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• (1100)

[English]

The Chair (Mrs. Shelby Kramp-Neuman (Hastings—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): Welcome to meeting number 123 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women.

I would like to remind all members of the following points. Please wait until I recognize you by name prior to speaking. This is a reminder that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

[Translation]

Thank you all for your co-operation.

[English]

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

Before we welcome our witnesses, I would 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.

For today's panel, by video conference, we have two witnesses appearing anonymously. As well, in the room, from Humane Canada, we have Kerri Thomson, manager, justice and legislative affairs. In addition, by video conference, we have Kamal Dhillon, author and speaker.

At this point, I would like to begin with Kerri Thomson, for up to five minutes.

Ms. Kerri Thomson (Manager, Justice and Legislative Affairs, Humane Canada): Thank you.

Good morning, Madam Chair and honourable members. Thank you for the opportunity to appear today.

Humane Canada is the federation of Humane Societies and SP-CAs, with members in 10 provinces and two territories, whom Canadians depend on to care for abused and abandoned animals, to advocate for greater protections and to provide resources to their communities.

We're also the founders of the Canadian violence link coalition, which brings together multisector stakeholders to explore the connection between animal abuse and human violence known as the "violence link" that often manifests in intimate partner and family violence.

I'm here today to advocate for survivors of violence and for their animals. More than 60% of Canadian homes have a companion animal, with 70% of those identifying their animal as family. When there is violence in the home or in a relationship, it is not only the human victim who is vulnerable but also the animal, which can be used as a very effective tool of coercion and control.

From our work with survivors with animals, as well as with law enforcement, family lawyers and prosecutors, we are aware of how common this link is. However, it often goes unrecognized by law enforcement and in the courts, even when animal cruelty charges are laid. This is especially true where an abuser engages in non-violent forms of abuse. A 2018 Canadian survey found that 89% of violence survivors reported animal abuse by their partners. A later study of survivors highlighted some specific actions, with 65% reporting threats to get rid of the pet and 60% reporting intimidating or scaring the pet, while only 20% reported the actual injury of a pet and 14% reported a pet being killed.

These statistics indicate that abusers are more likely to engage in less obvious forms of abuse, leaving victims unsure if they should report to police because it's unclear if a crime has been committed.

A few stories from our network and research show the range of ways animals can be used for coercive control. A survivor left an abusive situation, but her abuser refused to let her take her dog. A week later, he brought the dog to meet her but only allowed her to spend time with the dog if she complied with some of the things he wanted. Even after leaving, he was continuing to control her through the dog.

Our family law research study last year revealed similar situations, or situations where the pet was just removed without the victim's knowledge or consent and with no indication of where they would be taken.

In an Ontario dangerous offender application in 2022, the offender's history of violent behaviour spanned 20 years, with a demonstrated pattern of violence toward multiple intimate partners. During one such incident, he was jealous that his former partner's phone kept ringing. He wanted to have sex later, and when she refused, he became irate, accused her of cheating on him and began smashing things before throwing her cat off the 11th floor balcony. He then blocked her from leaving when she tried to run outside after her animal.

According to a January 11 article in the Ottawa Citizen this year, an offender was arrested for arranging the sexual abuse of four dogs and the extortion of a young man with autism, a minor he was grooming to have a sexual relationship with. An investigation revealed that the offender had coerced his impaired victim into being photographed engaging in sex acts with a dog, which he then used to extort sexual favours from him, threatening to send the image to the victim's family and friends, as well as to police.

While legislation would be useful to clearly identify that these indeed are criminal acts involving coercive control, we also need to train all justice system personnel, from law enforcement through to judges, to understand animal abuse as a significant contributing factor in situations involving intimate partner violence and family violence. This would add clarity not only for justice stakeholders but also for victims and survivors.

In closing, this committee recognized that cruelty toward animals can be an early indicator of intimate partner violence and that abusers may use pets as a way to threaten their partners in its study of intimate partner and family violence in Canada. Likewise, we urge you to consider animal mistreatment as a tool of coercive behaviour here. Thank you.

● (1105)

The Chair: Thank you for your testimony.

Next I will welcome, by video conference, Witness 1.

You have up to five minutes.

Witness 1 (As an Individual): Thank you and good morning.

Non-preferred or unsafe parents who utilize parental alienation, or PA, as a legal strategy will be victorious at the criminalization of coercive control, as it will allow them to take their post-separation abuse even further. I support the government's initiative to criminalize coercive control if the use of parental alienation and its related pseudo concepts and remedies are prohibited in family court. Otherwise, those who the new law is meant to protect will be at even greater risk.

Family court labelled me an exemplary mother and as someone who engaged in coercive control and parental alienation. Prior to family court, I had never heard of PA. Little did I know that my children and I would become victims of what is referred to as the alienation industry.

In the spring of 2022, I received a judgment that ordered a transfer of care of the children from me to their father within 48 hours and a no-contact order between the children and me and my family and friends. The no-contact order stipulated no direct or indirect

contact with the children for 90 days, and that if such contact did occur, the 90-day period would start over.

The children were devastated by this news. Prior to this order, they spent 15 hours a week of court-ordered parenting time in their father's care. They had not had an overnight visit in almost three years. At this time, the children were 12 and 14 years of age.

At no time was the no-contact order breached. However, it took over 500 days until I was reunited with my daughter. It has now been over 900 days since I've had any contact with my son.

In addition, the judgment ordered that the children travel to the United States to attend what is referred to as a "reunification camp" with their father. The program was four days in length, at a sole cost to me of \$15,000 U.S. Please note that our family is Canadian. We have no ties to the U.S. My children are not the first to be ordered to the United States for reunification therapy as a remedy for PA. This has been happening since at least 2008.

The judgment further stated that, once the children returned from the U.S., they would engage in what's referred to as "aftercare", with a therapist approved by the facilitator of the American reunification camp. In less than six months, an additional \$18,000, this time in Canadian funds, was paid. I was responsible for half.

