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# Standing Committee on the Status of Women

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Chair: Dominique Vien





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• (1530)

[*Translation*]

**The Chair (Dominique Vien (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis, CPC)):** I call this meeting to order.

Good afternoon, colleagues. I'm happy to see you again.

Welcome to meeting number 40 of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Thursday, April 23, 2026, the committee is resuming its study of women's shelters and transitional housing.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to make a few comments for witnesses and members.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, please click on the microphone icon to activate your mike. Please mute yourself when you are not speaking. For those in the room, if you wish to speak, please raise your hand. For those on Zoom, please use the “raise hand” function, which is at the bottom of the screen.

For interpretation for those on Zoom, you have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel. I would like to remind the witnesses that committee members may ask questions in French or English. If you need interpretation, please take a moment now to prepare your earpiece and select the desired channel. That way, we'll save a few seconds if you have to speak.

I remind you that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair. Of course, I won't interrupt the flow if there's a good exchange. I'll let things run their course.

Before we welcome our witnesses, I would like to provide a trigger warning. We will be discussing topics related to gender-based violence, which may be a trigger for people who have had similar experiences. If any participants feel distressed or need assistance, I invite them to inform the clerk, Ms. Miller. For all witnesses and members, it's important to recognize that these are and remain difficult discussions. Therefore, we will try to be compassionate in our conversations.

I would now like to welcome the witnesses for this first hour.

First, we have Rachelle Walker, executive director of the Muskoka Women's Advocacy Group.

Second, we have Marie McGregor Pitawanakwat, chair of the National Indigenous Women's Housing Network.

Finally, we have Laisa Audlaluk-Watsko, interim board chair of Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada.

We are now ready for the opening remarks.

[*English*]

Ms. Walker, the floor is yours for five minutes. Thank you.

**Rachelle Walker (Executive Director, Muskoka Women's Advocacy Group):** Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the committee.

My name is Rachelle Walker, and I'm the executive director of the Muskoka Women's Advocacy Group. We operate two emergency gender-based violence shelters. We're located in the district municipality of Muskoka, which spans a massive area of almost 6,500 square kilometres.

Our region is a collection of small towns, communities and rural areas. In communities like ours, the barriers abuse survivors face are stark. We have little public transit, patchy cell service, regular hydro outages and a lack of options normally found in larger urban areas. Many shelters across Canada regularly face frustration around the lack of safe and affordable housing choices for survivors. As highlighted by the Women's Shelters Canada study, shelters are often operating above their funded capacity. Frontline staff must extend stays repeatedly simply because there's nowhere feasible for women to go. Shelters end up in overflow positions because the housing system is broken.

Transitional housing is a solid bridge for women, but it can't fix a broken market on its own, and we need more of it. Our agency manages a transitional housing program or second stage, as is sometimes called, with 10 rent-geared-to-income units. This program provides many supports for survivors, but one key component that is impossible to replace is time. Urgency is not empowerment. Women enter our emergency shelters with valid concerns about the unknown but also with relief, and then soon they are overwhelmed because they need to start looking for housing yesterday.

Our housing program offers up to two years' stay. It gives women some breathing room to regain independence, secure employment and safely rebuild their lives, and it works. In the past three years, our transitional program has housed 34 women and their children. In 2023 two women reported that they were returning to their abusers after leaving the program. The other 32 did not, but when women leave shelter or second stage, they encounter a brutal for-profit housing market.

Transitional housing is a vital lifeline, and it allows women time to steady themselves and to strengthen their community, family and friend relationships which have normally been broken by an isolating abuser. They tend to generate real and safe options in that time even when those options aren't perfect. Transitional housing could become a dead end if the federal government doesn't invest heavily in long-term affordable housing stock and what's needed to support it.

If the federal government wants to work toward ending the cycle of violence and poverty, I have two recommendations.

First, look past capital grants. Building structures is only part of the solution. The federal government needs to consider earmarking substantial transfer payments of core operational funding for both emergency shelters and transitional housing. Without operational dollars, we can't pay staff to provide the necessary support to survivors. We can't cover the increasing costs of utilities or make needed repairs.

Second, funding has to take geography into consideration. A survivor's safety shouldn't be determined by where she lives in Canada. We need targeted dollars to expand infrastructure like basic and reliable transportation. For Muskoka, that means transit reaching our geographic edges and beyond, so women aren't forced to choose between isolation or returning to danger.

Financial stress is awful, but to an extent, financial stress can be managed. Living in violence can't. If we want survivors to manage the systemic housing gaps that follow them, of course we need to invest in capital projects but also in minor capital strategies and in the operational needs of shelters, transitional housing and affordable long-term housing.

Thank you.

• (1535)

**The Chair:** Thank you so much, Ms. Walker.

Ms. McGregor, you have five minutes.

**Marie McGregor Pitawanakwat (Chair, National Indigenous Women's Housing Network):** Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Marie McGregor Pitawanakwat. I serve as chair of the Na-

tion Indigenous Women's Housing Network and co-chair of the Women's National Housing and Homelessness Network.

I am grateful to be able to provide comments today. I have a presentation. I will try to be as brief as possible with it. It is to the Standing Committee on the Status of Women. It's a brief discussion of the role and capacity of women's shelters and transitional housing. I have five issues to briefly state, a "what will happen" statement if the issues are not addressed and five recommendations to match the issues.

The first issue is the matter of staffing at violence against women shelters. The staffing numbers tell part of the story. For example, there are 3,546 full-time workers, 1,076 part-time workers and 1,682 casual or part-time relief staff at women's shelters and transition homes. The question is this: Are these numbers adequate for the number of clients being served? In addition, some of the staffing and human resources issues facing shelters and transition homes include staff fatigue, high turnover and recruitment challenges.

The second issue has to do with aging infrastructure. A national survey in 2025 asked 618 violence against women shelter staff to participate, and 317 responded. When asked about the condition of buildings and infrastructure, 45% of the respondents indicated that major repairs were needed, with costs of more than \$40,000. When asked about minor repairs, survey respondents indicated that 31% of shelter buildings needed minor repairs at a cost of less than \$40,000. It was also stated that many buildings were created before accessibility standards were imposed, which required retrofitting to comply with regulations.

The third issue is the housing crisis and deep affordability issues. These are reflected in shelters and transition homes having to turn away survivors after reaching capacity. Survivors are also staying longer in emergency shelters, transition homes and second-stage shelters. This means beds and units are not as available to new survivors as they were formerly, since survivors are staying there longer.

The next issue is fundraising. This one is vital: “The need to raise funds for core operational costs...is nearly universal.” Fundraising is conducted to cover the following: renovations, 71%; technology, 51%; transportation, 50%; office administration, 44%; salaries, 47%; safety and security, 36%; utilities, 31%; and rent or mortgage, 19%. This is from the Hoogendam and Maduakolam study of 2026.

The next issue is what I'd call multi-faceted needs. For instance, emergency shelters and transition homes are working with clients who present multi-faceted needs. Some clients have histories of sexual exploitation, trafficking, forced marriage and family violence. Clients include indigenous women; clients living in rural, remote, northern and isolated communities; immigrant women; 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals; women involved in sex work; and survivors of human trafficking. In addition, technology-facilitated gender-based violence shows up as tracking, hacking and harassment of clients. This work requires increasingly specialized, trauma-informed and culturally safe approaches.

I turn now to what will happen if not enough is done.

• (1540)

The view of clients and shelter workers has to change—

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Ms. McGregor Pitawanakwat, I have to interrupt you, as your five minutes are up. Thank you. You will have the opportunity to come back to what you didn't have time to say.

