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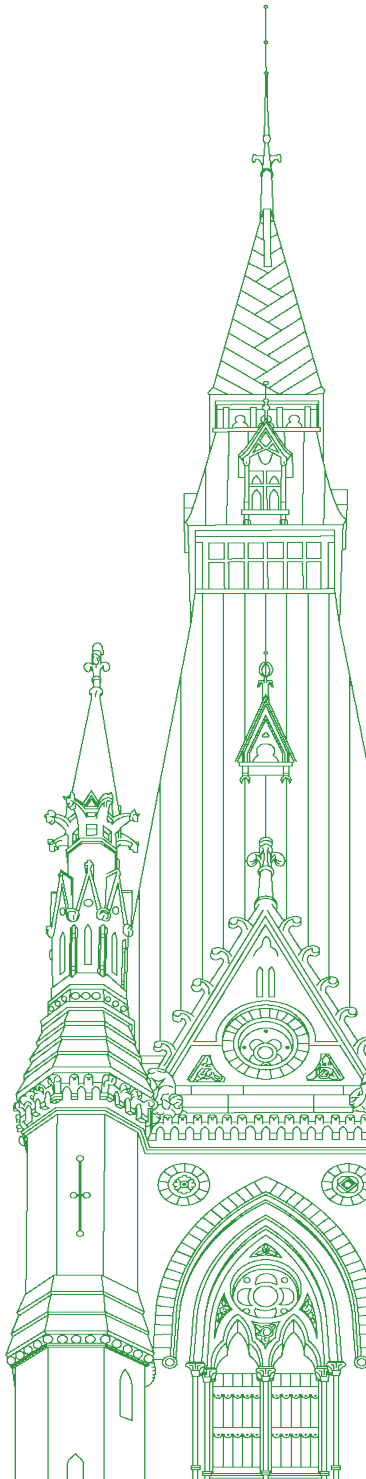

Chair: Robert Morrissey

Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

Thursday, November 5, 2026

● (1105)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Robert Morrissey (Egmont, Lib.)): Welcome, colleagues.

I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 54 of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

[*English*]

Pursuant to the motion adopted on Tuesday, September 22, the committee is meeting on EI parental leave in Canada.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members, as well as witnesses, are appearing in person and online. The one witness appearing online has been sound-tested and approved.

Before we begin, I have a couple of observations. I would remind all those participating to silence their devices as well as to refrain from tapping on the microphone boom, for the protection of our translators.

You have the option and the right to participate in today's meeting in either official language. Choose the channel that gives you the official language in which you wish to participate. If you're appearing online, click on the globe icon at the bottom of your Surface. Choose the official language of your choice.

If there is an interruption, please get my attention. We will suspend while it is corrected.

I would remind everyone to please keep your earpiece and interpretation on to continue to participate in the meeting regardless of the language being used in the room.

Please direct all questions through the chair. Wait until I recognize you before you proceed.

Before we begin, I do have to advise you that sometimes the testimony we receive can be disturbing. I'd like to provide a warning. We will be discussing a variety of experiences that may relate to sensitive topics. This may be triggering to viewers with similar experiences. If any participants feel distressed or need help, please advise the clerk.

For all witnesses and all members of Parliament, it is important to recognize that these are very difficult discussions, so let's try to be compassionate in our interventions.

For the first hour, I would like to welcome, as an individual, Alanna Clark, working mom and motherhood content creator, appearing in person; Andrea Doucet, distinguished professor, Brock University, by video conference; and from Cardus, Peter Jon Mitchell, family program director.

I would remind everyone that they have up to five minutes for their opening statement.

Ms. Clark, we'll begin with you.

Alanna Clark (Working Mom and Motherhood Content Creator, As an Individual): My name is Alanna Clark. I'm a working mom to an almost three-year-old girl named Victoria. I live in the GTA, and I'm expecting twins in March.

I'm also a content creator. I share my life as a Canadian mom with a combined audience of over 40,000 people. When I shared with my audience that I was coming to Ottawa to advocate on their behalf, I had over 100 responses from Canadian moms sharing their thoughts and experiences.

I started sharing motherhood content with the goal of showing my audience what a positive motherhood experience could look like. Today, I have the opportunity to advocate for improvements to the maternity leave system in Canada to benefit all Canadian moms and moms to be.

First, I want to share a little bit about my experience on maternity leave. For the first six months of my leave, I had a top-up from my employer. For the next six months, I did not. During this time, I lost my mom following her long battle with illness. I expected to return to work after 12 months, but I couldn't find suitable child care. I was forced to extend my leave to 15 months and then 18 months, when my daughter finally got a toddler spot at a local Montessori. During that final six months, I received no EI and all household bills fell to my husband.

EI was and is designed to provide temporary income support when people experience interruption in their employment. Maternity leave is not simply a bump along the road; it is a commitment to raising the next generation of Canadians. It allows mothers to recover from childbirth, gives parents time to care for and bond with their newborn and promotes maternal and family well-being. As it stands, the system excludes many mothers, including students and the self-employed.

It also has another serious flaw. More women than you would ever know lose their jobs while on maternity leave and are unable to speak publicly if they're able to get a settlement from their employer. When a new mother in an already vulnerable place in her career loses her job while on maternity leave, she does not qualify for EI. At the time when she is expected to return to work and has burned through her savings, the safety net that is meant to catch those in need of income support due to job loss is not there for her. Instead, she meets the concrete floor and a harder job market to return to than the one she left a year and a half before.

Maternity leave does not need to be, nor should it be, part of EI. If it has to be, then it needs to be treated differently. Many women end up having children close in age, such as those with two children under two. The harsh reality is that even if a mother has paid into EI for a decade, she must cut her first leave short to earn 600 more hours for the next one, even if she has worked 20,000 hours in the preceding decade and has never otherwise drawn from the system.

The economy is hard for my generation. The payments offered by maternity leave make it harder. Quite simply, 55% of $68,900 is not enough to live on when you live in a major urban centre like Toronto or Vancouver and have built your life around a full-time income. At a time when costs have increased in your life, your pay has hit an all-time low. This is particularly challenging for middle- and higher-income earning women, who face a significant financial setback when taking maternity leave. The rates paid for maternity leave need to be higher. The calculation for the child benefit needs to account for your new lower income and must provide payments when they are most needed. Something needs to be done to address the significant tax bill that many new mothers face while on maternity leave.

Another question of fairness comes into play for parents of multiples, which I'm about to be. Our maternity payments remain the same. Adopted infants and children born through surrogacy get less time with their parents as their parents did not give birth to them.

Perhaps most important to me personally is the fact that new mothers deserve flexibility. We deserve to be able to work part time and earn additional income while on leave, without facing a clawback. As a content creator, I sporadically have the opportunity to produce sponsored content with brands. The content I produce does not take away from my time as a mother, just like writing a news article would not take away time from a journalist on leave, but every time I did this on maternity leave, I lost a week of EI payments despite the fact that my total income and earnings remained significantly lower than when I was working.

The nature of work has changed, and many people have side hustles and jobs in the gig economy which help support their families. Maternity leave EI does not reflect that. A mother should have the flexibility to choose what is best for her family and have the ability to earn additional income without the government clawing it back. She's likely paid into EI for a decade already.

I appreciate that this committee is considering this issue. On behalf of working moms across Canada, I ask for greater flexibility; increased payments and a system that considers a lifetime of contributions rather than 600 hours in a specific period; and protections for moms who lose their jobs while on maternity leave.

● (1110)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Clark.

Ms. Doucet, you have the floor.

Andrea Doucet (Distinguished Professor, Brock University, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

Congratulations on the unanimous passage of Evan's law last week, a bill this committee shaped by carefully listening to grieving families. It's proof of what's possible when parental leave is treated as a matter of care rather than only an employment issue. This follows on from what Alanna was just talking about.

My name is Andrea Doucet. I'm a distinguished professor of sociology at Brock University, and I'm a former tier one Canada research chair in gender work and care. For more than 25 years, I've studied parental leave, fathers and caregiving. I also co-lead the International Network on Leave Policies and Research, a global think tank that spans over 50 countries.

Today, I'm going to start with a story and then offer six recommendations.

The story is about two fictional fathers, Jean-Guy from Quebec and Jerry from Ottawa, and is based on research that I've done.

Jean-Guy lives in Gatineau. Jerry lives in Ottawa. Both earn $105,000 a year. They both welcomed baby girls in September. Jean-Guy in Gatineau took five weeks of paternity leave. This was his individual, non-transferable entitlement not dependent on whether his partner was eligible for leave time. He was paid 70% of his wages, up to a ceiling of $103,000. He earned about $1,400 a week while on leave.

Meanwhile, across the river, Jerry in Ottawa was also hoping to take five weeks with his new baby under the EI parental sharing benefit, but he could only take leave if his partner qualified for and took her leave time. His partner didn't qualify. She didn't meet the requirement of 600 insurable hours in the year before giving birth. Even if Jerry could have taken this leave, the wage replacement would have been 55% up to a ceiling of $68,900. The most he could have taken home was $729 a week, about $660 a week less than Jean-Guy. The total dollar difference between these two fathers was about $3,300 over the same five weeks of leave, so Jerry did not take any leave time with his new baby.