It is notable that prior to this judgment, our family had already been court-ordered to participate in what is referred to as outpatient reunification therapy, a section 30 assessment and a clinical intake consultation, for a combined total of approximately \$50,000.

As identified at last week's committee meeting, parental alienation is a lucrative endeavour for lawyers and court-ordered clinicians. A review of case law will demonstrate that it is the same lawyers, psychologists and social workers, case after case, who advance the narrative of parental alienation in family court.

The label of parental alienation in family court actually results in the non-preferred or unsafe parent being judicially empowered to further engage in coercive control. For example, my co-parent was granted an order that I had to provide him with 24 hours' notice when I'd be physically present at work because of its proximity to my daughter's school—a school she was no longer attending. The judge herself brought forth the idea that I should be required to walk to work or park in a specific location.

Financially, I spent several hundred thousand dollars to try to protect my children. The end result was that I was erased from my daughter's life for over 500 days, and I continue to be erased from my son's life. Additionally, I have a "costs award" against me for over half a million dollars, payable to my children's father, because he is considered the successful party in family court based on PA.

Throughout my speech today, I've used the terms "non-preferred" and "unsafe" parent rather than mother and father. The use of parental alienation as a legal strategy does statistically affect more mothers. However, fathers are also at risk and, therefore, children as a whole. A review of Ontario case law will show that an educational assistant, a university lacrosse coach and a Toronto fire chief are all fathers who lost their children via this legal strategy.

Professionally, I spent 10 years working in pediatric rehab. We utilized techniques based on best practice and research. Each client goal had aligned objectives, and we used a goal attainment scale. Reunification therapy uses indices of success—for example, when the child demonstrates expressions of love; they understand how distorted memories or perceptions can occur; or, in my case, my daughter could envision her father walking her down the aisle at her wedding.

Six American states have signed into law legislation that aligns with the recommendations of the UN. As these laws are passed state by state, Canada will become a larger target market of the alienation industry than it already is. One American therapist has made it publicly known that she has already relocated to British Columbia.

In conclusion, I recommend that this committee advance the criminalization of coercive control in tandem with the recommendations of the UN and NAWL, such that the use of parental alienation and its related concepts and remedies are prohibited in family court. This is because those who are labelled an alienator are also labelled as someone who is engaged in coercive control, and the use of parental alienation as a legal strategy results in judicially empowered coercive control by the non-preferred parent and the clinicians involved with the case.

• (1110)

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much as well, Witness 1, for your testimony.

Witness 2, you have up to five minutes.

Witness 2 (As an Individual): Thank you.

Good morning, everyone. Thank you for the opportunity to share my story.

I'm a 17-year-old survivor of the family court system who was judicially trafficked to the United States for reunification therapy because my father claimed parental alienation. I am the daughter of Witness 1.

In 2022, my brother, my father and I travelled to New York to attend what is known as a reunification camp. It was facilitated by a social worker I worked with. For four days, we went to the personal apartment of my father. During this time, we were told that our neg-

ative memories of our father were false. We watched *Welcome Back, Pluto*, a movie about parental alienation. We watched a video summary of the controversial study—

The Chair: Witness 2, I'm going to have you pause for a moment.

I need you to try to slow down a bit and speak into the mic as best you can for the translation.

Thank you so much.

Witness 2: Sure.

We watched a video summary of the controversial study on false memories called "Lost in the Mall". We watched episodes of the show *Brain Games* that tried to convince us further that our memories were incorrect, such as "False Memory and Misinformation Effect" and "Remember This!" We were told that our mother was the abusive one, and that the sessions were all videorecorded.

In the afternoons, we visited local attractions. During these outings, we were coerced into co-operation. A specific example was at the Empire State Building when Mary yelled at me for not smiling in a photo. I was told that if I did not smile, the no-contact order with my mom would be tripled.

About a month after we returned from New York, we began attending what is referred to as "aftercare" with a Canadian social worker. I will refer to him as "Kevin". Kevin's framework and methodology were simply extensions of what we experienced in New York. With Kevin, we watched videos of controversial experiments that would not meet the ethical standards and best practices of today. For example, we watched Jane Elliott's "blue eyes, brown eyes" exercise, Tronick's "still face" paradigm and Harry Harlow's "monkey mother" experiment. Kevin even tried to encourage us to be physically affectionate with our father based on the work of Harry Harlow. Kevin utilized threats and bargaining in our therapy sessions. His indicators of therapeutic success included us telling our father that we loved him, initiating and accepting physical affection from our father, and addressing him as "Dad".

With regard to schooling, it is important to share the following.

On our return from New York, my brother missed three weeks of school and I was not permitted to return to in-person school that year. I was forced to complete my grade 9 year virtually. In the fall of 2022, my father registered my brother and me at schools in his neighbourhood. My brother was devastated by this decision, as he would have been entering grade 7 with all of his friends since junior kindergarten.

I was simply excited to be returning to in-person school. I was not permitted to have a cellphone. My father said that, if I made new friends, they could call me at his number. I was not permitted to have a Chromebook that belonged to the school board. Rather, my father purchased me a Chromebook and installed the app Qustodio on it to monitor my every move.

Now that I was out of the house for the first time since April, I knew I had to advocate for my rights. I reached out to an organization for youth, and a lawyer there was able to assist me in obtaining a judicial interview. After my father learned that I had been in contact with this organization, I was threatened. My friends would be called to the guidance office and questioned, my friends would have to provide their phone records, and school security footage would be obtained. My father also started coming to the school at lunch and having me paged to the office. On one occasion, he had the principal come find me. He made me leave with him for the duration of the lunch breaks.

After the Christmas holidays that year, I was not permitted to return to in-person school again. I was enrolled at an online private school and not permitted to know my log-in information. My father logged me in to school daily. The online private school was asynchronous, and I did not have any real-time interaction with other students or teachers.