I now give the floor to Ms. Audlaluk-Watsko.

[*English*]

The floor is yours for five minutes. Thank you.

**Laisa Audlaluk-Watsko (Interim Board Chair, Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada):** Thank you, everyone. *Unnusakkut*, good afternoon, Chair and members of the committee. Thank you for this invitation.

My name is Laisa Audlaluk-Watsko. I'm here on behalf of Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, the national representative organization for Inuit across this country. Since 1984, our mandate has been to advocate for systemic change to improve the social, cultural and economic well-being of Inuit women. Housing and shelters have been central to that work for decades.

I want to begin with a simple statement for Inuit women: The issues before this committee are not policy questions. They are a human rights emergency. The lack of safe, affordable and culturally appropriate housing is a crisis rooted in forced settlement, one that places Inuit women in danger every day.

The numbers from our own research are stark: 52.9% of Inuit in Inuit Nunangat live in overcrowded housing, and 32.7% live in homes requiring major repairs. Inuit women are six times more likely than non-indigenous women to live in unsuitable housing. Approximately 59% of Inuit communities have no emergency shelter, which means that many Inuit women fleeing violence have nowhere safe to go, and 62% of urban Inuit women surveyed by Pauktuutit had avoided going to a shelter due to feeling unsafe or facing discriminatory treatment.

Overcrowding is not just a housing problem; it is a violence problem. When there are no alternatives, Inuit women are forced into dangerous situations. The link between housing insecurity and gender-based violence is a daily reality in our communities. The crisis also exists outside of Inuit Nunangat. As more Inuit move to cities, the lived realities of urban Inuit require equal attention from this committee.

At Pauktuutit, we have spent decades collecting evidence and building solutions. We co-developed and co-chaired, with the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation and Indigenous Services Canada, the shelters initiative for indigenous women and children. This was a proven Inuit-led model, with representatives reviewing and selecting projects. As of 2025, 12 Inuit-led shelter transitional housing projects have been approved, including an emergency shelter and transitions home in Puvirnituq, Nunavik.

We are also leading a national housing and shelters research and advocacy initiative examining lived experiences across the full housing continuum. Our finding is clear: Housing insecurity is more than an infrastructure problem; it is a systems failure requiring federal policy reform.

Despite this progress, I must be honest with this committee. When asked to rate how well current federal housing policies meet Inuit women's needs, on a scale of one to five, Pauktuutit rates this current system at two. Why? There are four core failures. There is no stable multi-year funding for Inuit women's shelter organizations. The affordability benchmark in the national housing strategy, which is 30% of regional income, is meaningless in communities where the cost of living is 40% to 100% higher than in southern Canada. Funding cycles are short and competitive, and the administrative burden undermines the ability of Inuit organizations to plan and deliver sustained solutions. Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami has identified a need for \$3.04 billion over 10 years, just to bring Inuit core housing needs to the Canadian average. However, federal budgets do not come close to meeting this need.

The committee is asking what support measures are needed. Pauktuutit's answers are to, one, establish a dedicated Inuit women's housing and shelter fund. A distinctions-based federally administered funding stream must be co-developed with Inuit women's organizations. It requires multi-year operational support and an investment that reflects northern construction realities.

• (1545)

Two, permanently fund—

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** I'm sorry to interrupt you, Ms. Audlaluk-Watsko, but your speaking time is up. I would also like to inform you that a technician will contact you to check your connection, which is considered weak.

We will now begin our first round of discussions.

Mrs. Goodridge, you have the floor.

**Laila Goodridge (Fort McMurray—Cold Lake, CPC):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

Thank you to the witnesses for being here, and thanks for the work you guys do in serving vulnerable women.

I want to quickly give you a shout-out, Ms. Audlaluk-Watsko. Your photography is stunning—like, truly stunning.

If you haven't checked it out, I would recommend that everybody look at it. It's nothing to do with this, but it gives a very good demonstration of some of the housing challenges faced by the Nunavummiut.

Thank you for sharing that piece and that beautiful art.

Ms. Walker, I was chatting with Scott Aitchison, one of my colleagues, earlier today. He was telling me that before he was the mayor of Huntsville and before he was the member of Parliament for Parry Sound—Muskoka, he led the fundraising for Chrysalis, your transitional housing in Huntsville. He said he did it in collaboration with one of your predecessors, because they saw the need. They understood the importance of transitional housing as a community. They decided to just do something about it and not wait for the Government of Ontario or any other level of government to step up. They just did it.

You spoke about transitional housing. Can you speak about what the importance is of transitional housing and how it serves people?

• (1550)

**Rachelle Walker:** Sure. As I said earlier, transitional housing is about giving women time. When women come into the shelter, it's traumatizing. They are uprooting themselves. They're uprooting their children. It's scary. It's an unknown thing. By the time they go into transitional housing from our shelters, they're well acquainted with the staff. They realize that the building is very secure. Our transitional housing is attached to our Huntsville shelter. While they're there, we do have staff they can access for support during their stays.

They're not doing everything on their own for the first time. Quite often we have women who have never even opened a bank account before. Someone can help guide them through those kinds of things. All the little daily things you take for granted when you live alone are new for these women, in a lot of cases. They might also have been made to feel, because of the abuse, that they're stupid and they can't do it. We are there to provide support, a roof over their heads and help, in the ways that we can.

**Laila Goodridge:** Thank you for that.

One piece you talked about, and that I really appreciated, was taking geography into consideration. I think that's one of the things the Government of Canada is especially bad at. I'm the member of Parliament for Fort McMurray—Cold Lake. I represent 142,000 square kilometres covering most of northern Alberta. It's an immensely large territory. It has a variety of different communities, from large cities like Fort McMurray and Cold Lake down to tiny little indigenous communities and everything in between. The needs do not necessarily get served. Someone decides, well, if you go an hour away, there is a shelter, or if you go three hours away, there is a shelter, so that should be good enough.

I'm wondering if all three of you women could talk about the importance of having supports close to home so that people have the support network that they already have while they are finding ways out of abuse.

Perhaps Ms. McGregor Pitawanakwat can start.

**Marie McGregor Pitawanakwat:** I think the isolation of many rural and remote communities is an important consideration, especially when a lot of the communities cannot be accessed unless you fly in or travel in by boat when the water's open. There needs to be some kind of consideration for shelter services for those kinds of communities.

I know that a group called the Rural Development Network in Alberta is working on these kinds of things. They've been very progressive, with sort of grassroots thinking about consulting with people regarding what they need in terms of shelters, second-stage homes and transition homes. I think that's very useful. Connection with them would be very valuable, I think.

Yes, those in remote areas need to have shelters and services as well.

**Laila Goodridge:** Ms. Walker, please go ahead.

**Rachelle Walker:** On remaining in the community, when we are at capacity or over capacity, we will often refer women to other shelters in our region. Parry Sound is one that's a bit closer to us. It's the same with the Orillia shelter.

Women don't want to leave their areas. They have family and friends established here. They are familiar with the layout of the major towns around here or the area they're from. They might have kids who are in school. They might have a job, and they might not have transportation to get to that job. If a woman is from Bracebridge and she wants to stay in the Bracebridge shelter and we don't have room, going to Huntsville isn't even really an option as far as public transit. There is some public transit here, but it's not at all like an urban centre.

It's really destabilizing for women to leave their communities.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mrs. Goodridge. That will be the final word for this first turn.

Good morning, Ms. Gladu. You have the floor.