The story highlights three problems with EI parental leave: access, adequacy and design. My six recommendations, which I'll share now, address these problems.

One, improve coverage. The 600-hour EI rule means that about one in four mothers outside Quebec receives no benefits at all. Quebec's threshold is $2,000 in earnings, and about one in eight mothers is left out. That's half the rate for the rest of Canada. My recommendation is simple: Look to Quebec. Replace the 600-hour rule with a low-earnings threshold of about $2,000. Provide a CCB supplement for parents who don't qualify and cover self-employed workers automatically.

Two, raise the wage replacement rate towards 70% or 75%. Raise the earnings ceiling. Canada offers some of the longest leave among OECD countries at some of the lowest rates of pay.

Three, create an individual, non-transferable entitlement for fathers, second parents and single parents paid at about 70% to 75% of wages. In Quebec, paternity leave is a father's individual right, and about seven in 10 fathers take it. In the rest of Canada, the parental sharing benefit is a couples benefit, and about three in 10 fathers take it.

Four, build in flexibility in terms of how and when leave is taken. In Sweden, parents can take paid leave in full days, half days or even an hour a day, and they can save some of their leave time until their child is 12 years old.

Five, change how we think about parental leave. People who care for infants and young children are not unemployed. They are not looking for work. They are working. Care work is work.

Six, design EI parental benefits as both an employment policy and a care policy. As a care policy, it should align with the national school food program, CCB and early learning and child care.

One lesson I've learned from my European colleagues is this: For every child in Canada, there should be no gap between the end of well-paid parental leave and high-quality early learning and child care.

Thank you.

● (1115)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Doucet.

We'll now go to Mr. Mitchell for up to five minutes.

Peter Jon Mitchell (Family Program Director, Cardus): Thank you for the invitation to appear today, and thank you for the work of this committee in supporting families across Canada.

Cardus is a non-partisan think tank dedicated to clarifying and strengthening, through research and dialogue, the ways in which people, institutions and government work together for the common good. I direct our family program at Cardus, which studies family formation and examines ways to enhance family stability.

Paid parental leave provides economic security and time for parents to develop important attachment bonds with children. Paid leave is correlated to increased infant health, lower risk of postpartum depression, increased father involvement, and a lower risk of union dissolution.

Paid-leave policies serve two interests that exist in a degree of tension with one another. The employment insurance benefit is intended to attach parents to the paid workforce while also providing financial security and time to forge strong parent-child attachment during the early years of a child's life. This tension requires careful consideration when formulating policy options.

Not all employed parents can access paid parental leave. Parents who work part time, who work in precarious work arrangements or who are full-time students may not meet the federal eligibility threshold of 600 hours of insurable employment. The current federal EI threshold can prevent some parents from accessing future parental leave when they choose to work fewer hours in order to provide unpaid caregiving. Some parents are unable to achieve the threshold before subsequent birth or adoption.

Our first recommendation is to reconsider the eligibility threshold. As was previously mentioned, the Quebec parental insurance plan threshold of $2,000 of insurable earnings provides an interesting proposal. An individual earning Quebec's minimum wage at $16.60 per hour can be eligible after just 121 hours of work, compared to the federal threshold of 600 hours. Data suggests that about 90% of births in 2023 were covered under QPIP, compared to 78% under the federal EI system.

Our second recommendation is to update the family supplement threshold for lower-income families. The phase-out threshold of $25,921 in net annual household income has not changed since 1997. At the time, the phase-out threshold matched the net family income threshold at which the Canada child tax benefit began to decrease. The CCTB increase was based on inflation, but the family supplement remained unadjusted. A non-binding motion in the House of Commons in 2003 to increase the family supplement phase-out was adopted but never implemented. Quebec adjusted the threshold to match earnings equivalent to 40 hours per week at minimum wage. The new threshold is indexed to inflation and will be adjusted to future increases in minimum wage.

Applying the same method, based on the federal minimum wage of $18.15 per hour, would result in a phase-out threshold of about $37,752 annually.

Finally, given the health and development benefits associated with paid parental leave, the committee could explore extending the length of leave. The evidence shows that the introduction of the extended leave option under the current EI system did not reduce the likelihood that a parent would return to work. Yet, parents who opted for the extended benefit were more likely to be in partnered families, have higher income, work unionized jobs, and have access to wage top-ups. This suggests that other considerations regarding access to paid leave would need to be addressed before any consideration for extending the duration of leave.

Paid parental leave offers families some stability at a time of significant life transition. More families should have access to this important benefit.

Thank you.

● (1120)

The Chair: We'll begin our first round of questioning, the six-minute round, with Madam Cobena.

Sandra Cobena (Newmarket—Aurora, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, everybody. Thank you for your testimony and for sharing your experiences.

Ms. Clark, in your opening statement, you mentioned that, on your social media platforms, you requested some feedback from mothers on the flexibility in the current EI system and the parental leave system. Can you share some of those responses with us?

Alanna Clark: Sure. I had about 100 responses to an Instagram story. If you are not familiar with it, an Instagram story lives online for 24 hours. I had about 100 responses. Some of the key themes, I would say, were women asking for our system in the rest of Canada to be more like Quebec's. There were a lot of requests for a higher payout, because a lot of women who identified themselves as middle- to higher-income earners felt like there was a significant cliff.

There were some other comments that I thought were really interesting. I know a number of women who will outwardly say that they're proudly one and done, that they're happy to have one child and that it fits for their lifestyle, but when they open up a little bit more, the reality is that a second child is not in the cards for them financially. They can't afford to take another leave. They found leave crippling, and they're worried about the ongoing cost of raising a child.

I think it is reprehensible when there are families out there who want to have two kids.... I don't think that having two kids should be a luxury good afforded only to higher-income families. I would hope that any Canadian who wants to have two children should be able to have two or more. Sometimes the third is a surprise, like in my case. The number of women who opened up on that was fascinating.

Another thing that I saw a fair bit was a request for flexibility. The request was to be able to earn some income on maternity leave without a significant clawback. I speak to my example as a content creator. I'll be honest that sometimes I don't like to lead with that because people can perceive content creation as superfluous. I know that, in my case, it's really been about building a strong community of moms living in the GTA. Whether it's content creation or people who make crafts and sell them at a craft fair or maybe a journalist who writes some articles for a blog, there are so many ways that women are able to earn income that doesn't take away from fundamentally full-time caring for their child. They should still be able to supplement their income. It feels deeply unfair that, with the payout from EI being so low, if a woman tries to supplement that, she gets punished by the government.

The other thing that came up a lot was how punishing women find tax time. Specifically, if they received a top-up from their employer, that's not always reflected in the tax that's taken off EI. In my case, I owed a couple thousand dollars, and I'm very grateful that it wasn't a financial struggle for my husband and me to cover. I know that's not the case for many. There have also been some requests that perhaps EI not be taxed, that it be a non-taxable benefit.

Sandra Cobena: Thank you for that. It's the same feedback that I've received.

Every mother and every baby is different, and they have different needs. Whether it's one child, multiple children or perhaps a special needs child, the needs are different, but the system is rigid. The complexity increases with the financial pressures because of the affordability crisis that we're living through.

Could you speak a little more about the difference it would make for a mother if they're able to return to work temporarily or earn a bit of income on the side? What would that mean for the financial security of the family, and what would that mean for family planning?

Alanna Clark: I'm going to start with an answer that addresses mental health.

One of the most fascinating things is that when I was on maternity leave, I would share videos of me taking my daughter to the zoo, something which I thought was a perfectly normal thing, and I would receive comments. I remember one mother commented, “How do you leave the house without your husband? I have no idea how to do this.” It was interesting, because she didn't have the confidence to get out. I said, “You just start, you just try. You start small. You go to the grocery store, and you build your way up.” The minute she started doing that, she commented that my encouragement helped improve her postpartum depression.

The flip side of that is I know many mothers who aren't able to go out and do those enriching things like going to the zoo, a circle time or swim lessons because of the financial pressures that maternity leave brings on their family. I think that it would have an incredible benefit on maternal mental health and postpartum depression if women had a little bit more financial security during their maternity leave.

When it comes to family planning, I think it's really unfortunate in the current system when families choose to have children close together, specifically looking at two under two. I know a mother who's going to have maybe a 14- or 15-month age gap. She's unable to return to work because her son has such significant care needs. For her, that means her next maternity leave with her next baby isn't going to have any funding. She's very concerned for what her financial reality is going to look like.

I think that, when you offer increased payment, you're offering family stability. You're offering women the opportunity to have a more meaningful maternity leave. You're offering the opportunity for children to have more enrichment when they're with their parents. At the end of the day, when parents are stressed, I do believe that comes through in raising their children. It comes through in their stress levels. It comes through in how they treat their children and in the way they can be present for their children. I don't think it's necessarily a lot of money from government that needs to happen, but it needs to be better than it is now.

