going to try to get in two questions in my short amount of time.

Meseret, I would love to see your recommendations on financial literacy for kids in high school. So many of them don't know any differently—whether they're in a coercive control or financial control situation. If it's implemented throughout the education system.... I think understanding financial autonomy could be very beneficial.

Christy, how do you help children who have been exposed to IPV break those patterns of unhealthy relationships?

I'm pretty sure we're out of time.

The Chair: Could one of you wrap it up in about 25 or 30 seconds?

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: It's Christy I'm looking for.

• (1850)

The Chair: Christy.

Ms. Christy Dzikowicz: These are difficult things.

I want to clarify this: I didn't put up my hand not because I'm opposed to criminalizing coercive behaviour but more so because I hesitate to put too much weight on criminalizing more behaviours when I believe we're not yet equipped to effectively respond to the Criminal Code violations we have already.

To your point, Michelle, we see kids coming in who are witnesses to violence and to their parents being assaulted. If you talk to our forensic interviewers, they will tell you these are the toughest interviews. They listen to kids talk about significant harms they've faced. Watching their parent being harmed shakes children to their absolute core and takes away their sense of safety.

I think it's finding ways for us to more effectively respond to the crimes we have—using prevention and other things. Criminalizing is for when we can start getting ahead on effective responses for kids.

The Chair: That's great. Thank you.

Emmanuella, you have about five minutes and then some.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Thank you, Madam Chair.

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

This is for the Toba Centre for Children and Youth. I'm sorry. I don't know how to pronounce your last name, so that's what I'm going to call you for now.

You spoke about creating safe pathways for victims to come forward. I'm wondering if you can speak to us a bit more about some of the barriers that currently exist, and specify changes you would recommend we make so that these barriers are no longer in place.

Ms. Christy Dzikowicz: Thanks very much for the question.

I'm speaking specifically from the lens of a child advocacy centre. These exist in most major cities across this country. I'm also speaking for the sexual assault centres and survivor centres that exist for adults who experience this. These types of environments are being created as soft landings that are inclusive of our criminal justice partners, law enforcement, child protection and all of those very critical responses that we're all very invested in. I think we all want to see criminal justice happen successfully when it needs to happen, and to see offenders prosecuted.

Our types of environments create pathways where kids can come forward, and where other vulnerable people can come forward and feel safe walking through the doors. They would not necessarily enter a police station to make a report, or go to a hospital, sit in a waiting room and be triaged through several people. They can come into a space where they're supported by victim advocates from the very beginning of reporting and throughout that journey. Then we can pursue justice and hopefully see some success. With or without that successful prosecution, they have support that's ongoing.

Environments like ours, I think, are critical. Creating more environments like this across Canada is critical for young people and adults. That's what I mean by "safer pathways". A lot of our first nations communities and newcomer populations have had very negative experiences with some of those systems—not just in Canada but also in countries of origin. We need to embed those responses where they become critical, wrapping them in a community care environment and acknowledging the systemic racism and experiences they may have had in the past.

It's ironic, but we need professionals like law enforcement to help. Most of the folks working in these specific spaces are phenomenal human beings. That doesn't change the negative experiences someone may have. When you've experienced that type of negativity and those are the very people you rely on in your time of need.... We need to change that pathway.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Thank you.

There's a lot of work to be done before criminalizing it, although that's obviously up to the government. We don't know what we're going to be recommending yet. There will for sure be talk about bringing forward legislation that surrounds coercive control.

What type of language would you recommend we use? A lot of the witnesses we've heard from speak about intimate partner violence and coercive control. A lot of the witnesses here today spoke about children and how they often experience coercive control, as well. I know that's a bit more difficult, because children are the dependents of their parents. They depend on them financially, and there's a lot of stuff we have to be careful about.

What would you recommend there? Would you say “family violence”? Would you say “intimate partner violence”? What type of language would you use around that?

Ms. Christy Dzikowicz: I mean, for us, “interpersonal violence” captures it very well, right? It captures it for children, for youth, for intimate partners. “Interpersonal violence” in all these family relationships, romantic relationships or otherwise is fairly inclusive of those.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Does any other witness have a comment on that? No? Okay.

Are any of you aware of any other countries that have criminalized coercive control?

• (1855)

Ms. Meseret Haileyesus: I'm sorry. Just a little bit....

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Are there any other countries that have criminalized coercive control that you are aware of?

Ms. Meseret Haileyesus: Australia tried. Of course, it's already passed, I think. However, I also mentioned in my statement that, in the past, because of the racial inequality and discrimination, it was affected, you know—aboriginal society. I can raise Australia, maybe.

Ms. Jeanne Sarson: Scotland has coercive control as a law, a criminal law.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Okay. So, I guess we'll look further into that rather than asking specifically, unless you have some. Do you...? I think it's too big of a question right now to ask. However, if you have any information that you would like to table to the committee—you all know the definition at this point—please feel free to do so.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

At this point, we have finished the second round. We did gavel in at 5:19, so in order to go into our committee business, I'd like to start around 7:03 or 7:04.

That being said, we do have a window of about five or six minutes. We will not get through an entire round. Would you like to stop there, excuse our witnesses and just go right into committee business, or is it the will of the committee to commence a third round and get...?

I think I'm seeing that we're just going to.... You know, we've had a tremendous amount of testimony at this point. Unless I'm seeing or hearing otherwise, we will excuse our witnesses.

Thank you so much for your testimony today. We certainly appreciate it.

We'll just wait a few minutes, and then we will go into a closed session.

Voices: Thank you.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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