In the summer of 2023, I turned 16. On my birthday, I left my father's residence and began walking to my mom's. It was my understanding that, at age 16, I could make this choice. Rather, my father called the police and I was stopped about two-thirds of the way to my mom's. We spent hours in a park. In the end, I was taken back to my father's in a police car. My father had given the officers consent to use handcuffs and force if needed. I went co-operatively to avoid this.

Later that summer, I was provided with an updated judgment that permitted me to have contact with my mom again. The order states that it is in my best interest to reside primarily with my mom and to have parenting time with my father in accordance with my wishes.

The no-contact order that was in effect for over 500 days regarding my mom, and attendance at a reunification camp and aftercare, did not strengthen my relationship with my father. Rather, it reinforced my feelings, which have been consistent for years. My father's actions and choices while I was in his sole custody for over 500 days damaged our relationship further.

As someone who has observed and personally experienced coercive control, I support its criminalization. However, the presence of parental alienation and its associated remedies needs to be adequately addressed. The providers of reunification camps and therapy for parental alienation use types of coercive control in their practice, and further encourage and support the use of coercive control by the non-preferred parent. I recommend that legal representation be provided to children. While in the sole care of my father, there was not one individual I could confide in about what was actually happening. I recommend that the court not be able to make orders that include custody reversals, no-contact orders, the use of transport agents, reunification camps and therapy.

Thank you for listening to a high-level summary of my story. I will continue to advocate until change is made. This past January, I was featured in a webinar hosted by the Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children. I spoke after Reem Alsalem and prior to Suzanne Zaccour.

Thank you very much.

• (1115)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Witness 2, for your testimony.

Lastly, I would welcome Ms. Dhillon.

You have up to five minutes. Thank you.

Ms. Kamal Dhillon (Author and Speaker, As an Individual): Thank you.

I'm a single mom of four grown children and a grandma to the seven most beautiful grandchildren in the world.

I feel compelled to share my story in order to tear down the walls of secrecy and shame.

I was 18 when I was married to a supposedly respectable man from an extremely wealthy and influential family. I was his victim for over 15 years. My abuse didn't happen in a third world country. It happened right here in this country.

From day one, he instilled in me an extreme fear. It was impossible to escape. Those who should have protected me protected him. The details are gruesome. I was subjected to all forms of abuse that turned into torture.

This happened almost daily. He tried to kill me on many occasions. He hung me. He doused me with kerosene. He even tried to push me in an ocean numerous times. He forced me to drink poison.

The beatings were relentless. He tied me up, kicked me, dragged me by my hair. He would leave me tied up all night. I was forced to sleep outside many nights. As a result of his beatings, I now live with an artificial jaw after having gone through 10 jaw surgeries. The pain is excruciating. I've lost all of the facial nerves.

All of this was to make it look like a suicide and to get full custody of my children. They would become his next victims, especially my two daughters. The kids would hide under their beds and cover their eyes to avoid seeing and hearing the screams. They were afraid to go to school, as they might never see me again.

I want to give victims the courage to speak out, get help and stop the cycle of abuse.

Unknowingly, my abuser gave me a very public platform and a loud voice—one that will change the misconception of domestic violence. You see, being a survivor requires great courage. I'm unmasking my story, but I refuse to be defined by the history of violence that I left behind.

The abuse is in my identity. I've fought hard to acquire the skills to cope, to recover, to combat cultural labels and to thrive as a warrior.

I'm an author of two books, a speaker and an educator on violence.

I continue to see victims failed over and over. The punishment does not fit the crime. Domestic violence is still looked at as a private matter.

There are so many abusers who live amongst us, hiding in plain sight, who are never publicly identified, despite abusing multiple victims over decades. This, I believe, is due to the existence of a broken system that causes victims to remain silent.

To all victims of domestic violence, I hope I can give your silent sufferings the exposure they deserve. To those who have suffered and to those who are still suffering, may you be strengthened by my story.

I hear you, I see you and I believe you. For me, those harsh years of brutality are behind me now. I am free. I hope every other victim will be too.

Please help me help victims become victors and make it a safer place for them and their families to live, without the ongoing fear of violence. Let this talk and the gravity of it affect you and enrage you. Let's not get numb to this violence. I appeal to you to protect our vulnerable children from abusers.

I have a question for you: What would you do if your daughter, your sister, your friend, your neighbour or your co-worker was being beaten, tortured, raped, sodomized or isolated by someone who's supposed to protect you and her? That was me and my story.

Thank you.

● (1120)

The Chair: Thank you very much for sharing your story.

Thank you to all the witnesses for your opening remarks.

We will now move to our first round of questions. I ask all members and witnesses to please be mindful when there is one minute left. I will inform you when there are 30 seconds left. It is a short session before we go into drafting instructions.

I'd like to begin with Michelle, for six minutes.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri (Peterborough—Kawartha, CPC): Thanks, Madam Chair. It's very hard, obviously, to fit everything in six minutes.

For everyone watching at home, we have a couple of witnesses whose identity has been protected, obviously, for their protection, so you'll hear them referred to as Witness 1 and Witness 2.

There has been powerful testimony on coercive control and the use of pets.

To Ms. Thomson, thank you for bringing this testimony to light. It is a massive issue, when we look at coercive control.

Ms. Thomson, if I can start with you, you said in your testimony that they protected him and not you. Can you explain who they are and how they did that?

● (1125)

The Chair: Ms. Dhillon, that question was posed to you.

Ms. Kamal Dhillon: Thank you.

Can you rephrase, because I wasn't really...?

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: In your testimony of your abuse, you said they protected him and not you. Can you explain who they are, and what they did to protect him and not you?

Ms. Kamal Dhillon: First of all, family members would say to me, "Just be quiet, and do whatever he wants you to do." I would be scolded; he would be praised.

Secondly, the police did not protect me. The police asked me, "What did you do to incite the violence? What did you do to provoke it?"

Another time, a police officer had his hands on his hips where his gun was, and I had just been threatened by a gun. When I started to cry, he said, "Well, your story doesn't fit, so we'll go. Just don't waste our time."