• (1555)

[*English*]

**Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton—Bkejwanong, Lib.):** Thank you to all of the witnesses for being here today. I'm very interested in what you have to say.

I'll start my questions on the topic of the rural reality for shelters and transitional housing. I'm trying to understand how big the gaps are in the various areas. I'll go to each of you, starting with Ms. Walker.

**Rachelle Walker:** As far as housing goes, when it comes to Muskoka and market rent, one of the issues we face here as women accessing housing is that a lot of independent landlords—when I say that, I mean people who have a granny flat or a room in their home to rent out—tend to prefer to use that as an Airbnb situation instead of renting it out long term to someone. That takes places that our women could potentially rent off the market. That leaves fewer units to rent at inflated prices.

I was looking at rentals around here not too long ago. In Gravenhurst, there was a \$900 room in a basement for rent. It was fully furnished and had no window, so there was no proper egress. When I first moved here in 2014, I had an 800-square-foot apartment with windows on the second floor, lots of room and lots of light. It was clean and beautiful. That is quite a change over the past 12 years. It's quite something. That's huge.

As I've mentioned, transportation is also huge for women here.

**Marilyn Gladu:** Very good.

Laisa, I think you can talk a bit about the budget that put some funding toward the national action plan to end gender-based violence. How is the funding that the government's providing helping in your area to address the needs of women there?

**Laisa Audlaluk-Watsko:** We mainly look for funding in and around that by applying directly to those base programs. It is still a little bit rare to get into them because it's so limited, but they're starting. We're only getting familiarized with those areas because it's so limited with that gender-based one.

Otherwise, I will have to come back to that question after I get someone in-house to answer better on the funding.

**Marilyn Gladu:** Okay. You can send it to the clerk when you get the answer.

Marie McGregor, I want to ask you about how big the gap is that you see in this transitional housing space. I also want to give you some time to finish the five recommendations that you wanted to make.

**Marie McGregor Pitawanakwat:** Thank you for that.

Yes, there is a gap. When you think about a territory the size of... Think about 49 communities in northern Ontario. Many of those are fly-in, and many of those are accessible only when the river ice has broken. Some of those are accessible only by winter roads. That tells you how difficult transportation is.

The other challenge to that is that building and construction materials need to be trucked in over the ice roads during the winter or shipped in by barge when the waters are open. All of that compounds the cost of building materials. A couple of years ago, I heard an estimate that the cost for an ordinary three-bedroom bungalow in the far north was \$700,000. It wasn't a fancy or big house by any means. It was just a plain, ordinary, little three-bedroom bungalow for \$700,000. That was three years ago. With the rates of inflation the way they are, who knows what that number is now. What's happening is that housing affordability is beyond the reach of many people, in particular women.

One of the questions you want to ask yourself when you're working with this is, what do we need? It's not, what do we want? "What do we want" tells you that you should have a three-car garage and a swimming pool. "What do we need" tells you this: Can I have a door that locks at night? Can I be warm when I wake up the next morning? Can I have a window to look out of? Is there a place I can cook, wash and sit and enjoy my book?

The big question is the difference between need and want. As I drive around here in the south, I see so many examples of want, want, want, and the destruction of natural resources just because of want. It's heartbreaking.

I'm sorry. I wish I had a better answer, but there it is.

• (1600)

**Marilyn Gladu:** No, it's okay. It's a fine answer. I'm just running out of time.

Could you send your five recommendations to the clerk, so that the committee can look at them when we're putting together our own recommendations?

Thank you so much. I think I'm just about at the end of my time.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Gladu.

Ms. Larouche, you have six minutes.

**Andréanne Larouche (Shefford, BQ):** Good afternoon.

Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I'd like to thank the three witnesses for joining us today. Clearly, five minutes for an opening statement is not much time. They seem to have a great deal to say on this issue, which particularly affects communities.

Ms. Audlaluk-Watsko, at the end of your remarks, you only had time to make one formal recommendation, which concerned separate funding, and then you had to stop. I'm giving you the opportunity to continue—if you have further recommendations to share with us—and to finish what you wanted to say.

[English]

**Laisa Audlaluk-Watsko:** Thank you, everyone. I have three more points.

Number two is to permanently fund the shelter initiative for Inuit women and children. It is a proven, Inuit-led model. It must be scaled and permanently sustained, and not be subject to funding renewals.

Number three is to serve urban Inuit. Shelter strategies must address the growing population of Inuit living in cities. They face discrimination, cultural isolation and an absence of Inuit-specific services.

Number four is to establish accountability mechanisms. Canada has commitments under the national housing strategy, the Inuit-Crown partnership committee and the national action plan to end gender-based violence. This committee should recommend binding implementation timelines, public reporting and outcome targets developed with Inuit women's organizations.

In closing, the 2019 National Housing Strategy Act identifies housing as a fundamental human right. Pauktuuit asks this committee to ensure that the right is operationalized—not just acknowledged—for Inuit women, girls and gender-diverse Inuit.

*Qujannamiik.* Thank you.

[Translation]

**Andréanne Larouche:** Thank you very much.

I may have the opportunity to revisit certain points with you a bit later.

Ms. McGregor Pitawanakwat, do indigenous women living off-reserve find themselves in grey areas with limited access to services?

[English]

**Marie McGregor Pitawanakwat:** Yes, there is a grey zone.

There is federal legislation that governs lands and Indians. This is called the Indian Act and it was made in 1876. Under that act, one-third of 1% of all of the land in Canada falls under the jurisdiction of the Indian Act. The lands are held in trust by the federal government so that individual Indians living on Indian reserves cannot sell that land. It's communally held.

When it comes to women, if, for instance, through domestic violence or marital breakdown or whatever, the woman is forced to leave the home, that grey area means that she usually has to leave the reserve and seek shelter elsewhere. I also realize that there are

matrimonial property laws that exist but I'm not familiar with how those work, which first nations have accepted them, and which have not. My experience with women who have undergone family conflict is that they are often shunned, ostracized and made fun of. They will leave the reserve and the typical reasons will be for medical services, employment, education or just plain because they are homeless. They end up going to cities and towns looking for accommodation, and they try to restructure their lives.

What you have are patriarchies that function according to the way the Indian Act operates. There is such a high prevalence of this that any other viewpoint is discarded. An example of that viewpoint is the concept of indigenous allodial land title. What this means is that indigenous people hold original title or underlying title to their lands, irrespective of any foreign government that came as recently as 150 years ago and imposed it.

The women who are evicted from their homes have every right to live on the other 99% of the land because that's still their land too. This is the kind of view that we're adopting, accepting and starting to work with.

Again, I don't know if that helps, but that's what I'm thinking. Thanks.

• (1605)

[Translation]

**Andréanne Larouche:** I will come back to you later to discuss solutions to housing issues.

**The Chair:** Time has gone by in a flash. Thank you very much.

Ms. Cody, you have five minutes.

[English]

**Connie Cody (Cambridge, CPC):** Thank you. Through the chair, I want to say thank you to all the witnesses for coming today on such an important topic.

I'll start my questions with Rachele Walker.

The national shelter study 2024 update shows that the shelter occupancy increased by 8% from 2023.

Do you see the affordability crisis and rising cost of living as a factor resulting in this increase in the length of stay and higher occupancy rates in shelters? Also, has shelter occupancy continued to increase throughout these past couple of years?

**Rachele Walker:** I think that when there are options taken off the table for women, then shelter seems like it should be the option. I would also argue that we see women coming into the shelter who are in serious need of a safe place to stay. They are being stalked, and the abuse is continuing after she's left the home.