● (1125)

Sandra Cobena: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Cobena.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Joseph, you have the floor for six minutes.

Natilien Joseph (Longueuil—Saint-Hubert, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I particularly want to thank you for your leadership.

Ms. Clark, thank you very much for being here today and for your courage.

We know that parental leave allows parents to devote time to caring for and nurturing their newborn child, among other things.

How could allowing surviving parents to receive the remaining benefits help recognize the importance of this caregiving work provided to children?

[*English*]

Alanna Clark: Thank you for the question. I am listening through an interpreter, so I'm doing my best.

When it comes to how to recognize the importance of caregiving work, I think you have to recognize that, when a mother is on maternity leave, it's not a bump in the road. It's not an unplanned one-month or two-month period for which she needs to cover some bills. This is a 12-month or, now, the opportunity for an 18-month commitment to raising a child.

I think that our other presenter onscreen made some really great comments there as well, that it's care work. If you were to adopt, for the rest of Canada, what Quebec has—with that higher income ceiling, a higher earning threshold and then a higher payout—you'd be offering more flexibility and stability, and you'd be offering a payment that is a little more in line with what families are earning when they're working.

I think one thing to keep in mind is that, when you are a working mom—perhaps you've purchased a home in the greater Toronto area or Vancouver—you are facing crippling costs, and you probably need a home in that area to maintain your job near one of those two big economic centres. It doesn't work very well when your income goes from, perhaps, $100,000 or $120,000 down to $33,000 for the year. I know a lot of people who, when they're planning for their maternity leave, end up saving in advance. That's something I'm doing right now. I'm saving to make sure that I have a comfortable maternity leave.

I think you recognize it by recognizing that women who are on maternity leave have jobs. We're not unemployed. We are taking a break from traditional paid employment to care for our families.

[*Translation*]

Natilien Joseph: I have another question for you regarding the risks.

What risks might arise if surviving parents were required to return to work quickly because that financial support had been interrupted?

[*English*]

Alanna Clark: Would you mind repeating the question? I had a little bit of trouble following the translator.

[*Translation*]

Natilien Joseph: What risks might arise if surviving parents were required to return to work quickly because that financial support had been interrupted?

● (1130)

[*English*]

Alanna Clark: One challenge is that the system is so binary, such that, if the mother or father goes back to work—maybe they need to go back to work for only a month or two—then their EI claim for maternity leave is over, and they're not able to have that flexibility to go back and forth.

If there were greater flexibility, you would offer families the ability to make the decision that makes the most sense for them, their financial security and their financial reality. That could include a bit of part-time work. I think many people have, for example, grandparents who can support with child care. If you have a grandma watch a child for four or six hours a week, I don't think that takes away from the fact that the mother is still fundamentally caring for the child. That just gives the mother a bit of flexibility to earn some additional income.

I think we need to think about maternity leave not as something that parents have to survive. It should be an opportunity for families to thrive and to start that new beautiful chapter in a secure and happy way. I think that a lot of women, a lot of families, experience a lot of stress and anxiety because they don't have that financial security.

[*Translation*]

Natilien Joseph: Thank you very much for sharing your expertise with us, Ms. Clark.

[*English*]

Alanna Clark: I hope that addresses the question.

[*Translation*]

Natilien Joseph: I will now turn to Ms. Doucet.

Much of your research has focused on parental leave and the sharing of caregiving responsibilities.

When a parent dies during parental leave, what impact can ending parental benefits have on the surviving parent and child?

Andrea Doucet: Thank you very much for the question.

[*English*]

I'm going to respond in English, which is my first language.

I know that, certainly, the committee will be looking at the issue of the death of a parent, building on Evan's law. I think there needs to be more. This is my argument about EI parentally being not just an employment policy but a care policy. The same kind of logic that went into Evan's law should go into this particular issue as well. There needs to be a recognition that the family needs care and flexibility.

I can give you one example. Again, it's drawn from Sweden, which is the gold standard for really strong parental leave policies around the world. They actually have the option of transferring some of their parental leave benefits to another family member, to a grandparent or someone in their kin network. That could be a possibility if there were death of a parent. I mean, this is just the absolute worst thing that could happen for anybody. My daughter has a two-year-old. If something happened to her or her husband, I think there should be flexibility and compassion. This is where the logic of care and not employment should be the first consideration.

You asked about caregiving. One thing I wanted to add was—

The Chair: Madam—

Andrea Doucet: Yes.

[*Translation*]

Thank you. I'll stop there.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Larouche, you have six minutes.

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

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being with us today.

What I take away most from what I've heard is that we need to place greater value on what's often referred to as invisible labour. In Quebec, this cause has been championed for over 25 years by Afeas, the Association féministe d'éducation et d'action sociale, now known as Égalya, which has called for the first Tuesday in April to be designated a national day recognizing invisible labour.

In fact, that was the first study I proposed to the Standing Committee on the Status of Women after I was elected in 2019. The purpose was to encourage reflection on this issue. We therefore conducted a study on invisible labour, and one of its first recommendations was to establish a national day to recognize invisible labour. We didn't want it to be merely another date on the calendar; rather, we wanted a day on which people could collectively reflect on how to better recognize this work. I would remind members that invisible labour includes the work performed by caregivers and volunteers, but also the work done by parents within their families.

I see you nodding, Ms. Doucet. In the course of your research, I imagine that you've addressed the issue of better recognizing invisible labour.

● (1135)

Andrea Doucet: Thank you very much for the question.

[*English*]

Yes, unpaid care work, like paid care work for early learning and child care and elder care, is the lowest paid work in our society, and that continues. For me, this is why there needs to be a shift in our thinking, in our imagination, about what care work is. This, then, applies to parental leave and how it's not just an employment policy. The invisible work of care never ends. It's emotional. It's the thinking work. It's the feeling work. It's the constant.

A national day would be excellent to recognize it, and then higher payments for it. To recognize and to value is to actually financially recognize it as well, because it isn't just care here, over in a corner. It's actually that you need finances to put a roof over the child's head, to feed the child, to buy formula if the mother isn't breastfeeding. Financially supporting it, increasing the wage replacement, increasing the ceiling, increasing the low-income settlement, all of those matter to families, so value it, not just through symbolism but actually in real practice.

[*Translation*]

Andréanne Larouche: There's a petition on this matter. The signature period for it ended in September. I'll be tabling it in the House shortly. It comes from the team at Afeas, now known as Égalya, which is taking some getting used to for me. Point 5 of the petition specifically calls on the government to "[d]esignate the first Tuesday in April as National Invisible Work Day to raise public awareness and challenge stereotypes".

That's exactly what you said in your remarks, Ms. Doucet. We need to change how parental leave is perceived. That's part of it too. It ties in with what you said in your opening remarks.

Ms. Clark, I saw you nodding as well. You, too, believe that this perception needs to change. As you pointed out, parents on parental leave are not on vacation. Quite the contrary.

What do you think about the idea of setting aside a day to collectively reflect on the measures the government could introduce to better support all forms of invisible labour?

[*English*]

Alanna Clark: I'll take that question as being directed at me.

[*Translation*]

Andréanne Larouche: Yes, my question was directed at you, Ms. Clark.

[*English*]

Alanna Clark: That's perfect.

I think it's great to have a day to recognize it. I think that's a meaningful first step the government can take. However, as our colleague said, that day needs to be backed by real action. It needs to be backed by policies with financial backing that make maternity leave more accessible and enjoyable for families.

When I think about the invisible work of care, one thing that became very clear to me while I was on maternity leave was that I was working every day. I was taking care of my child. I was often solo parenting. My husband has a very demanding career. Thanks to having those 18 months, I was able to have a very positive nursing journey with my daughter, which was something very special to me. Let's be clear: All of that was work. I think that we do a disservice when anyone implies that women on maternity leave are on some kind of break or vacation.

[*Translation*]

Andréanne Larouche: Thank you very much.

It's true that it would be better to recognize this leave. Time is moving quickly, so I may return to this during my second round.

Ms. Doucet, I have a quick question for you.

Another cause I'm advancing on behalf of the Bloc Québécois is a much broader reform of employment insurance. We'll soon be reintroducing a bill on this matter, including measures to end exclusion from regular employment insurance benefits for people who lose their jobs because of domestic violence, because they are returning to school or because of family responsibilities.

Do you think that would be a step in the right direction?

[*English*]

Andrea Doucet: Just to clarify, would this not be parental leave but another kind of leave for intimate partner violence, or would it be part of parental leave, part of EI—

[*Translation*]

Andréanne Larouche: The proposed employment insurance reform would provide benefits in such situations in recognition of the fact that people sometimes leave their jobs to return to school, after a maternity leave or due to family responsibilities.

My time is up, but I see you nodding, so I assume you believe this would be a worthwhile measure to support women.