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thank you, Ms. Dhillon, that helps clarify many issues.

I have limited time.

Was your abuser, your ex-husband, ever criminally charged with any type of abuse?

Ms. Kamal Dhillon: Yes, he was.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Is he in a facility, or did he go to jail?

Ms. Kamal Dhillon: He did not go to jail. He was arrested, charged with assault and threatening to kill. He avoided that. He left the country, came back, and the case was thrown out.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: Thank you for that.

I will move to Witness 1 and Witness 2.

Thank you for your courage today in speaking about your situation. Honestly, bringing to light to this committee as we study the criminalization of coercive control... I think we have a unanimous understanding from the majority of witnesses we've heard that coercive control needs to be criminalized. However, there is concern about ensuring that the abuser isn't using it to manipulate.

I'm finding in these testimonies that there seems to be a very strong missing link of psychiatry in the family court system, when analyzing these personality disorders. The very terms that are supposed to be used to protect folks are then turned against them, and they become victims of them.

Witness 1, can you clarify how much money you had to spend based on the court order for these forced therapies?

Witness 1: Prior to the reunification camp, it was upwards of \$50,000 between the various treatments. The reunification camp was \$15,000 U.S., so that put it at about \$70,000. The aftercare was already up to \$18,000 after six months. I would say, with confidence, it's approaching \$100,000 in court-ordered therapy.

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: It's hard not to assume that somebody is obviously profiting from these court orders. Who decides on the therapist? For you to get a court order and have to go to the United States rather than Canada when you're Canadian, who is deciding which therapists are used to help these families?

Witness 1: Both parties will be asked to put forth submissions of recommended therapists. What will happen is that the recommendations put forth by the preferred parent will never be accepted, and then you will always end up going with a therapist who's been put forth by the non-preferred parent because you were told, if you are not in agreement, you are further frustrating the process. It's looked negatively upon if you don't co-operate and go with a recommendation they put forth. It is always a therapist who is put forth by the non-preferred parent, and then the court makes the final order on that.

• (1130)

Ms. Michelle Ferreri: I only have 30 seconds. I have so many more questions around that.

To Witness 2, a young girl, thank you for your brave testimony. You haven't seen your brother since this court order. I'm curious about how long it has been since you've seen your brother and if you are allowed to see him.

The Chair: If you could answer that in about 10 seconds, that would be great. Thank you.

Witness 2: Sure.

Now it has been since August 2023 that I have not seen my brother. Our order says that I am allowed to see him, but it has to be either at my father's residence or at a place agreed upon by my father. I have not engaged in that yet, and I have not seen him since last August.

The Chair: Thank you, Michelle, and all the witnesses.

Emmanuella, you have six minutes.

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

Thank you to all of our witnesses for the courage you have and for bringing forward your stories.

Witness 2, I have just a point of clarification. How old is your brother?

Witness 2: My brother is currently 14.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: He's younger than you. Okay.

I know, Witness 1, you spoke a little bit about the fact that there are people benefiting from this economically and that it's often the same therapists who people are being sent to and it's often the same judges who are making these decisions.

Can you speak a little bit more to that and explain whether you know of other people who have had a similar experience? What makes you say this?

Witness 1: Yes, for sure.

A review of, actually, the case law.... There is a website called CanLII that has a public website for case law. If you review the case law with regard to parental alienation, reunification therapy in camps, you will find consistency in the names of the therapists who have been ordered. What is really ironic is that, when I'm connecting with other parents like me from all over Ontario, we actually have the same clinicians in our cases. I'm in wherever I am, and then for somebody three hours away, it's still the same person being utilized for the provision of this care of reunification therapy.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Do you think that might be because there are not that many experts in this field or people in the field, or do you think it really is done for other reasons?

Witness 1: I think it's done for other reasons, and they're negative ones.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Okay. Thank you.

You said both parents get to put forward names of people they would like to use and that, for the preferred parent, his or her choices are never the ones who are used. However, then you're saying the same clinicians are the ones who are often getting chosen. Do you think there's a link there? Do you think the non-preferred parent is the one who is going into case law and seeing which ones are successful at this, and perhaps that might be the reason?

Witness 1: It gets very hard to explain. There is a subset of specific lawyers where their whole entire primary income and practice is based on the use of parental alienation. There's about a handful of lawyers in Ontario who use PA regularly and they use the same therapists. They've been using the same therapists for, I don't know, over 10 years. I also don't think there are therapists who have proven any sort of success with regard to their practice. There's no research or longitudinal studies that support this having been successful.

The challenge is also that there is case law that supports using these therapists, using these practices, so it gains credibility and it gains strength in family court. However, there is not case law that supports or demonstrates the actual reality and the devastation that occurs because of such orders.

• (1135)

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Thank you.

Ms. Thomson, I have a question for you. Thank you very much for what you've shared with us today. It was a different perspective, and one we hadn't heard yet.

I'm wondering what specific things you think we should be recommending to ensure that animal abuse—threats to animals or anything like that—in a situation where there is intimate partner violence can be used either by the courts or in a police report, or whatever it might be.

Ms. Kerri Thomson: Thank you for the question.

First of all, it's acknowledging that animal abuse is part of that whole spectrum of intimate partner violence. That would be the first step. The next step would be writing it in the case reports and police reports, checking on the animal and the police asking if there's any animal abuse when they are doing a domestic call-out.

If it goes to the courts, it's ensuring that those animal cruelty charges are not dropped in favour of a plea deal, because that often happens, unfortunately, especially if there are other charges on the table.

Unfortunately, that requires a lot of training on how to understand where the many facets of animal abuse fit into that intimate partner and family violence spectrum.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: If we were to recommend something on training, whether it's training judges or whomever, we should include animal abuse within that.

Ms. Kerri Thomson: Yes...as a form of coercive control and in the context of intimate partner and family violence.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: I see I have less than 30 seconds, so I won't bother asking another question.