We have women come in sometimes who think that they are almost...not “home free”. I don't want to use that term because there are no homes to rent. They think they're okay once they're in shelter, once they're away from the abuser, but that's not the case. Abuse tends to escalate after a woman leaves and that's when it becomes the most severe. Quite often women don't even realize until they're in shelter that the situation is going to be a little bit worse or maybe much worse than she thought originally.

The lack of affordable housing is what stops women from having the options. Women who have affluence are able to make choices that women who don't have money can't, but I think sometimes those women could actually benefit from a shelter stay as well.

**Connie Cody:** As intimate partner violence is increasing and as—as I'm hearing from several people—elder abuse is on the rise as well, we're seeing significant growth in the number of people seeking shelter systems. Unfortunately, what I'm hearing is that our shelters specifically for women are full.

Where are these women realistically going to go at night if they're turned away from a shelter system, and what risk does that create for their safety?

**Rachelle Walker:** We don't turn women away. We have to turn women away from our specific shelters, but we don't leave women without options. Our staff will call around to other shelters, the ones closest to us. They will just keep working outward in concentric circles until they find something. We also have put women into hotels. We do some risk assessing on the phone and make sure that they're safe enough to stay in a hotel for a night or two. We have movement sometimes, and sometimes we don't. However, we never leave a woman without options. If she chooses not to take them, that's her choice. We always offer as many options as we can.

• (1610)

**Connie Cody:** Survivors of human trafficking often require unique supports to help them recover from the deep trauma and extreme abuse they experienced. What unique assistance, supports and safe spaces are needed for these vulnerable women seeking shelter to protect them? In your view, do you think the current shelter system provides this support?

Again, that's for Ms. Walker.

**Rachelle Walker:** Women who are leaving human trafficking... There are definitely similarities, but there are a lot of differences as well. A woman who's coming into the shelter because of an intimate partner relationship is leaving, typically, one abuser. There might be some abuse coming from extended family on that side. However, when a woman is leaving a human trafficking situation, she has more than one abuser to worry about. She has deep trauma. Quite often, these women are leaving situations where they've been abused for their entire lives, from childhood onward. There are further psychological impacts that go along with that than there are for a typical woman coming in for a typical shelter stay.

I think what these women need is time, as well. I think two years, minimum, is something that's going to help a woman be able to rebuild her life. She's leaving a very traumatic situation. She needs something. She needs to be able to rebuild from the ground up.

**Connie Cody:** In my community, I've heard from a lot of women that they'd rather live in their cars than in shelters. There's a lot of active drug use that goes on within the shelter system, and it's deterring them from going to these shelters. This is particularly difficult for women with children who don't want to expose their kids to unsafe environments and for our vulnerable seniors.

What can we do to address these issues of drug use and violence within these shelters, issues that seem to be a barrier for women, young adults and seniors seeking shelter?

[Translation]

**The Chair:** I'm sorry, Ms. Cody.

[English]

**Connie Cody:** If you have an answer to that, could you please provide it to me in writing?

Thank you.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you. Time flies so quickly.

Ms. Desrochers, you have five minutes.

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

First of all, I would like to thank the witnesses for joining us today. I would also like to thank you for all the work you do on the ground. I know that you work with communities and women who are in very vulnerable circumstances. You do difficult and important work. Thank you so much.

Before I ask my question, let me provide a little context. I'll try to keep it brief.

We know that the housing crisis is a major contributing factor to the difficulties faced by women experiencing violence. That is why our government is committed to increasing the supply of affordable housing across the spectrum, whether we're talking about transitional housing, very affordable housing, or social housing.

I believe all three witnesses highlighted the fact that there is simply not enough affordable housing in Canada. It accounts for 4% of all housing, one of the lowest rates among OECD member countries. We are committed to doubling that rate to at least 8% over the next decade. We created Build Canada Homes to launch more projects, and we have allocated \$13 billion to it, including \$1 billion for transitional housing and supportive housing. However, we know this is not enough. The portal opened in December, and we could already spend all those funds. We know this isn't enough to meet the demand.

In addition, \$4 billion in funding, managed by Indigenous Services Canada, is earmarked to support indigenous housing in urban, rural and northern communities. That's not all—as part of Build Canada Homes, we've also made commitments to indigenous communities. Furthermore, I want to emphasize that at least 20% of the funding will be allocated to support housing in rural and remote communities, as we want to ensure they receive what they need.

All of this is part of the renewal of the National Housing Strategy—which is why today's discussion is so important. The witnesses' recommendations will inform this discussion.

My first question is for Ms. McGregor Pitawanakwat.

[English]

Do think that this is going in the right direction? We understand that this is not enough, and we understand that this has to be combined with some work in prevention, but do you welcome those investments from the government?

• (1615)

**Marie McGregor Pitawanakwat:** I'm pleased to hear that those kinds of investments are being made. I'd like to put a plug in for the National Indigenous Collaborative Housing Inc. They have a nationwide collection of organizations that are housing providers for indigenous communities. They work both on and off reserve as well as with non-status urban people. Some of the projects have provided shelter facilities for women and children. They're doing very good work. They need to hear that the commitment to what they heard in the beginning will be kept. That's important.

The other thing I want to say about the whole issue is that the multi-dimensional needs come not just from human beings' difficulties. We're also looking at the external reality of what the climate is doing to human beings. For example, you have floods in some communities, you have forest fires that destroy other communities and you have other major natural disasters that cause power outages for hundreds if not thousands of people at a time. There's emergency preparedness that's needed for that. There's natural disaster preparation and work that needs to be done for that.

The other thing that I've seen with the Build Canada Homes strategy is an interest in building to scale and building at scale. That says to me that a majority of that funding will be for developers and contractors. Somewhere along the way, there needs to be a niche or an opening for people who want to learn to build their own. The reason I say that is that indigenous people have been on the North, Central and South American continent since time immemorial, 50,000 years before the present, and in those 50,000 years, indigenous peoples have been able to provide housing for themselves.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. McGregor Pitawanakwat. That is all the time we had.

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

**Andréanne Larouche:** I would like to thank the witnesses very much for joining us today. We understand how urgent the needs are and the importance of this study.

Ms. McGregor Pitawanakwat, I will address you first, but other witnesses, such as Ms. Walker, may respond afterward.

I would like to talk about the Yānonhchia' project, which addresses housing in indigenous communities and is designed and led by indigenous people.

Why is it important to have solutions designed and led by indigenous communities themselves, rather than imposing one-size-fits-all models on them?

[English]

**Marie McGregor Pitawanakwat:** Yes, I really like that idea. Co-development is important, as well as people learning to build their own homes again.

If you go to any reserve and see where homes have been built by contractors or developers, what's missing sometimes is the inclusion of the people for whom those homes were built, as in the training, the participation, the co-design, the set-up of the grounds, the design of the rooms and putting the thing together. There's a lot of hands-on, on-the-ground work that's missing. Once they get into the home, and they have the key, all of a sudden, things start to go wrong. Then it's everybody else's fault that the toilet doesn't flush, the blinds don't work or the fan is out of order or that kind of thing.

Whereas, if people had on-the-ground experience of putting this stuff together, learning how to do it—I'm assuming that these are the trades that have to do with building homes, which can include indigenous and gender-diverse people, women and young people learning how to do what we used to be able to do—then you would see a lot of pride in ownership and pride in maintaining these things. How do I know this? I've done it myself. If anyone tries to separate me from my tiny home, woe betide.

I'll stop there.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much for those clarifications, Ms. McGregor Pitawanakwat.