● (1140)

[*English*]

The Chair: Give a short answer, please.

Andrea Doucet: There should be more leave. There should be more leave during the life course, not just for the care of young children. There should be a lot of different kinds of care leave.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Larouche.

[*English*]

Mr. Genuis, go ahead for five minutes.

Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses.

This has been a great study so far, with a lot of great information.

Conservatives have put forward a number of specific proposals for reforms to the parental leave system, emphasizing choice and flexibility. We've been hearing a lot today and throughout the study about the importance of flexibility. One proposal that we put forward is not directly related to EI parental leave. I want to get your feedback on it, Ms. Doucet, because it, in part, relates to fathers and including them. It's to change the way the CPP child-rearing drop out works.

Right now, only one parent at a time can collect the benefit from the child-rearing drop out. That's based on the assumption that only one parent is making employment sacrifices at a time. Increasingly, however, there are arrangements in which both are balancing caregiving responsibilities and making work sacrifices at the same time. There might be two shift workers who say that they're each going to reduce their shifts. Allowing both parents to claim the child-rearing drop out for the same period of time would actually be a way to recognize that, oftentimes, there are two parents simultaneously making workplace sacrifices to be with their children.

I know this isn't the core topic of today, but since you're here, Ms. Doucet, do you want to react to that proposal in any way? If not, you can always come back to us in writing about it.

Andrea Doucet: Yes, I would need to know more about the policy. However, my overall point would be that care policy should be gender neutral in the sense that care is a human capacity. It's not a maternal instinct. It's not a mother's capacity. More policies that recognize that fathers and non-binary parents can also be primary caregivers are really important.

I wrote a book called *Do Men Mother?*, which is about fathers as primary caregivers. Care is a human capacity.

I don't know this policy. I will look it up. In general, I'm in favour of gender-neutral care policies, like our Nordic colleagues have.

Garnett Genuis: We'd love to have your feedback on it later, in some other forum. The nature of this policy is to emphasize that simultaneous sharing of caregiving responsibilities happens now, as opposed to the current system, which presumes it's just one person at a time making those sacrifices.

To the two witnesses in the room, I want to pick up on something Ms. Clark talked about, which I might call the close-in-age children penalty. If you space your children out, then you might be able to get enough hours in between for the next one. However, if you have them close in age, you won't be able to get enough hours. This seems arbitrary and unfair to families who happen to have close-in-age children.

Both of you, for maybe a minute each, what do you think about changes we could make to address that problem, to make the system more fair for families, regardless of how close in age their children are?

Alanna Clark: I'm happy to start.

I think one change that would benefit that is to keep in mind the fact that.... For myself, I started working at 16. I had my first child when I was 30, which means that I paid into EI for a very long time. It's kind of ironic that I'm having twins, but I very purposely chose to space my children out. I wanted a three-year gap because we wanted to soften that economic blow, but then we're having two.

For my friends who have had two under two or two children close in age, they end up punished. I think the ultimate victim in that is the child, who loses out on time with their parents. I think the system needs to account for the fact that women may have worked 20,000 hours in the last decade, and it shouldn't matter if they worked 600 hours since their last claim.

Garnett Genuis: It's pretty striking that you're talking about planning the timing of your children around quirks in the leave system. I think that is a reality for a lot of parents. They have to look at bizarre features of the system and change the timing of their family based on these bureaucratic rules.

I'll give 30 seconds to you, Mr. Mitchell, if you want to comment on that as well.

● (1145)

Peter Jon Mitchell: Thank you.

Just as the law can be a teacher, I think public policies can sometimes have unintended consequences and shape families' decision-making. This is why I like the $2,000 threshold that Quebec has, as a proposal. It's much more attainable and allows, I think, families to navigate the issue we're talking about more efficiently.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Genuis. You're right on time.

[*Translation*]

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

Caroline Desrochers (Trois-Rivières, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for joining us for this study and for presenting their research and recommendations.

I also want to thank my colleagues for proposing this study on such an important issue. For many years, they voted against every measure we introduced to improve the employment insurance system, such as allowing maternity benefits to begin earlier and enabling parents to share or extend their leave following the birth of a child.

The EI system is, of course, the foundation of the economic support we provide to families. It's absolutely essential, but it's only one of several measures.

There are many other affordability measures, which my colleagues also voted against, that help families. These include the national school food program and the Canada child benefit. There's also the child care program that we've successfully rolled out across the country in recent years. In addition, there is the Canada groceries and essentials benefit. These are all measures we've put in place to support families because we recognize the economic challenges they face, especially families with young children. Of course, our colleagues voted against all of these measures.

The good news is that we're here this morning to discuss these issues and to hear your specific recommendations on how we can improve the system.

I will begin with Ms. Doucet.

[*English*]

Thank you for all the research you are doing.

[*Translation*]

In addition, my colleague Andréanne Larouche spoke earlier about invisible labour. You also referred to it, Ms. Doucet. It's so important to recognize invisible labour, because it's true that when people are at home, whether they're men or women, they work very hard. It's important to find ways to support parents who do this work.

[*English*]

Madam Doucet, I'd like to go back to what you talked about. I was really surprised by the figure you brought up of seven out of 10 fathers in Quebec versus three out of 10 fathers in the rest of Canada. That's a huge difference.

Maybe your research looked into this. I'm wondering what impact that has on how fathers perceive their roles, how society perceives the role of a father in the raising of children and how it's looked upon. I'd like to hear a little bit about that.

Andrea Doucet: There are so many levels as to what happens when a father does spend time taking parental leave or just spends time taking care of his children. You pointed to a good one. It means it changes the social norms that it's only women who are supposed to take leave.

This has taken so long to shift. When a man goes to his boss and says that he wants to take five weeks, or he wants to take seven weeks, there's still.... I know this from qualitative research that I've done with fathers who talk about the difficulties of going to their bosses. If the culture is such that it's very male dominated and higher levels of management haven't taken leave, it's hard for men to take leave.

When men take leave, it changes the perceptions. It leads to longer-term financial security for women. There is, again, a study from Sweden that shows women's income is higher with each month that fathers take parental leave. It also leads to caregiving capacities in men.

Care is the right of the child, but what I've learned, again from my Nordic colleagues, is that it's the right of a parent to care for their child as well. I know, from interviewing a lot of caregiving fathers, it is generative. It changes them. It means that they recognize this invisible load.

I wrote an article that started with, “It’s the hardest work I have ever done in my whole life.” That was a stay-at-home father who realized, when he did the work, that he hadn't recognized how hard it was.

When men take leave and are involved in caregiving, it can change society and our economy. It changes a lot.

● (1150)

Caroline Desrochers: Thank you so much.

I don't have much time left. I do have one more question, just following up on that.

We saw in Quebec, when we implemented the day care program, the participation of women in the workforce, and also how parental leave applied to both parents, whoever they were, also favoured more participation of women in the workforce.

I know we don't have time to hear from you on this, but perhaps we can continue the conversation later.

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much, Ms. Doucet.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Desrochers.

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

Andréanne Larouche: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Mitchell, Ms. Clark and Ms. Doucet, thank you for appearing before the committee today as part of this study.

I'd like to return to the issue of invisible labour. We need to be able to rise above partisanship. I hope we will come back this issue one day. In 2010, before I arrived, Nicole Demers introduced a motion that was adopted by Parliament recognizing Invisible Work Day. However, the 2011 election took place, and since then there's been no political will to bring the issue back to the forefront. That's why I proposed a study on the matter at the Standing Committee on the Status of Women, to put this issue back on the agenda.

That said, there's something else in the EI system that's extremely discriminatory, Ms. Doucet. Women lose benefits because they're on maternity leave. A court decision even found this to be discriminatory. Witnesses who have appeared before this committee have urged the government not to appeal that decision and to recognize that a woman should not lose benefits because she's on maternity leave, since it's discriminatory.

What do you think about this issue in the EI system, Ms. Doucet?

[*English*]

Andrea Doucet: It's a great issue to raise. I would have to think about it a little bit more, because I don't know that particular issue in detail. I will look at it. I will be writing a brief for the committee with my colleagues, Lindsey McKay and Sophie Mathieu. We'll make sure that we do look at that.

In terms of invisible labour, though, what I did want to add is that there's now a lot of invisible labour or mental load, going into what Alanna talked about, having to really think about when to take leave, how you're going to take leave and the financial stress. That's a whole other level of invisible load, mental labour and mental load that is now compounded upon women and increasingly men.

Thank you for your concern and your questions.

I know half of the committee here is from Quebec. I did look at the committee structure. Hopefully you will lead the committee forward on learning from your own province all of the good lessons.

[*Translation*]

Andréanne Larouche: I have only 15 seconds left.

Thank you for pointing out that Quebec is different, Ms. Doucet.

Mr. Mitchell, how do you feel about expanding the qualifying period so that mothers can truly thrive both in the workplace and with their children? In Quebec, the coverage period has been expanded, and we've seen the difference it can make.