I want to thank all of you once again for being here. Hopefully, we can all make a difference together through your testimony.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Emmanuella.

Next we have Andréanne.

You have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

I would like to thank the witnesses for providing us with their testimony to help the committee with this important study on coercive behaviour despite what it may cause them to relive.

It is always striking to see the extent to which, in 2024, this violence against women is so widespread, particularly in a domestic context, and it must still be denounced. As a woman, it is hard to accept and imagine.

Ms. Dhillon, in your opening remarks, you talked about the importance of training. You explained that your attacker was able to leave the country.

I am going to relate it to recent events here in Parliament and in Quebec, where the “Rebâtir la confiance” report was first tabled. There is now a pilot project on electronic bracelets.

How helpful to you could the ability to recognize coercive behaviour have been, coupled with means such as the electronic bracelet?

[*English*]

Ms. Kamal Dhillon: Thank you for the question.

For years, in every talk and every meeting with MPs, I've always brought up the need for ankle bracelets, but I have never seen anything go ahead. It is very important for us to have that for the safety

of the victim and the children—and even for him. He can say, “I wasn't there,” because he was monitored.

Yes, I totally agree, and I applaud you in Quebec for having that.

• (1140)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Thank you, Ms. Dhillon.

I keep coming back to you. In your testimony, you spoke very bravely about the physical assaults you experienced. You said that, from the first meetings you had with your abuser, you had sensed something. Could it be that before being hit, you were submitted to coercive behaviour that was insidious, manipulative or violent in a different way? Can you say that, in addition to physical violence, there have also been other forms of violence, including coercive behaviour?

[*English*]

Ms. Kamal Dhillon: Yes, there was.

As I said, I was 18 years old and did not know anything about relationships. On day one, after we got married, within hours I was dropped off at the emergency room because he had brutally raped me and sodomized me.

He was much older than me and I believe he chose me so that he could groom me because I was innocent. I had no idea what to expect. I went through a whole range of different abuses—physical, sexual, financial, emotional, mental and all sorts of things. Then there was cultural.

I hope that answers your question.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Andréanne Larouche: Yes, thank you, Ms. Dhillon.

In closing, I am going to talk about an aspect that has not been discussed as much by the committee.

I thought of this study a long time ago. Finally, Bill C-332 has made its way through the legislative process, and it is currently being studied in the Senate. Very little has been said about it here, but many articles on this bill were published last week in Quebec. The bill seeks to criminalize coercive conduct.

Have you had a chance to read the bill briefly, or have you heard about it? If so, do you have any recommendations for improving it? I see our study mainly as complementary work. There is a bill, but could we do something else while we wait for the bill to be passed and for coercive behaviour to be criminalized?

[*English*]

Ms. Kamal Dhillon: Unfortunately, I am not aware of the bill. I apologize

However, I do want to really stress that intimate partner violence is taken lightly in the courts. Because it's "domestic", I believe it is still very low on the spectrum for being criminally charged and criminally held.

I believe that having ankle bracelets, mandatory anger management, mandatory whatever for drinking problems and all of this.... Because it is the woman who is always fleeing, I think it's about time that the men—the abusers—have to leave the house instead of the victims.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dhillon.

Leah, you have six minutes.

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

I just want to thank all the witnesses, appreciating this is very difficult testimony for all of you to share.

I want to start off with Ms. Thomson.

Congratulations. I first want to mention about getting Bill C-332 amended to include animal abuse.

This is a big issue. It's true that a lot of people who have pets consider them to be like family members. They don't want to leave them because they're their main form of support, especially in abusive situations. They can talk to their pet and they won't say anything. It's their only form of support.

Do you agree that it's necessary for shelters, regarding the pets of people fleeing violence, to allow the pets into shelters?

• (1145)

Ms. Kerri Thomson: Unequivocally, yes. It should not even be an issue.

At present, only 30% of shelters in Ontario and 20% across Canada currently have the sort of facilities where they can accommodate pets in the shelters with them.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I understand that it might be difficult sometimes. Pets behave differently. We know that. We still love our pets.

Do you think it would be productive to have, for example, a partnership between an animal shelter and a women's shelter, so if somebody is fleeing violence they have a safe place to put their pet? Could it be a coordinated effort?

Ms. Kerri Thomson: Yes, and that's one of the things that Humane Canada has worked on over the past three years: building a safekeeping network among animal shelters within our membership as well as beyond that, so that they can partner with local violence shelters and offer foster homes or accommodations for the animals, and women and children can leave safely.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Are you having to fundraise for that independently?

Ms. Kerri Thomson: Oh yes.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Is there no government funding for that?

Ms. Kerri Thomson: The project was funded by WAGE—Women and Gender Equality—for three years, but the project finished on March 31 of this year. We've been continuing to fundraise and to put some of our efforts towards that.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Was your funding cut by WAGE?

Ms. Kerri Thomson: No. It was just the life of the project. It was three years.

Ms. Leah Gazan: It was the life of the project. Thank you so much.

Witness 2, I first want to thank you for your courage in sharing your testimony. That's very difficult to do.

You spoke about family reunification camps. We've heard a lot about these family reunification camps. I have done a bit of my own reading on family reunification camps, especially in the States, and I'm growing more concerned. Even the film you were talking about—brown eyes, blue eyes—is not really an appropriate film to be showing kids in that situation, to be quite honest. It just seems highly inappropriate.

Do you think we need to get rid of family reunification camps, particularly camps out of the country?

Witness 2: Yes, absolutely. I think that would be a very productive step here. I think there should be limits placed on sending children outside of the country for these camps.

There should also be bans placed on the court's ability to order children to go to the ones in Canada, because this isn't just an out-of-Canada problem. There are ones here as well. The one my brother and I went to happens to be outside the country, but yes, I think those need to be gotten rid of for sure.

Ms. Leah Gazan: From what I've heard, it seems a bit unreasonable that.... Speaking to Witness 1, I know that you had to foot the bill for reunification camps out of country. Were you given a choice at that time in the process to keep your kids in Canada, or was your only choice sending your kids to the United States?