I now give the floor to our colleague Mrs. Roberts for five minutes.

• (1620)

[English]

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

Through you, my first question is for Ms. Rachel Walker.

Before I ask my question, I want to say that you guys are doing an amazing job. You're not just helping women. You are heroes, because it takes people like you to dedicate your lives to helping other women. I want to thank you. You deserve it.

Here is my question, Ms. Walker. This committee continues to hear heartbreaking testimony from women who want to leave violent situations but simply cannot find affordable housing or shelter space. After nearly a decade of Liberal housing strategies and spending announcements, shelters like yours are still overwhelmed and operating at capacity.

What are you seeing on the front lines? Why are women still falling through the cracks, and what should this government do to help?

Did we lose her? Oh, my God. Maybe she's upset.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Mrs. Roberts, can your question be addressed—

[*English*]

**Anna Roberts:** I have another question. I guess I scared her away. I do that to people.

My next question will be for Laisa. You spoke earlier about \$3.4 billion needed to assist with housing. You spoke about this action plan. On April 24, 2026, the housing minister announced funding for housing. There is nearly \$2 billion that will be going towards based agreements with first nations, Inuit and Métis partners, \$1.2 billion in existing funding as well as a \$780-million top-up for new funding.

How has this helped your community?

**Laisa Audlaluk-Watsko:** Can you repeat the last part? I'm sorry.

**Anna Roberts:** There was a top-up of \$780 million in funding. How is this helping your community? Have you started to see it flourish?

**Laisa Audlaluk-Watsko:** Because we lack trades here in the north for building houses, while the ambition is good with the housing proposal for, I think, 3,000 in Nunavut, that has gone slower than planned. We are slow in building, but even with that coming, we have already been informed that it will be lower than expected because so much more housing is needed for young families having children.

**Anna Roberts:** I'm sorry. I don't mean to interrupt you, but I'm on a timeline.

It sounds like there's a desperate need in your community, which I appreciate and respect, but what do you think are the timelines for this to be fulfilled? Is there an incentive to encourage individuals in the trades to move up there to assist with the building of the homes?

**Laisa Audlaluk-Watsko:** There isn't, to my knowledge. We are too slow with the trades, and there are not enough college programs for the trades. That's what I'm seeing first-hand.

**Anna Roberts:** Is there any opportunity to encourage individuals who don't live there? Is there an incentive for them to come and assist?

**Laisa Audlaluk-Watsko:** We don't have much choice but to have help come from outside of Nunavut or Inuit Nunangat. We have been seeing that since that incentive.

**Anna Roberts:** Thank you very much.

My next question will be for Ms. McGregor.

Are you seeing any assistance with the funding announcements in your community to build more shelters? Are any of those funds coming to your organization?

**Marie McGregor Pitawanakwat:** I'm not directly familiar with funding coming to the communities I'm working with, but I know that there are other organizations like the Ontario Aboriginal Housing Services, the Aboriginal Housing Management Association and the Rural Development Network. Then there are organizations in Quebec that are working with indigenous people to create shelters and transition homes, so the answer is yes.

• (1625)

**Anna Roberts:** Have you had any conversations with the federal government?

**Marie McGregor Pitawanakwat:** No, I haven't had direct direct input.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. McGregor Pitawanakwat. That will conclude your remarks for this turn.

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

[*English*]

**Chi Nguyen (Spadina—Harbourfront, Lib.):** Thanks very much to the witnesses for being here.

I want to ask a couple of questions. The other day, I learned about the Canada housing benefit for survivors, which provides portable housing benefits. I was wondering if this is a program that any of your organizations are familiar with, know of or are using in your supports for women.

It's a specific housing benefit for survivors that provides portable housing benefits—some dollars to help survivors. Is this something that you're aware of or something that has been talked about in your network?

**Marie McGregor Pitawanakwat:** I'm familiar with one example by a group called Keepers of the Circle, which is operating in Kirkland Lake, Ontario. They're building a modular panel factory, which will provide modular panels for constructing housing. This is a program that's women-led. The tradespeople working in the factory will be indigenous women and 2SLGBTQ people. They are now in the process of designing three shelters to be built using those modular panels from that factory.

That's one example that I'm aware of right now. As for other ones, I haven't yet been briefed on it. I know about that one.

**Chi Nguyen:** Thanks very much.

I'm going to switch tracks a little bit because my questions were a bit more directed to our witness from the Muskokas.

This is actually a great example, Ms. McGregor, that you just raised. I want to ask about other interesting innovations or practices that you think are helping or are really leading edge that we should be taking note of to make sure that as we develop programs and as we provide supports, we're building those practices in.

That's a question for both organizations.

**Marie McGregor Pitawanakwat:** I have a favourite hobby horse. It has to do with agency, independence and self-sufficiency. One of our studies, which was funded through CMHC, was the examination of natural alternative building materials as a way to use traditional teachings incorporated with natural materials so that indigenous women and two-spirit people can learn how to build their own homes again. Those five materials included stone, straw bale, timber frame, log and cordwood stackwall. That study was completed a couple of years ago. This summer, later, we'll be doing a demonstration build using two of those materials—straw bale and hempcrete.

We hope to demonstrate how physically demanding, how labour-intensive and how much hard work it is, yet at the same time, how much less cash you will have to put up front in order to build something. We also intend to demonstrate that needs are very different from wants. If people can be specific about what they need and how to meet those needs, then they can put together buildings for homes that will meet the needs.

That's another example of the activity that will be happening. Beyond that, the floor is open.

**Chi Nguyen:** Thank you very much.

Laisa, would you mind sharing if there's any innovative practices that you think we should be considering or thinking about continuing to resource?

**Laisa Audlaluk-Watsko:** I'm not too familiar with that area. We can look into it in our organization.

There has been talk in my community about modular homes being put into place for temporary housing. It was an organization that was separate from our area. I thought, "Wow, that's a great idea." There are no real linkages from their program to ours, but I think that some innovations that are coming up north are also adaptable to what we're seeing and what we can do, because I think they're portable and they may work, heating-wise.

Otherwise, there are no real programs or projects with that yet, to my knowledge.

• (1630)

**Chi Nguyen:** Thank you.

Is my time finished? I was going to say that I just learned from my colleague that there is an agreement with Nunavut to help build out a facility that will help us build more modular homes in Nunavut and build them in the territories. That's coming online. We're really excited. It's something that we are supporting.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** There, the information has been conveyed.

Thank you very much to all the witnesses for making themselves available today.

I will suspend the meeting for a few moments while we welcome the next panel of witnesses.

• (1630)

(Pause)

• (1635)

**The Chair:** The meeting is resumed.

Before we begin, I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of members and witnesses.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mike and please mute yourself when you are not speaking. If you wish to speak, please raise your hand. For those on Zoom, please use the raise hand function.

For those on Zoom, at the bottom of your screen you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation: either floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

I would like to remind witnesses that committee members may ask questions in either French or English. If you will need interpretation, please take a moment now to prepare your earpiece and select the listening channel you need in advance in order to take full advantage of the time allotted for questions and answers.

I remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

I would now like to welcome our second panel of guests.

First, we have Ms. Sue Bookchin, executive director of the Be the Peace Institute.

Next, we're joined by Ms. Mylène Bigaouette, acting director of the Fédération des maisons d'hébergement pour femmes. She is accompanied by Julie St-Pierre-Gaudreault, adviser, policy issues.

Finally, we welcome Jasmine De Fina, executive director of SafeHope Home.

• (1640)

[*English*]

We will begin with the opening statements.