[*English*]

Peter Jon Mitchell: I think, if you're speaking about leave in general, yes. This allows for the important care work to happen both for men and women, and we know that children thrive when we have healthy attachments. That's what the program in Quebec certainly does and EI in Canada as well.

The Chair: To conclude the last five-minute round, we will begin with Ms. Falk for five minutes.

Rosemarie Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster—Meadow Lake, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here today.

I want to make note of this. I know that the government talks a lot about their $10-a-day day care program. I hear from a lot of parents who are unable to access spots. The wait-lists are sometimes for years and their child never ends up getting a spot. It does affect either spouse if they need to stay home then.

Mr. Mitchell, from what I understand, in your previous research and policy work, you've identified reducing barriers to adoption as an important part of supporting families. In the previous Parliament, I introduced a private member's bill to provide adoptive and intended parents with an additional 15 weeks of benefits, given that they received 15 fewer weeks than birth parents because they are not eligible for maternity benefits.

The government at the time opposed my bill. They voted against it, but later they introduced similar legislation, which passed in June 2024, a few years ago now. The benefit has still not come into force yet.

I'm just wondering, Mr. Mitchell, how important it is for adoptive and intended parents to have that time at home to bond with their child.

● (1155)

Peter Jon Mitchell: I've had the opportunity to speak with many people who are involved in the adoption sector, whether that's adoptive parents themselves or those who facilitate adoptions, and the issue of attachment, regardless of the age of the child, always comes up. It is important. I hear from those experts that attachment issues even resurface 10 or 15 years down the road.

I think to have those extra weeks, which would basically be like maternity leave to birth moms, is a good step, and it does provide some extra time, any extra time for that attachment. I think it's a positive step forward.

Rosemarie Falk: Thank you.

Ms. Clark, do you have anything to add to that? I see you nodding.

Alanna Clark: I do.

My best friend welcomed both of her daughters through surrogacy, and her second surrogate was a TikTok follower of mine and has also become one of my best friends. She saw my video that my best friend was looking for a surrogate and she said she'd love to do it, so I have, while not personal experience, I think very intimate experience.

I also have a number of audience members in the surrogacy community, and I think for them.... I can't speak for that community, so please just know I'm not a part of it; I'm just a supporter of it. When I see moms by surrogacy, they really feel left out by not having those 15 weeks.

I know there's been a lot of talk about it, but it does need to be implemented because, ultimately, I think the person who's most hurt by that is the baby who's not getting equal time with their parents. I believe that surrogates deserve those 15 weeks as well to heal their bodies, but I think that we need to think about what's fair and what's reasonable for all families. The surrogate should get the 15 weeks, of course, to heal her body, but the baby deserves the full amount of time with their parents.

Rosemarie Falk: For sure. I know that, with the research that I did when drafting the bill initially, I definitely noted that. The woman who's birthing the baby still needs time to heal and recover, because sometimes birth can be quite traumatic—sometimes, all the time, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if there are no complications or complications that can be quite traumatic to the body but also the mind and your emotions.

Then also, for adoptive parents, they still need that time to form that attachment.

Mr. Mitchell, I think you make an especially good point as well, that it's not just newborns. Even when kids are being adopted at older ages, that time to attach is so crucial for building a rapport and relationship and bonding to help with regulation, development and all those things.

How important would you say the additional 15 weeks would be to bond? Would you say it is important?

The question is for both of you or either one of you.

Peter Jon Mitchell: Yes, I would certainly say that an additional 15 weeks is a good step forward for building attachment.

Alanna Clark: I think it's important. I also think it's a step toward equity for those families and their children.

Rosemarie Falk: For sure. Awesome.

Thank you so much.

The Chair: You had 10 seconds left. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Harrison, you have five minutes.

[*English*]

Emma Harrison (Peterborough, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have so many thoughts about this.

I was elected just 18 months ago. Before I was a member of Parliament, I was a self-employed stay-at-home mom. When I ran in the election, my daughter was six months old. I've never qualified for EI maternity benefits. I have three children. With my first child, I didn't realize I had to opt in beforehand, so it was too late for that. We planned as best we could to actually have our middle child in the winter, because we farm. It was important to have that time before the season started in April or May, so our baby was old enough. It was easier to function on my own with an older child as well.

There's the level of invisible work and all these things. My husband is now a very part-time paramedic, as I do this job. To watch him take over the invisible load.... He really thought he knew. He was like, “Yes, I know. I come home and I help.” Watching him take on this complete invisible load was really tough at first on our marriage, for sure, but it has strengthened our marriage tremendously. He truly understands, as best he can, exactly what mothers or stay-at-home parents go through. You come home to maybe a disaster or maybe a really clean house, and food and all these things, but you have no idea what's gone on all day long and just how stressful it was. When I come home, it's nice knowing what I'm walking into and how I can step in and help.

It's such a challenging time. I took on a tremendous amount of debt. He had parental benefits, but they didn't supplement our income and farming is a tough gig on a good day.

Ms. Doucet and Alanna Clark, I would love to know your top priorities. You've spoken a lot to them, but I really would like it very clearly laid out how we can best support families. This is something I truly care tremendously about. It's all about children, at the end of the day. It's about how we raise the next generations, protect them and help families with the burden that comes financially with raising a family.

Ms. Clark, would you like to go first?

● (1200)

Alanna Clark: I'll start by saying I know that around this table we have many parents of young children and many parents who have had different pathways to supporting that. I think it's a value-add for every young family in Canada to have those voices represented in the House of Commons.

To me, I think the top priorities are that flexibility and that recognition. I can't speak perfectly to the self-employed experience, because I'm both self-employed and also a regular employee.

To me, I think it's flexibility. I think it's offering families that flexibility. It's recognizing, as our colleague said, that this is a care policy. It's not just an employment policy. It's recognizing a lifetime of contributions to a system, rather than punishing a family for not having 600 hours in a specific period.

It's also just recognizing that sometimes families are formed in different ways, whether it's adoption or surrogacy. To me, it shouldn't be about nickel-and-diming the parent. It should be about thinking about what support is best for the child.

Emma Harrison: Thank you.

Professor Doucet, would you like to lay out some clear priorities?

Andrea Doucet: Thank you, Ms. Harrison.

I love that story. It really demonstrates the point that when fathers have time to care and when they're there in the home having to do everything, they see things they did not see before. It's a great story. Thank you.

I agree with Alanna. My first recommendation was social inclusion, and not just for the parents but from the child's perspective. What I've learned from my European colleagues is that there is parentally rich and there is parentally poor. There are children whose parents do not have any income, are struggling with income or have precarious income when they're caring for their child. That's a horrible situation to be in. Every child deserves financial support, and parental leave is a place where we can do that. We already have the system.

We also have Quebec across the river. It has put into place a policy that includes a lot more parents and, by extension, a lot more children. You heard the statistics from our colleague, Mr. Mitchell, about how many babies are covered in Quebec compared with the rest of Canada. It's social inclusion. Every child should have parents who are receiving financial support while they're caring for them.

The Chair: You have 15 seconds.

Emma Harrison: Okay.

Maybe I won't be able to get answers due to time, but I'd love to know, Ms. Clark, about your followers and their feelings on the Canada child benefit, which is a tax-free supplement that I found incredibly helpful when I was off, as well as the GST tax rebate, which has now turned into the Canada groceries and essentials benefit.

I would love to know if you have any comments, or maybe you could submit—

The Chair: We'll have a short answer, please.

Alanna Clark: I'll say that some of the biggest challenges that my followers find with the Canada child benefit is the fact that when you start maternity leave, the amount you're entitled to is based on your full-time working income. It is not based on your new and significantly lower income, and when you need the money, you don't have it, especially if you are in a family earning a middle to higher income. The following year, when you're at your full income, that's when you get the money, but it would have been really useful 12 months ago.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Madam Harrison.

Thank you, witnesses, for coming in and sharing your experience and providing the committee with valuable testimony.

We'll suspend while we transition to the last hour. Thank you.

● (1200)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1210)

The Chair: The committee is back in session.

Again, you all know the rules. I will clarify for the witness. As we begin, we just have one witness for this session. The second witness has a technical issue.

I would like to remind the witness of the following: You have the right to participate in today's meeting in the official language of your choice. Please click on the globe icon at the bottom of your screen to select the language that you're going to participate in. If there is an issue with translation, please get my attention, and we'll suspend while it is being corrected. Please wait until I identify you by name before proceeding.

With that, I will introduce, from BridgeNorth Women's Mentorship and Advocacy Services, Karen Todd, executive director.

Ms. Todd, you will be the only witness appearing in this last hour. You have five minutes for your opening statement. You have the floor.

Karen Todd (Executive Director, BridgeNorth Women's Mentorship & Advocacy Services): Thank you, honourable members of Parliament, for the opportunity to speak with you today.