Witness 1: Thank you for the question.

The non-preferred parent had recommended or requested the camp in the States. He had also requested another camp that takes place in Canada but has oversight from an umbrella organization that is running these camps in Canada and in the States.

I did counter with a program out of B.C. that didn't involve no-contact, custody reversal or a transport agent, but the courts favoured and ruled on his side. He did bring forth three witnesses from the U.S. to testify to support his narrative.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Were you given the option to suggest your own places to send your kids when the court made that order? Were you given the choice to put people on the table as well?

Witness 1: Prior to the court order, we had a 21-day trial, and during that time I did counter with another provider of reunification in B.C.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Was that provider of reunification taken into consideration at that time?

Witness 1: They were, yes, but in the end, the judge ruled for the non-preferred parent's option.

• (1150)

Ms. Leah Gazan: Is it not required that both parents agree on the place to send their child prior to the decision being made?

Witness 1: Absolutely not, and the judge knew that I was not in agreement with the no-contact order or custody reversal. She acknowledged that during our trial, and then ordered the exact opposite.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I would say that is—

The Chair: I'm going to have to leave it at that, Leah.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I'm sorry.

The Chair: Anna, you have five minutes.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses. From what I'm hearing, this whole system is broken, and we have a lot of work to do.

I'm going to go quickly because my time is limited.

I would like to speak to Ms. Dhillon.

Thank you for your courage. Thank you for speaking up not just for yourself and for your family, but for all the other victims.

I want to ask you a couple of questions, and I hope they are not too personal. Was this an arranged marriage?

Ms. Kamal Dhillon: Yes, it was.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: You mentioned culture. Is this something in your culture that is practised on a regular basis?

Ms. Kamal Dhillon: It is becoming less and less. However, when I got married, the only way to get married was through an arrangement.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: You mentioned in your testimony that no one helped you, and you mentioned your family. Why didn't they believe you? Why did they not stand up for you?

Ms. Kamal Dhillon: I believe, once again, it was their pride, their shame. In fact, I speak regularly about something my father said that I hope no father ever says to his child. After my abuser came out of his three days in jail after his arrest, my father said to me, "Baby girl, please go back. Stay with him. I'll come and get you one day." I said, "When, Dad?" He said, "I'll come for your body."

To him, that was more honourable than having a daughter who was a free woman, one whom he may consider or the community may consider a loose woman.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: I'm sorry. That was hard to swallow.

Ms. Kamal Dhillon: Can I just complete it with a few lines?

Mrs. Anna Roberts: Sure.

Ms. Kamal Dhillon: I answered my dad. I said, "No, Dad. He didn't kill me. You did."

Mrs. Anna Roberts: Good for you. Excellent.

I want to ask you something. Was your mother subject to the same treatment that you were subject to?

Ms. Kamal Dhillon: Not at all.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: You mentioned pride earlier. Was it something in the family? Was it pride because of a financial gain to the family?

I don't understand. Being a parent, I would do anything to protect my children. To me, it sounds like your father was an abuser.

Ms. Kamal Dhillon: To me, my father was a man who lived for others. In the temple, in the public eye, he wanted to show that everything was perfect for him.

He also said, in that same context, "If you leave him, who will marry your sister? What if your married sisters are sent back home because of you?" I had to carry the burden of my five sisters on my shoulders to protect them, while all along he would break my bones and abuse and torture me.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: What about your children? What are the mental aspects that this created for them?

Ms. Kamal Dhillon: My children have gone through hell. In fact, I didn't see my children for almost four years, the older two, and then I kidnapped the younger two and brought them through the border into Canada. I don't know if I shouldn't be mentioning any of that at a government conference.

My youngest son is with the RCMP. There are triggers. Each child of mine suffers from PTSD, as do I.

Mrs. Anna Roberts: Thank you for that.

My time is limited, and I want to go to Kerri next.

I want to tell you my experience. I rescued a dog from Dog Tales. This dog was a feeder dog. I'm not sure if the audience knows what a feeder dog is. A feeder dog is a dog that is used to amplify dog fights.

This dog was beaten and slashed. Their ribs were broken, but I have to tell you something: I chose to adopt this dog because I felt that this dog could teach me. In terms of what you said about allowing pets, pets are crucial to survivors of war. I know they're used to help dying patients. The Salvation Army and the Red Cross use them.

I commend you for that. I agree with the thought that we should allow them into our shelters, because it helps heal the individual. This dog went through so much, yet they were kind, loving and caring.

Kerri, thank you for bringing that to our attention.

• (1155)

The Chair: Thank you, Anna.

Lisa, you have five minutes.

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

I'll echo my colleagues and thank all the witnesses for their hard to hear but very valuable testimony today. I met Witness 1 and Witness 2 previously, and obviously I was very moved by their testimony and thought the whole committee should hear it.

Witness 1, you spoke about this already quite a bit today, but I'd like to just nail it down. You called it an "alienation industry". I'm wondering if you would flesh that out a bit more for us.

Witness 1: Sure. Thank you for the question.

When I'm referring to an "alienation industry", I am referring to a defined set of lawyers, social workers and psychologists who primarily benefit from the use of the parental alienation narrative in family courts.

Does that help clarify?

Ms. Lisa Hefner: Yes. Beyond that, you've mentioned that only a few players just keep getting used by the system over and over again and getting these same verdicts to the point where it's almost creating jurisprudence in this country. Something that may not have been an accepted term is becoming accepted just because it's being used over and over again. Is that what I understood from you?

Witness 1: Yes, I agree with that completely. What it's also doing is reinforcing their credibility within the jurisprudence and the case law that lawyers can bring forth—that in this case, this case and this case this individual was utilized to provide therapy. Then they get reordered yet again. However, I think I said earlier that there is no follow-up case law as to whether that reunification therapy was successful or what the actual outcomes and potentially traumatic impacts were to the children, such as Witness 2.