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

**Sue Bookchin (Executive Director, Be the Peace Institute):** Thank you so much, Madam Chair.

Be the Peace Institute is a non-profit with a unique niche in Nova Scotia in tackling gender-based violence through a systemic lens versus individual service provision.

We are trying to strengthen the GBV sector so organizations can work more effectively together to create collaborative and customized arrays of services and supports that range from immediate safety to trauma-specialized healing and also prevention, and also the systemic change that is needed in all our traditional structures to alter the patterns that allow this to persist and also still marginalize and punish survivors.

This is a public health and public safety crisis with generational consequences. According to the Mass Casualty Commission, we need an essential investment in prevention and lifting women and girls out of poverty if we are to change the rates. It's an ecosystem view and many entities have a role.

Specifically, with regard to housing, transitional housing, poverty and gender-based violence, like all social determinants of health, these are inextricably and directly correlated in terms of risk and incidence of gender-based violence and require strategic connections when we're thinking about solutions. Domestic violence is a key factor in losing housing and a driver of poverty, homelessness and housing insecurity, increased vulnerability to abuse and things like exchanging sex for housing, and risks of human trafficking and exploitation, especially at the intersection of marginalized identities and discrimination against those who are BIPOC, gender-diverse, trans, people living with disabilities and newcomers.

I'm going to go directly to my recommendations in case I run out of time.

After 40 years of transition houses, we need to rethink how shelter and transition housing services are delivered, as the complexities and demands are growing. An ecosystem response means other services are also needed: women's centres, outreach services, and trauma-sensitive and domestic violence-informed mental health system navigators.

We have relied for too long on transition houses as the only or the primary providers in this sector, and they cannot meet all the needs. We need to consider how people who use violence can be the ones removed from the home rather than the ongoing burden of displacement on survivors.

Our systems continue to overburden women, both survivors and shelter workers. We should consider a guaranteed basic income so that survivors are not compelled to stay in abusive situations for lack of financial means to support themselves and their children. Also, according to the Mass Casualty Commission, resourcing and funding should be commensurate with the scope of the problem. We absolutely need investment in new, supported, affordable and safe housing for people in these vulnerable conditions. This should be a priority.

Another recommendation of the Mass Casualty Commission was a national gender-based violence commissioner, which we have seen no evidence of to date. Access to safe and stable housing has become a crisis in Nova Scotia. There is a desperate need for second-stage and longer-term supported housing that is safe, structurally sound and includes wraparound services, trauma-specialized counselling, employment readiness training and mental health supports for children and youth.

There's a distinction between transition houses or second-stage housing that is designed specifically for women and children fleeing relational violence and shelters that are not for that purpose. The latter rarely feel safe for women and gender-diverse or trans women, especially when children are involved. Even with transition houses, they are often the last resort for women who have no other options and are therefore the most vulnerable.

Many survivors trying to escape abusive relationships will never enter a transition house, but for those who do seek that shelter, there are still many barriers. There's stigma, especially in a small town in a rural area where everyone knows everyone; internalized shame; the paucity of services and shelters in rural and remote areas, where gender-based violence can be up to 75% higher than in urban areas; no public transportation; and often the fact of owning pets or livestock in rural areas dissuades women from leaving.

● (1645)

There is an absence of diverse representation among staff. In Nova Scotia almost all shelters are run by white women unless they are specifically run by indigenous women.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Ms. Bookchin. That concludes the time allotted for your opening remarks.

[English]

**Sue Bookchin:** That was fast.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** I want to be fair to everyone.

Ms. Bigaouette, you have the floor.

**Mylène Bigaouette (Acting Director, Fédération des maisons d'hébergement pour femmes):** Good morning.

The Fédération des maisons d'hébergement pour femmes is made up of 37 member shelters, representing 36 emergency assistance and shelter homes—that is, first-stage shelters—and 18 second-stage shelters, spread across 11 Quebec regions. We are actively working to defend the rights and promote the autonomy of all women. We represent and advocate for the policies, achievements and rights of our member shelters.

The federation's member shelters provide housing and support to abused women and their children, which means they address all forms of violence experienced by women—including violence from an intimate partner, as well as domestic violence, violence from a roommate or landlord, human trafficking, sexual exploitation and so on. They also recognize the strategies women employ to cope with violence and ensure their children's safety, as well as the repercussions of the violence they've experienced.

During the 2024–2025 period, among all women who were housed and supported, 81% experienced psychological violence, 54% experienced physical violence, and 49% experienced economic violence. This means that each woman may experience different forms of violence, regardless of the reason for her stay. It is from this perspective that the federation understands women's experiences and the challenges they face, particularly those related to mental health and substance use, as well as those related to housing instability and homelessness.

In addition to the primary reason for seeking shelter, which can vary, 54% of women in shelters had mental health issues, 12% used psychoactive substances, and, upon leaving the shelter, 39% of women moved to another unstable living situation. Many of them then found themselves at risk of homelessness. As my colleague will explain, difficulties in accessing housing make it very difficult for women to escape violence and expose them to the risk of experiencing or re-experiencing violence.

Ms. St-Pierre-Gaudreault, I'll turn the floor over to you.

**Julie St-Pierre-Gaudreault (Advisor, Policy Issues, Fédération des maisons d'hébergement pour femmes):** We are very pleased to have been invited to participate in this study, because it accurately reflects what shelters are telling us on the ground. What member shelters are seeing is that women's housing insecurity and the challenges associated with homelessness are a vicious cycle.

These women's journeys are always marked by violent experiences, whether it's violence suffered at a young age within the family or violence from a partner, roommate, or landlord. Most of the time, this pushes women into housing insecurity or into situations of hidden homelessness. This is often driven by violence.

In terms of the spiral or vicious cycle, we see that once women have experienced violence, they find themselves in precarious situations and feel direct impacts on their mental health and their ability to continue holding a job, for example. After experiencing violence or instability caused by having to constantly move from one place to another—whether as a survival strategy to avoid an abuser or because their living environment was violent—they will experience very complex traumas. This can affect their mental health and lead to addiction issues.

These three issues directly impact women's lives. Once they find themselves in a situation of financial insecurity, the vicious cycle begins again, because they risk experiencing violence or exploitation once more and will find themselves in vulnerable situations. Shelters then become essential, because they offer women direct support tailored to their multiple mental health needs, as well as to some of their addiction issues.

• (1650)

What we're really seeing right now is that shelters play a huge role and are stretched to the limit. As a result, they're unable to meet all these needs. As my colleague mentioned, shelters operate to address certain issues affecting women and help them break free from this vicious cycle. However, if they do not have access to affordable housing with community support, women find themselves in situations where they cannot leave the shelter, or in situations where, when they do leave, they will end up—

**The Chair:** Ms. St-Pierre-Gaudreault, that concludes your opening remarks. You will certainly have the opportunity to say more.

Ms. De Fina, welcome. You have the floor for five minutes.

[English]

**Jasmine De Fina (Executive Director, SafeHope Home):** Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the committee, for the opportunity to speak today.

My name is Jasmine De Fina. I'm the executive director of SafeHope Home, one of Canada's few survivor-led recovery programs for survivors of human trafficking. I also work within the victim services sector, supporting survivors navigating violence, housing insecurity, trauma and exploitation. I also speak from lived experience.

Housing insecurity and gender-based violence are deeply connected. Many women stay in abusive situations because they cannot afford to leave. They have nowhere to go. They cannot support themselves independently and fear losing their children. Like many women I have worked with, I personally remained in abusive situations and later entered into other unhealthy relationships in part because of financial insecurity and housing instability.