I am focusing on the financial implications of the current parental leave benefit and will offer three recommendations. I'm speaking today as both an individual and as the executive director of BridgeNorth, a small not-for-profit working with female-identifying youth who have experienced sexual exploitation and trafficking.

Seventy-five per cent of our operating budget is funded by government grants and 25% is from donations. We can't fund an insured health and dental plan or guarantee employer contributions to a retirement savings plan. We offer a modest health services spending account. Most staff earn salaries between $50,000 and $60,000 a year. No one earns less than the living wage for Toronto of $49,504. However, with the average rent for a one-bedroom apartment consuming more than 65% of take-home pay, saving for a house, retirement or to supplement the parental leave benefit is just not feasible.

Parental leave benefits provide for a maximum of $18,954 a year. That's less than 38% of the living wage. For individuals making less than the living wage, the situation is even more dire. An individual making $20 an hour receives only $385 per week.

My understanding is that the current salary for a member of Parliament is about $217,000 a year. Your parental leave benefit would represent 17.5% of your current weekly wage. If every two weeks your pay was $1,458 instead of $8,348, could your family afford for you to take a parental leave? Fortunately, this isn't your reality because no deduction is made to your sessional allowance for up to 12 months after the birth or adoption of a child. However, according to Benefits Canada, only 33% of employers are offering top-ups for parental leave. Employees of 67% of Canada's employers wishing to take parental leave need to figure out how to adjust their financial commitments to live on 38% of a living wage.

With men still making, on average, over 13% more than women, the financial impact of men taking parental leave is often prohibitive. The financial stress on new parents is significant, and they're often faced with the difficult decision of returning to work sooner than is ideal. We should be considering a parental benefit that is greater than 55% of maximum insurable earnings. However, I'll use the 55% to explain my three recommendations today.

Number one, for individuals making less than the living wage for their city or region, the parental leave benefit should equal at least 100% of their annual income as opposed to 55%.

Two, no one making more than the living wage should receive a parental benefit that is less than the living wage. Individuals making between $49,500 and $90,000 per year would receive a benefit equal to the living wage. For the individual making $60,000 a year, that means their benefit would be 82% of their annual income. For an individual making $90,000 a year, their benefit would equal 55% of their annual income.

As context to my third recommendation, 23 years ago, when I found myself unexpectedly pregnant, I worked for a company with no top-up program. Our daughter was born with Down syndrome. With three older sons at home, we couldn't afford for me to take an 85% drop in pay to stay home with my baby. I returned to work after seven weeks and got up at five o'clock each morning to pump breast milk. I worked long days to fit in appointments, to participate in activities, to stimulate my daughter's physical and cognitive development.

I met with my member of Parliament. My idea would not cost the government more money. Rather, I was proposing that I'd be allowed to return to work two days a week so that between my EI benefit and two days' pay, I'd make the equivalent of 55% of my annual earnings. His response was offensive. “Aren't you lucky to make a six-figure income,” he said, as though my education, hard work, long hours and capability hadn't earned me numerous promotions in the corporate world.

I wrote to the then minister of human resources development who responded that my proposal was not in keeping with the purpose of the parental leave benefit. My proposal would have had me at home with my baby five days a week instead of two, surely a better option for my daughter's early development.

My third recommendation is that for individuals without employer top-up benefits, they be allowed to work on a part-time basis without compromising their EI benefit to ensure continuity of a salary that is no less than 55% of their annual income.

Thank you.

● (1215)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Todd, for your opening statement.

We'll now go to the first six-minute round with Madam Cobena.

Sandra Cobena: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Todd, for your opening statement and for sharing your personal experience. It's a challenge that I think too many of us can identify with, unfortunately. I also want to take a moment to thank you for the work you do at BridgeNorth. It is incredible work. It takes heart to do what you do, so thank you.

In your opening statement, you painted a picture of what it looks like for a mother who desperately wants to be there for her child while also wanting to maintain her career, and the trade-offs, unfortunately, that mothers have to encounter. With regard to the proposals we have put forward, particularly the one on the flexibility to be able to return temporarily—I believe you were in the financial sector—and to not have to give up the rest of your leave in terms of time and financial compensation, what does that mean from not only a financial security perspective but also for you as a woman who has invested years and years in your career and who wants to stay connected and wants to maintain the relationships and skills? In the financial sector, things move very fast.

Can you speak to both of those challenges?

● (1220)

Karen Todd: Yes.

The answer is that there isn't a one-size-fits-all. There needs to be flexibility and choice and options. I actually don't think I would have been the best stay-at-home mom. It is the toughest job in the world. I think what was right for my family and my mental health was the ability to try to do both and to spend the time with my daughter that I needed to. This was especially given her being born with a developmental disability. I needed to get connected with the Down syndrome community, work with occupational therapists and learn everything I needed to in order to be a good parent of a child with a disability.

Yes, my career was also very important to me. I'm not saying there wouldn't have been challenges in trying to be back at work in a fairly senior role. When your regular workweek is 60 hours a week, what does two days a week look like? Does your employer still expect 30 or 40 hours' worth of work from a part-time employee? However, I think it would have given me the opportunity to strike a balance that worked well for me and my family. I get a lot of personal satisfaction from my work as well. I think that fills my cup in order to enable me to have a full cup at home as well—while both also drain from that cup, if that makes some sense.

Sandra Cobena: Of course, the reality is that for a professional mother, there is career momentum. There are timely opportunities. For you, being in a leadership position, that would have been particularly important. However, that doesn't mean you have to stop being a mother. In having this flexibility, you have a better chance of being able to be both. I think that's important. I can think of many women, not only in the financial sector. You have seasonalities, such as in farming. I think we have somebody here who is from agriculture. There's tax season for a lot of mothers, and real estate and so on and so forth.

Can you talk about what difference that would have made in terms of your career momentum to be able to stay connected and, further to that, for some mothers, when they take maternity leave, to actually have the option to study and upgrade their skills? That's the other proposal we're putting forward today.

Karen Todd: What I'm struggling with that question is I went back to work after seven weeks, so I didn't have the experience of what happened to my career as a result of being home with children. I had four stepsons who I inherited when they were four, six, 16 and 21. I had been a mom for many years and juggling children and family. My husband was a locomotive engineer with CP Rail. He would be gone for 30 or 40 hours at a time, so I had to plan my career as though I was always the primary parent. A third of the time he'd call and say that I could work late because he was at home. I had spent many years trying to juggle both.

I was the head of human resources in an insurance company at the time. The Canadian company had been sold to Meloche Monnex, which was bought by TD Insurance. It wasn't the best time for the head of human resources to be off on maternity leave and then parental leave. What a part-time option could have looked like is I still would have been able to mentor my staff and to continue to help guide some of the process. That would have enabled others on my team to step up and further some of their career development while they were having to fill in some of the gaps of my not being there, but still having me there for support and guidance. It probably would have supported some of their career development more than it might have mine.

● (1225)

The Chair: Thank you.

Sandra Cobena: Thank you, Ms. Todd.

I think on the flip side that says there's a business case as well for these flexibility options.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Cobena.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Koutrakis, you have six minutes.

[*English*]

Annie Koutrakis (Vimy, Lib.): Thank you.

Thank you, Ms. Todd, for being here today and for your very important testimony.

I listened very carefully to your story. It brought me back to a time when I was married to the father of my children and gainfully employed in a career that I very much was flourishing in and enjoying. I was seven months pregnant with my first son when I decided to stay home. Nine years later, with two little children, nine and six, I found myself to be a single mother without a job. Thank God, my parents were in a position that they were able to support me because the EI supports and programs at the time were not the same. My sons are now 40 and 37. As you can imagine, it dates quite a bit back.

I'm very proud to see the EI benefits, especially coming from the province of Quebec, where I see many young families are being supported in the right way. We heard in the earlier panel that if we want to look at a model that's been working really well for our families in Quebec, look to the Quebec model.

I know you work in your organization to help many young people who have probably faced unimaginable trauma. I would like to hear your thoughts about the Quebec model. I would like to hear your thoughts as well, please, on what someone who faced the challenges that I did years ago....

Are you and the people in your group aware of all the other benefits and programs that we have put in place to make sure that families feel supported when they need it most?

Karen Todd: I cannot speak to the Quebec model. I am not familiar with it at all.

Annie Koutrakis: Okay.

Are some of the people who you are helping through your organization aware? Are you able to help them find other programs that would be available to them to make it a little bit more helpful during times when perhaps EI benefits are not enough?

Karen Todd: Yes. In terms of the members of our direct service team who work directly with the youth we serve, we have case managers. We have developed relationships with partner organizations across York region and south Simcoe. For example, one of our strongest partnerships is with Rose of Sharon for young mothers. We refer back and forth with that agency. We've gone in and done workshops for young mothers who are getting service from Rose of Sharon and who may be back in the school they run. We've also had some of their young mothers, when there's a concern that they are vulnerable to sexual exploitation and sex trafficking, referred to our services.

Yes, our case managers know a lot about the supports in the community to help.