Ms. Lisa Hefner: As far as you know, what kind of research is there to show that parental alienation is even a real thing?

Witness 1: There is a lot of literature to support that it's not, that it is a pseudo-science. However, the people who promote parental alienation, though, will counter with different sources that they believe do support it. I am happy to connect the committee with professors, doctors, in Canada and the U.S., who would be able to address that more wholeheartedly than me.

Ms. Lisa Hefner: Because we only have limited time, if you're able to maybe reach out to some of those experts and ask them to submit a brief directly to the committee, that would be really helpful. We don't even need them to testify, but we can use their evidence when we're coming up with the final study.

I think I heard you say that there's increasing push-back against this practice in U.S. family courts to the extent that some of those so-called experts are coming and establishing their practices in Canada. Is that what I understood?

Witness 1: Yes, that is correct. The use of these remedies has been banned in six U.S. states. A practitioner in California has made it publicly known on social media that she has relocated to British Columbia to provide service.

Ms. Lisa Hefner: What can we learn from the states that have already put this in their legislation?

Witness 1: I think that it's hard to say. A lot of the legislation is new, but I think a meaningful point for the committee today would be that eliminating the remedies associated with PA will decrease

the use of PA in court. However, if coercive control is criminalized and PA is not banned—this is a little bit confusing to explain—instead of living through the remedies, we will have a criminal record and potentially face jail time.

• (1200)

Ms. Lisa Hefner: Let me just see if I'm understanding what you're saying. You believe that if we criminalize coercive control it will be used against the victim rather than the aggressor, unless there's also a stipulation about parental alienation.

Witness 1: Yes, exactly. I'm also saying that, if the remedies are banned and parental alienation is not prohibited, instead of being a victim of the current remedies, I would potentially have been in jail and have a criminal record.

Ms. Lisa Hefner: By banning the remedies, we've been talking about banning reunification therapy or banning the ability of a judge to force a particular therapist or therapy upon a child or a complainant. Is that what you mean by banning the remedies?

Witness 1: Yes, I'm sorry. I misunderstood the question. Thank you; I agree.

Ms. Lisa Hefner: I don't know if I worded the question well, so it's not your fault.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Lisa.

Ms. Lisa Hefner: I'm out of time.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Andréanne, you have two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

In my second round of questions, I'm going to turn to Ms. Thomson.

Before this meeting, I attended a meeting where I had the opportunity to discuss the important role that pets play in the lives of families. When an incident or tragedy occurs, we also wonder what we should do with the animals. So that was one of the topics that was discussed.

My colleague Ms. Gazan talked about the fact that a small percentage of shelters for battered women accept animals. This is problematic, since animals are sometimes part of the victim's path to healing. In addition, if we criminalize coercive behaviour, more situations can be reported and therefore more women will be eligible to get help from an organization in order to heal. We also know that animals can often serve as a form of therapy. I once had the opportunity to speak with a woman who used, among other things, equine-assisted therapy, with horses, to help women who were victims of violence get better. I would therefore like to explore potential solutions with you.

Do you have any concrete solutions to address the need for women and families to take their pets with them after they denounce an abuser, for example? Is it a matter of making more room in shelters, in spite of the issues it may cause?

[English]

Ms. Kerri Thomson: Basically, what we would like to see is anything that keeps the women and children—the families who love the animal—together, so that it reduces that trauma of separating the animal from them, which we understand is not necessarily possible at all times. The issue is that the shelters also don't have enough space for the women and children who need their services, let alone bringing animals with them.

Keeping animals, victims and survivors together is the most important thing for us. There's not an easy solution, because it requires so many different things. We need more affordable housing. We need more shelters that accept animals regardless of allergies, so there has to be space for people with allergies to animals. It's not an easy solution and it's not going to be cheap, but it is something that needs to be recognized.

You also mentioned other tragedies like emergency situations. People don't necessarily think about the pets and the pets being left behind, but in hurricane Helene just last weekend, a lot of people would not leave.

I hope that answers your question and that I didn't go off on a tangent.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Thomson.

Leah, you have two and a half minutes.

• (1205)

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thanks.

I want to thank you for this. People often don't think about these things in terms of giving people options to leave.

I have a question. A lot of animals are given status as emotional support animals, and it's very common. For a person fleeing violence, should they end up at a shelter, do you think there should be a way to license that animal to become an emotional support animal for the victim?

Ms. Kerri Thomson: That would be one idea to do that. The problem with the emotional support animal is that there are no licensing standards for it. It's only for service animals, so there would have to be a whole other standard, regulations and that sort of thing. I wouldn't say no to that, because that's technically what their role is with any victims of violence—they're supporting.

Ms. Leah Gazan: I ask that because very often, when somebody is fleeing violence, it's a very vulnerable time. To have that animal with them, comforting them all the time, do you think it would make the process a bit easier for that individual?

Ms. Kerri Thomson: Yes, absolutely.

Ms. Leah Gazan: Thank you so much.

I have limited time, but I just wanted to thank you, Ms. Dhillon, for your testimony.

You spoke a little about your family. One of the things we have spoken about a lot in FEWO is the importance of having places for women that serve diverse communities and specialize in different areas. For example, in my riding, there was a movement to open a shelter for women of the Muslim faith, for example.

Do you think that would have helped, in your situation, to go to a place where people understood maybe some of the cultural norms that you came from and that you spoke about, including arranged marriages? Would that have made it easier for you so that you didn't have to explain so much?

Ms. Kamal Dhillon: That's a really good suggestion. In fact, probably just 10 years ago, PICS, a progressive intercultural network in Surrey, opened a shelter for South Asian women, which helps a lot because, yes, they understand the culture. They understand the language, and they understand the whole dynamic surrounding arranged marriages, especially when language is a barrier. I think that really is very supportive to the victim.

The Chair: Excellent.

Dominique, you have five minutes.