We often ask women why they stay, but we don't ask whether Canada has created the conditions to make leaving realistically possible. One of the biggest gaps I want this committee to understand is that survivors of human trafficking cannot access appropriate shelter and housing spaces at all.

Human trafficking and violence against women are connected, but they're not identical issues. Trafficking survivors often have very different safety risks, trauma responses, clinical needs and recovery needs. Most violence-against-women shelters are not designed for the complexity of trafficking cases, and trafficking survivors rarely gain access to specialized beds because Canada has so few across the country.

At the same time, mainstream shelter environments can sometimes increase safety risks for trafficking survivors due to recruitment concerns, gang involvement, organized crime connections, trauma triggers, addictions and the high level of clinical support that is required. Canada needs specialized, trafficking-specific stabilization and recovery spaces.

Within trafficking-specific programming, we also cannot treat all survivors the same. Women without children and mothers often require separate living environments and program structures. Women with children need recovery spaces designed specifically for mothers and children together, while other trafficking survivors often require highly specialized, adult-focused recovery environments. Right now, there are simply not enough spaces.

At SafeHope Home, we consistently maintain a wait-list. Organizations across the country are full. Nationally, there is only a very small number of specialized human trafficking recovery programs. There are fewer than 10 dedicated long-term programs across the country.

Many of these programs are also not funded through ministries responsible for housing or long-term residential recovery, despite housing being one of the central needs survivors face. Instead, organizations are often forced to piece together unstable funding from multiple short-term resources while trying to provide highly specialized, intensive care.

Trauma recovery also does not happen in 30, 60 or even 90 days. For many survivors of trafficking and severe violence, healing takes years.

What Canada needs is a staged continuum of care for survivors of violence and trafficking. We need specialized emergency stabilization spaces for women fleeing violence and exploitation. We need long-term, women-only addictions and mental health treatment that is trauma-informed and specifically designed for survivors of violence. We need long-term, live-in recovery programs where women can heal the trauma, attachment wounds, survival coping mechanisms and vulnerabilities that keep them at risk of re-exploitation and returning to abusive situations.

We then need supportive transitional housing and independent living options where women can slowly rebuild stability while continuing to receive wraparound support. Finally, we need long-term affordable and subsidized housing so that women are not pushed back into dangerous situations simply because they cannot afford to survive.

These services also cannot continue to rely on temporary pilot projects and unstable year-to-year funding. Gender-based violence, trafficking and housing insecurity are not temporary problems. They have existed for generations and continue every day across this country. The funding response should reflect that reality.

Across Canada, shelters and transition house programs are overwhelmed. Women are turned away due to lack of beds, and they return to abusive partners and end up homeless and vulnerable to further exploitation. Young girls are being recruited into trafficking directly from homelessness, child welfare involvement, couch surfing and unsafe housing situations.

We also need to acknowledge that the response varies drastically by province. Trafficking survivors are highly transient, yet the quality of care changes drastically depending on where they are in Canada. Ontario's anti-human trafficking strategy has created stronger coordination and specialized responses, but we need national consistency. The federal government should establish minimum standards of care and coordinated anti-trafficking responses across every province and territory so that survivors receive consistent, quality support wherever they go in this country.

We must also realize that labour trafficking remains severely under-identified and under-serviced in Canada. We need specialized live-in recovery and stabilization programs for labour trafficking survivors as well, including migrant workers and newcomers experiencing exploitation, coercion and debt bondage.

I also want to emphasize that investing in long-term recovery systems is fiscally responsible. When women receive stable housing, trauma recovery, addictions care and long-term support, governments see reduced emergency room visits, reduced psychiatric admissions, reduced justice system involvement, reduced incarceration, reduced homelessness and reduced child welfare involvement.

• (1655)

Most importantly, we begin breaking intergenerational cycles of violence, exploitation, addiction and poverty within families and communities.

This is not simply social spending. It is long-term prevention and cost reduction across multiple public systems.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you for your opening remarks, Ms. De Fina.

Mrs. Roberts, you have six minutes.

[English]

**Anna Roberts:** Thank you, Madam Chair. Through you, I first want to commend all the witnesses.

You are heroes to all women. Thank you for what you do, because I know it's not easy.

My first question is for Jasmine De Fina.

Jasmine, I've admired your work. I know that you're working to educate people at schools—students and teachers—and also police officers on awareness of human trafficking. It is crucial in this country that we stop or at least put a halt on human trafficking.

As you and I have discussed many times, 93% of people who are human trafficked are women and children. Twenty-two per cent of that 93% are under the age of 18. Seven per cent are boys, and they don't make it: A lot of them commit suicide. It's tragic. This is not the Canada that we want to remember.

My first question for you, Jasmine, is about communities across Canada that are increasingly worried about public safety and about repeat offenders targeting vulnerable women and girls, while support systems remain overwhelmed. Do gaps in the current justice and social support systems continue to leave survivors at risk?

**Jasmine De Fina:** Yes, absolutely they do. A lot of the trafficking cases happen with offenders who are on bail or who have not received adequate time for their previous trafficking of people.

**Anna Roberts:** I'm currently working on a private member's bill to strengthen the opportunity to have these criminals stay behind bars to protect our survivors. I want to call them "survivors": They're not victims. You guys are survivors and I commend you for it.

Would you agree that lengthening those sentences would help survivors feel safer and not at risk?

**Jasmine De Fina:** Yes. I think one of the main barriers as to why survivors don't come forward to report their trafficking is that they understand there really is no justice served. Oftentimes, traffickers are not found guilty. The women have to go through an atrocious process to even take the stand, and a lot of times they don't survive the process themselves. Like you said, they die by suicide, or they relapse and spiral.

The traffickers are not even found guilty. If they are, they're seeing two, four or seven years maximum, and the women have to then watch their backs for the traffickers when, shortly, they're out again.

**Anna Roberts:** One of the things that I've spoken to many survivors about is the fact that the reason they don't come forward is that they get retraumatized, and the perpetrators often threaten them and threaten their families.

If we could ensure their protection and have them come forward so that they can testify without entering the courtroom, do you think that would help ensure that the sentencing meets the crime?

**Jasmine De Fina:** Yes, absolutely. I think that would be wonderful.

I've had situations with women I've supported through court where traffickers have shown up in their apartments and were holding them at gunpoint. Oftentimes, they find the women in the parking lots at the courts, as survivors are just kind of left there. They don't even have police accompaniment.

I absolutely agree with that.

**Anna Roberts:** I recently met with a family member, a mother of a child who is autistic. She was groomed at the age of 15. I was disappointed.... Well, I was disgusted, to be honest with you. She

finally found her daughter after five years. They had to operate on her anus and now she's on suicide watch. What is it...? The individual, the perpetrator, didn't get a day of jail sentencing.

How is it that we are allowing these perpetrators—I call them "animals"—to continue to terrorize our women, our children and our boys? Why is it that the laws take so long to change to ensure the protection of all survivors?

• (1700)

**Jasmine De Fina:** Yes, I'm not sure how the systems work, but what I've seen is that a lot of people don't have the passion that you do, Ms. Roberts, to put forward these private members' bills and to make sure that things like it are happening. I think, a lot of times, we talk about supporting survivors and then we don't really see the outcomes in the end.

**Anna Roberts:** We know this industry is at \$239 billion U.S. annually. There should be a penalty for all the buyers—the perpetrators—to ensure that those funds are put aside to help the survivors. Would you agree with that?