● (1230)

Annie Koutrakis: How do you think those programs, together with some potential EI reforms, would make a difference in their lives? You listed three different recommendations. I'm wondering if you could share with us a little bit more about the thought process behind the recommendations.

Karen Todd: Let me start with one of the employees on my staff. She is 30 years old. She and her husband are currently working toward having their second child. They recently bought a house. They moved out of Toronto, where they were renting, into a smaller community to purchase the house. She has said to me that they have to figure out how to save $30,000 so that they can continue to pay their mortgage and pay their bills while she is off on leave.

The other thing she has said to me is that she's hearing on social media that if you want to stay home for 18 months, tell EI you're going to be off for 12 months and tell your employer something different. If after 12 months you decide you would like to go back to work but you've already been getting the reduced benefit for the 18 months, there isn't a way to go back at 13 months and recoup the benefit you gave up when you originally told EI you were going to be out for 18. I know the stress she's under right now trying to figure out how they're going to get $30,000 in the bank to be able to supplement the reduction in her income with EI benefits.

For those we serve, we know that food insecurity, poverty, homelessness and not being able to feed your kids can push a young woman back into the sex industry, where she is more likely to become the victim of a trafficking situation. It's just so important that we provide a minimum benefit that allows people to not have so much financial stress that they're unable to be a good parent.

Annie Koutrakis: Thank you very much for doing the work you do. I'm really hopeful that with this study, this very important study, we'll get it right and make sure that we are there for the vulnerable communities and for young families who need the help when they need it the most.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Koutrakis.

Ms. Larouche, you have six minutes.

Andréanne Larouche: Thank you very much for joining us today, Ms. Todd. It's never easy to be the sole witness. You're being bombarded with questions from all sides. I can understand how you must feel. We're lucky to be able to benefit from your experience and recommendations, and we're extremely grateful for them.

We've begun our study and will be devoting additional meetings to it, but I would like to discuss a few points that have stood out to me so far.

First, you may not yet have examined the Quebec model, but in this committee we hear a great deal about the Quebec exception. It's a unique model. A final agreement between Canada and Quebec regarding the Québec Parental Insurance Plan, or QPIP, was concluded in 2005. Quebec has therefore administered its own parental insurance plan since January 1, 2006. The QPIP is administered by the Gouvernement du Québec and funded through contributions from employees, employers and even self-employed workers.

One thing we hear often is that we need to expand parental leave. This is where the Quebec exception comes into play. Here's one example: Women who wish to return to work after giving birth can access up to 78 weeks of leave in Canada and 85 weeks in Quebec. Quebec therefore offers a longer period of leave.

What do you think about extending the number of weeks available so that Canada could one day match the number of weeks offered in Quebec? How could women benefit from a significant measure such as expanded parental leave?

● (1235)

[*English*]

Karen Todd: Yes, I think that is a very worthwhile pursuit. We know that the early years of a child's life are very important. As long as you have the financial ability and being off doesn't cause you financial stress such that you're having to make decisions about whether to pay your rent or feed your children, I think the longer that a parent can be at home with their child, the better it is for that child's early development.

I also think it goes beyond that, though. As well, how are our young people learning about parenting and about good parenting skills? The only thing I knew about being a parent was what I learned from my parents. There certainly weren't any of those opportunities when I was going back to school. I'm 65, so that was a long time ago. It is the most difficult job I've ever done, and what's the training we get to do that job well? There's a lot more we could be doing to support parents in the early years to develop the skills to actually parent well.

[*Translation*]

Andréanne Larouche: You're absolutely right. We agree that being a parent is the most difficult role we have, but it's also the most rewarding and, above all, the most important. As the mother of a four-year-old daughter, I'm reminded of that every day. It's true that we're in a privileged position. I had my daughter while serving as a member of Parliament, and I was able to find a way to balance work and family responsibilities. We are indeed fortunate, and not everyone is in that situation.

Another issue we've heard about on this committee, in addition to expanding and reviewing parental leave, is EI reform, which could help people and families facing certain circumstances. For example, we believe that EI should be reformed, including by extending the qualifying period for special benefits. I'm referring to maternity leave. Right now, some women lose their EI benefits because they're pregnant or on maternity leave. The courts have found this to be discriminatory.

Do you have any other recommendations for EI reform that could make life easier for parents?

[*English*]

Karen Todd: I don't have any others to suggest other than the ones I talked about earlier in my opening remarks. I did hear in the previous panel that there's the issue of needing to have a certain number of hours between children, and I would agree with what one of the witnesses said previously. I was 42 the first time I accessed EI benefits, and I had been working for 25 years. I do agree with that concept of how many hours you have worked over a lifetime versus how many hours there have been between leaves.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Larouche.

[*English*]

We go now to the five-minute round with Madam Cobena.

Sandra Cobena: Thank you, Chair.

Ms. Todd, thank you again for your insights. Let's continue the conversation that we ran out of time on.

You mentioned something that I think is important to highlight: that there is, in fact, a business case for the flexibility in parental leave. In looking at this from an employer's perspective, can you share again your thoughts on why it would be beneficial for employers to have talented women stay connected with the workforce?

● (1240)

Karen Todd: Yes. In our organization, we have 20 employees. Most of those employees are working directly on the front line with the youth we serve.

The woman I mentioned earlier, who is actively working on getting pregnant with their second child, plays a critical role in the organization in terms of building our infrastructure, in a lot of the measurement and evaluation work and in our reporting to government through the grants we get. Right now, I'm sitting here thinking about how it will be very difficult to fill her role for the period of time that she's out. That's my problem. I'll get that figured out. I don't think she would choose to work on a part-time basis. I think her wish would be that the financial benefit is such that she can be fully at home.

From my perspective, would it be helpful to me to have her available a day a week? Something like that would certainly be of benefit to me. Again, I think that's where flexibility needs to come into play. I think the right thing for her would be that she's completely at home.

As an employer, it's often easier to fill a vacancy for a longer period of time than a shorter period of time. The amount of time we invest in bringing somebody up to speed with the industry, the organization, our government funding, our grants and the secret sauce in terms of how we actually work with youth can take several months. It is actually easier to fill a vacancy for a longer period of time than a shorter period of time to start to reap the benefits of the investment in getting somebody up the learning curve.

Sandra Cobena: Would you agree, then, that Canada loses valuable talent and productivity when mothers are forced into an “all or nothing”, forced into a maternity leave that is not flexible, that meets the current needs?

Karen Todd: Yes, I would agree with that.

Sandra Cobena: Would you agree, then, that having this flexibility would actually create a win-win situation for mothers and employers?

Karen Todd: Absolutely. As I said, the choice I would have made for me would have been a part-time situation. I think my employer would have benefited and I think my family would have benefited.

In the situation of my employee, who would absolutely want to be home full time if she could, it is better for the employer not to have an employee at work who is completely stressed by the fact that she has left her baby at home when she's wanting to be at home, is breastfeeding and having to get up early to pump and that kind of thing. It's not good for an employer to have an employee back because they feel they need to be there financially when that's not where they really want to be.

Sandra Cobena: Thank you, Ms. Todd.

I will give the rest of my time to MP Genuis.

Garnett Genuis: Thank you.

We haven't talked much about the role of technology and how changes in technology are shaping what's possible and what's desired in terms of work. I wonder if you have any thoughts on the latest developments in remote work, flexible work, and how that changes what women want to do and can do realistically today.

Karen Todd: Back when my daughter was born, there were no online meetings. You were either in the office or you were not working when you were at home.

With today's technology, obviously there are some opportunities and some potential negatives there. I think it is much easier for a parent to be able to work part time, if they so choose and if it's right for them and their family. When they can work from home, and especially for moms who are still wanting to nurse, it is much easier to manage both home and work when you have the flexibility to be working online and accessing files through shared drives. The downside to that would be the kinds of expectations an employer might have for somebody at home who wants to be fully at home and fully engaged with their child.

● (1245)

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Genuis.

We will now go to Madam Harrison for five minutes.

Emma Harrison: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Todd, for answering so many questions. You're the only witness here, so you are being peppered with questions.

I want to talk a bit about the work you do and the perspective you have being a mother and also being on the front lines of this incredibly important work. You have a really unique and valuable perspective.

In the riding of Peterborough, we have the Kawartha Sexual Assault Centre. They're on the front lines working with people on trafficking, sexual assault and all of those things.

This is a really valuable conversation about how we support the people you're working with on the front lines when it comes to EI benefits, as well as maternity and parental benefits.

My colleague Ms. Koutrakis mentioned the Quebec model, and you said you weren't familiar with it. I'll talk very briefly about one of the big differences in the really great model they have in Quebec. I'm sure that many of the women you work with have experienced disruptions to employment due to their circumstances. Outside of Quebec, parents need, generally, 600 employable hours, but in Quebec, they use a $2,000 in insurable earnings threshold, regardless of hours worked.

I was wondering, from your experience and with the unique perspective that you have, if that would be a better qualifying system.