[Translation]

Mrs. Dominique Vien (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis, CPC): Thank you, witnesses, for being here. It certainly takes courage to be with us today. Sincerely, we feel very sad hearing your stories because of the incredible violence you went through. I am thinking of Witness 2, who is 17 years old. This is unacceptable. She also has a brother who is even younger than her and who is therefore even more vulnerable.

Ms. Dhillon, according to our research about you, and as you pointed out in your opening remarks, you do a lot of education, and that is the mission you have set for yourself today.

Who is this education and awareness-raising aimed at? What messages are you conveying? What are you teaching them?

Obviously, there were people whose awareness was not raised, particularly the court.

You are a speaker and you say that you do education, so I would like you to tell me who your target audiences are, what your messages for them are and what results you achieve.

[English]

Ms. Kamal Dhillon: Thank you for the question.

I speak to a broad range of agencies. I'll start with the police.

I regularly speak at the Justice Institute of British Columbia for the training of new police recruits in municipal policing. First of all, I tell them how to approach a victim and how to talk to a victim. I tell them about the body language. I tell them not to stand in front of them and to give them space. I show them my injuries. I show them pictures through slides.

This is a question that so many of us victims have been asked: “If it was that bad, why didn't you just leave?” My approach to that question is “Do you believe it wasn't that bad?” The violence, no matter if it's hidden, if there are no signs, such as sexual, such as emotional or threats and all of that, is still abuse, and it still causes a lot of harm. In every situation, take us seriously. Don't give up on us.

I also speak to different agencies and to a lot of first nation communities and schools.

• (1210)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Dominique Vien: Ms. Dhillon, I am not a psychiatrist or a psychologist, let alone a physician. However, we know of narcissistic manipulators. We have seen some. We can recognize that, and I do not understand why people in law enforcement do not recognize them.

Be that as it may, one cannot blame a woman for having to deal with a narcissistic manipulator who also engages in coercive behaviour. It is very difficult to get out of a situation like that.

Thank you for the message you are conveying. It is extremely important. I urge you to continue. Go and train these people who deal with victims in their offices and in their police stations. It is very important.

I do not have much time left, just enough to ask one last question.

As a victim, what services did you need and should have been provided to you?

Did you receive any services? Were they sufficient?

If not, what services would you have liked to benefit from? What did you need?

[*English*]

Ms. Kamal Dhillon: Thank you.

I'm no psychiatrist, either. However, I did not receive any sort of counselling or support, and neither did my children at the time. I stress, even to this day, that I wish I could go to speak to a counsellor, a therapist, and just for whatever is still in there, the pain that I carry, I wish that I could unburden it now.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Dominique Vien: Thank you very much, Ms. Dhillon.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Dominique.

Sonia, you have five minutes.

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

Thank you, witnesses, for your courage once again. I start my questions with Ms. Dhillon.

Ms. Dhillon, you spent a fair amount of time advocating for education, so if we can talk about the education for children and youth on coercive control.... We all know that many vulnerable young

people may not have examples to follow and may not be aware of what coercive control is.

Are you aware of any provincial programs that already exist in Canada? Are school districts implementing them?

Ms. Kamal Dhillon: There was one in British Columbia—I forget what it was called because it was a number of years ago—but in all honesty, no, unless there's a guest speaker. When I go to high schools, I speak on schoolyard bullying and on dating violence. I speak to both girls and boys, and I tell them to recognize controlling behaviour: What does it look like when, say, your boyfriend keeps calling you, checking up on you, doesn't want you to have other friends and takes you away from your family?

These are some of the examples, but I have a whole list. These are some of the things that they need to look out for, “He doesn't just love you and care for you, and that's why he's calling you a hundred times a day. No. Now he's controlling you. He wants to know your movements.”

• (1215)

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: You talked about combatting the cultural aspect. I know that we have the Safe Centre of Peel, where they can get more help and with many organizations in one place to help with children, groceries, legal, job-finding—a one-stop shop where you can get help in one spot. You talked about language barriers and that people don't know what their rights and legal protections are.

Do you think those kinds of services can help women who don't know what their rights are?

Ms. Kamal Dhillon: Yes, that's a great idea. However, when a woman is fleeing abuse, her first thing is safety and trying to ground herself. She needs support in legal services, in getting custody and in, say, housing and counselling, so I think that finding a job comes way down.... However, yes, that would be very helpful. Transition houses...and I worked in one for many years. The job for that immediate place, for the shelter, is the safety of the women and the children.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: My next question is for Witness 1.

Thank you for sharing your heartbreaking testimony about the reunification camp therapy. What was the rationale from the judge for recommending this therapy in the U.S.? You said that even though parents are recommending the therapist, the judge is not admitting that. What is the rationale from the judge for recommending this therapy in the United States?

Witness 1: Thank you for question. It's a hard one to answer, to be honest.

The non-preferred parent, like I said, did put forth a reunification camp in Canada, as well as the one in the States. The provider of the one in the States was called as a witness to testify. There were two other American witnesses who were called to testify as well, as a way to convince the judge that this would be a positive solution and the right choice.

Ms. Sonia Sidhu: I want to follow up on this question.

Therapists are regulated by provinces and territories. For example, in Ontario it is the College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario. Are you aware of whether the provincial professional colleges are taking steps to stop the use of reunification therapy, and are you aware of the work being done in provinces, such as Ontario, to regulate this?

Witness 1: I did reach out to the Ontario College of Social Workers to let them know I was experiencing this. The individual from the U.S. providing the therapy was indeed not regulated with the Ontario College of Social Workers to provide telepractice or in-person therapy to our children. The Ontario College of Social Workers did provide a letter. They asked me to give that to the judge and opposing counsel in my case and the service provider herself, but that didn't carry any weight.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ladies and gentlemen, that concludes our panel for today. On behalf of the entire committee, I would like to thank all of the witnesses for their appearance.

This also concludes our witness testimony for the study on coercive behaviour. Thank you to everyone who has contributed to this very disturbing but important study.

At this point, we will be excusing our witnesses and suspending for five to 10 minutes while we go in camera.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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