Karen Todd: We're currently working primarily with youth. Many of the youth we're working with—we're talking about kids aged 14, 15 and 16 who have been trafficked—haven't actually been out in the work world earning any hours toward benefits at this point.

My understanding is that for women who have been either trafficked or sexually exploited, what we have to remember is not just if there have been.... I think about our founder. For 10 years, she was trafficked. She wasn't actually contributing to the CPP, for example. For 10 years, she was working seven days a week and many, many hours, and she was not actually contributing to the CPP. I know that's a real concern to her in terms of what that's going to mean for her retirement. Yes, absolutely.

We're working with some youth right now who are getting paid a minimum wage to attend a job readiness program as we try to simulate a real work environment. They've looked at their paycheque and asked, “Is this all?” They've seen so much more money pass their hands, whether that money ended up in their control or not. Not being able to earn at least a living wage can push them back into an industry that they've worked hard to get out of.

Emma Harrison: That's horrifying.

I was wondering if you would be able to speak to a process you believe we could create that wouldn't retraumatize these victims when moving through EI benefits and things like unregistered paid work. What would a process look like?

It's incredibly important to make sure that when we're helping and supporting these people, they aren't retraumatized by their experiences.

Karen Todd: I have no idea what a process might be. I know every time somebody has to retell their story to somebody new, that is retraumatizing. We have to find ways of understanding people's stories and having some flexibility to make the right decision for each individual. It likely involves organizations like ours helping others understand without the individuals themselves having to get into the nitty-gritty of their stories.

● (1250)

Emma Harrison: Thank you so much, Ms. Todd, for being here and for the incredible work that you do.

That's all I have, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Harrison.

[*Translation*]

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

Andréanne Larouche: Once again, Ms. Todd, thank you very much for being with us today. You certainly have been fielding questions from all sides.

In your opening remarks, you spoke about the financial impact, which is obviously greater for women. Pregnancy and maternity leave have significant consequences.

That reminds me of a position I once held as a project manager focused on raising awareness of women and poverty. It's true that balancing work and family responsibilities, having more precarious and lower-paying jobs, and taking maternity or parental leave are burdens that often fall disproportionately on women. They can lead women to accumulate less income over the course of their lives. All of this has an impact.

This also happens to victims of human trafficking. At the Standing Committee on the Status of Women, we conducted studies on human trafficking and domestic violence. We saw that women's impoverishment, meaning their inability to achieve the same level of financial independence and build sufficient financial security, often keeps them trapped in cycles of violence or in human trafficking situations.

Ultimately, improving women's financial circumstances could help lift them out of poverty and free them from violence.

[*English*]

Karen Todd: I'm sorry. Was there a question?

[*Translation*]

Andréanne Larouche: I'm talking about the importance of improving women's financial circumstances. Tell us how that could help them escape violence. Your organization also sees the impact of these issues.

[*English*]

Karen Todd: It is extremely important. As I said, most of the youth we are working with come from situations where there are various things that have made them vulnerable to sexual exploitation and trafficking, including homes where there has been abuse, neglect, poverty, food insecurity and housing insecurity. All of those things are the underlying factors that can make a youth vulnerable to somebody reaching out to them on the Internet, who very quickly sees their vulnerabilities and steps up to meet those needs. The youth believes they have a romantic partner, somebody who loves them and is trying to protect them and actually does that for a period of time, until they have manipulated, coerced and isolated the youth from others so they can be exploited. All of the things to get at the root causes of food insecurity, homelessness and poverty are extremely important.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Larouche.

[*English*]

We'll conclude the round with Mr. Genuis for five minutes, and then we'll go to the government.

Garnett Genuis: Thank you, Chair.

Maybe I'll start by making a couple of comments about some loose ends in the discussion that I think are worth commenting on.

I'll then give some time back to you, Ms. Todd.

There has been some mention of the Quebec model and some of the differences between Quebec and the rest of the country. I think it's important to underline that one key feature of the Quebec model is the possibility of interruptibility. The pause and resumption of leave is available in Quebec. It's not available in the rest of the country.

As was mentioned, the qualifying threshold is different, but that interruptibility feature is very important. It's one that we have proposed be introduced for parental leave across the country. It would be great to see the government move forward with a policy that would allow this in the other nine provinces: for somebody to work with their employer to pause and then resume their leave. There are all kinds of benefits for the individual, as well as the employer, in that situation.

We talked a bit about—I really appreciated your comments, Ms. Todd—the positive and negative potential implications of changing technology. On the one hand, this provides more flexibility and more opportunity to work from home. In the past you were basically in the office or you were outside of the paid workforce. You were still working, but outside of the paid workforce. It's not like that any more. The downside is that the way in which these things can fuse together makes it harder to disconnect. It's harder to say, “No, I'm not available at the moment.” I think we have to navigate those different realities.

One thing that strikes me is that if I had a long-term experienced staff member on parental leave, I would like to be able to negotiate some kind of arrangement with them, where I could call them occasionally for their advice and feedback and not feel that I was infringing on their personal time. I think the best way to do that would be to allow them to have a parental leave structure where they could work for some period of time, even if that were an on-call flexible work arrangement, where you ask, “Are you available for this one-hour training session to share this information with someone else in the office based on things you know?”

The other thought I had is that some of the advocacy we have from some people around what's best for families still emphasizes this model where you assume that people going to work means nine-to-five in the factory or office building, which means they need a nine-to-five day care for their kids while they're in the nine-to-five office building or factory. That's certainly a reality for some families today, but more and more, what we hear is the desire for flexibility, choice and options to find child care options and/or share caregiving needs in ways that fit the unique circumstances of families as they're combining work and family life, potentially at different hours in different locations and in different ways.

Our discussion of what families need needs to respond to the present realities in terms of technology and the way work and family life have changed. That's why we've really been trying to push this discussion of work and family life integration in ways that accord with the way work is today and the way technology is today.

That's about four minutes.

Ms. Todd, if you want to comment on any of that and agree or disagree, I'll give the rest of the time to you.

● (1255)

Karen Todd: I agree. For me, the blend of family and work made it possible for me to work whatever hours I needed to do so that I could blend the two. It was not a nine-to-five. For other people, that split is really important. I have people on my staff who need to have that complete separation of work time and home time. What works for me is the blend of those, not that distinct piece.

I think that is the key—flexibility and options—because it's also about what works for the other spouse or parent as well in a two-parent family. There are going to be lots of different combinations and permutations that need to be brought into the mix of figuring out solutions.

The Chair: Thank you.

You had two seconds left, Mr. Genuis.

Garnett Genuis: It's not the first time.

The Chair: Oh, okay. It's gone now.

Thank you, Mr. Genuis.

To conclude, we will go to Mr. Saini for five minutes.

Gurbux Saini (Fleetwood—Port Kells, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Karen, for appearing and for the work you do. We are trying to raise the next generation of Canadians, which is very important, especially in a society like Canada's, which has a declining population.

You mentioned that the early development of a child is very important. I agree with you. Does family play a big part in the early development of a child? I bring this up because I come from a family that emigrated from India. Joint families were part of the system. Parents and grandparents lived together. They were able to provide the care the child needed. Does that have a place in our society, or have we become a society that is too individualistic? I would like to hear your viewpoint.

● (1300)

Karen Todd: That's a really good question. I absolutely see the benefits of multigenerational families living together and the support that can come when grandparents and others are involved. That works in some families, but I think in other families that actually can cause more stress than the support around that.

Again, I think it needs to be sort of a “both-and” rather than an either-or.

Gurbux Saini: Our government believes in a multipronged approach to supporting new parents and young families. That's why we are trying to modernize the employment insurance program, but we also have programs like the national food program and child care at a reasonable cost. Do you think we should only be making the parental EI system better, or do we need all of those systems to work hand in hand to make a child's upbringing better?

Karen Todd: I think it is a combination of so many factors—food, child care, housing, income support and all those things. As I said earlier, we are able to have children without learning how to be a good parent. Lots of education needs to be part of this as well. There needs to be a multidimensional and total system perspective of looking at what a child needs around them to flourish and be the best they can be, so that we can unleash their full potential.

Gurbux Saini: There has been discussion on the Quebec model, which you say you're not familiar with. The other thing that came to us via previous witnesses was that the model in Sweden is considered to be a very great program. Are you familiar with it? If so, do you have a viewpoint on that?

Karen Todd: I am a bit embarrassed today that I don't know more about the system in Quebec and don't know the Nordic models and things like that. There are lots of reasons why I don't know those things. I'm not actually going to comment on that.

Gurbux Saini: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: There are only 30 seconds, so I'll thank you, Mr. Saini.

Thank you to Ms. Todd for being here for the full hour and for taking all the questions. Your testimony was important for the committee to hear.

Thank you to the committee members.

I remind you that on Tuesday, November 17, we will begin again with Bill C-266. The amendments for Bill C-266 are due this Friday.

Is it the will of the committee to adjourn the meeting?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: It's adjourned.

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