**Jasmine De Fina:** I think that would help the system both with the quick response for victims—that weighs a lot on the system—and with the medical coverage survivors need afterwards. As you said, there are operations and trauma therapy. There are all kinds of costs to recovery, so I think that would be really helpful. It would also help them feel like they've received some sort of justice.

**Anna Roberts:** I know my time is almost up, yet I had so many more questions for all the other witnesses.

I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart. I have been working on this for four years. I will tell you that there are nights I go home and just can't get to sleep. I can't get those visions out of my mind, so thank you for what you do. God bless all of you.

[Translation]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mrs. Roberts.

Ms. Ménard, you have six minutes.

**Marie-Gabrielle Ménard (Hochelaga—Rosemont-Est, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to welcome all the witnesses and thank them for the essential work they do.

Ms. St-Pierre-Gaudreault, I am delighted to see you back. You have yet again made yourself available. I will start with you, because there is one aspect I would like to ensure is properly included in the report we will produce. Obviously, we're talking a lot about the different client groups you support, but I think you can shed some light on this for us, and I invite Ms. Bigaouette to comment as well.

I would like you to paint a picture of the staff working in shelters and safe houses. Could you give us an overview of the current situation?

**Julie St-Pierre-Gaudreault:** I will respond briefly, then I will let my colleague Ms. Bigaouette follow up.

Currently, shelters have to double their shifts to meet needs. Cases are increasingly complex, which means that shelters are overwhelmed and unable to meet the demand. In Quebec, just last year, shelters affiliated with the federation had to turn away approximately 9,000 women for lack of space. We are increasingly unable to house women who need immediate support.

We are also seeing an increase in the use of our outreach services. Shelter staff are seeing increasingly young women using outreach services. These women are also becoming harder to reach, especially those living with housing insecurity. So, it's becoming very difficult for shelter staff. There is a severe labour shortage, so it is also challenging to provide our services 24 hours a day, seven days a week—which we must do since our shelters are an essential service, especially in a crisis situation, as we can see.

I will now turn to Ms. Bigaouette.

**Mylène Bigaouette:** My comments will follow along the same lines.

In addition to everything that Ms. St-Pierre-Gaudreault described, the housing crisis means that stays are getting longer and longer. This makes it harder to leave the shelter. This can also make it harder to respond to ad hoc requests. We really hear this a great deal.

Moreover, with all these factors and the growing complexity of cases, workers must become increasingly specialized in different areas. They must be able to respond to many requests. With the current funding, we can't pay salaries that reflect the specializations and experience of these workers. As a result, we're losing staff. Turnover is high and things are becoming difficult. It isn't possible to double shifts in some shelters. Everything falls on the shoulders of a single worker, who must answer the telephone 24 hours a day, seven days a week; deal with crises in the shelter; and meet the various needs.

This is an overview of the situation. There are other details, but that's enough—

• (1705)

**Marie-Gabrielle Ménard:** That's enlightening. Thank you.

Ms. Bookchin, I have a supplementary question for you.

I'm curious about the impact of this staff turnover on shelter users. I know full well that the relationship of trust is vital. Women in shelters need stability. What are your thoughts on this?

[English]

**Sue Bookchin:** Yes, I think there are a few things. One is about education and training for shelter workers. There is no doubt that there are capacity issues. Sometimes there's only one staff person in an overnight shift with a house full of traumatized people.

There's no standardized training or education for shelter workers—at least not here in Nova Scotia—so they're not necessarily equipped for the kinds of challenges they're facing, such as mental health and substance use challenges. Also, if there are children, there are trauma-specific needs of children and youth in those situations.

Most people learn on the job. We use “trauma-informed” as a buzzword these days, but trauma-specialized, trauma-sensitive responses are things that not a lot of people really understand or are educated in. That can have a huge impact on the clients who are coming into the shelter, because if the staff are dysregulated... Many of them carry their own lived experience. They're suffering vicarious trauma. They have moral injury because the organizations are not caring for them or validating their experiences. When clients come in and face dysregulated staff, that can be very harmful. We're hearing that from people who go into shelters. This really is an unnamed and silenced dimension that we don't really talk about.

On the turnover, people sometimes do go to shelters repeatedly. I had somebody describe to me that they were a “frequent flyer” at a transition house. When you're constantly seeing new people who have different levels of experience or competence in trauma-sensitive responses, it does damage people's trust. Women talk, so if people are not having a good experience, that kind of dynamic gets spread through the community and does compromise trust in the community.

[Translation]

**Marie-Gabrielle Ménard:** Thank you.

I'll take you in a completely different direction. I know that we don't use the term “third-stage housing”. However, we're working hard to find solutions. Obviously, we have first-stage housing designed for extreme emergencies, and second-stage housing.

Let's dream. What models would we—

**The Chair:** I must interrupt your dream, Ms. Ménard. Perhaps you will have the opportunity to return to it later.

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

**Andréanne Larouche:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to thank the witnesses for joining us for this important study.

Ms. Bookchin and Ms. De Fina, we can't say enough about your extremely challenging work, let alone your testimonies. Without you, I don't think that these women would pull through. Again, thank you.

My first questions are for Ms. Bigaouette and Ms. St-Pierre-Gaudreault from the Fédération des maisons d'hébergement pour femmes. I'm happy to see them here today.

In your brief, you stated that shelters have become "real safety infrastructure" for women. However, you pointed out that these resources remain underfunded and overburdened.

In concrete terms, how does this affect the safety of women and children? You touched on this briefly in your opening remarks. However, I would like to give you the opportunity to talk about this again.

**Julie St-Pierre-Gaudreault:** When women are denied access to services, which happened 9,000 times this year, we wonder where they can turn for services. We're talking mainly about first-stage housing. External services can provide direct support to women facing housing insecurity.

As my colleague said at the start, once women have been able to access the services of our shelters, 35% of them will again end up in a precarious housing situation. No community or affordable housing is available when they leave. That's why one of our key recommendations focuses on this issue.

Yes, shelters provide vital support and necessary guidance for women who have experienced multiple forms of violence and extremely complex life paths. However, they can't always access social housing with community support afterwards. The fact that women can access low-cost housing, for example, is no guarantee that they'll end up in a safe environment. They need a single-sex environment and, in some cases, ongoing community support.

We spoke earlier about the third stage, which is useful. However, we can see that, in some cases, women are unable to work through their complex traumas when they remain in a shelter or transition housing for one, two or three years. We really need permanent solutions so that women can work through their experiences of violence.

Perhaps Ms. Bigaouette wants to continue.

• (1710)

**Mylène Bigaouette:** Regarding the 9,000 denials that my colleague referred to, I would add that women call when they need accommodation. If they need to make two, three or four calls before they find a place, they undoubtedly face a greater risk. Sometimes, they have only one chance to leave the situation and the home. So this is a real concern.

We're also concerned that, over time, the women may stop calling. They know that it's getting harder and harder to find a place. Women sometimes tell us that they know about the lack of space and that they feel as though they're taking a place away from a woman who may be in a worse situation. This atmosphere can lead to self-censorship. We can't lie either. That's the reality. It's a risk.

**Andréanne Larouche:** I understood that there were 9,000 denials. However, you said that 12,000 denials were recorded in your

federation's shelters in 2024-25, owing to a lack of space. What happens to these women when they're denied access to a shelter? We want to talk about these women. We could even make a connection with the information heard in a study on homelessness in another committee. We could talk about hidden homelessness. Some women are forced to provide sexual services in order to secure a bed and a place to stay.

What are the effects of these 12,000 denials?

**Mylène Bigaouette:** They're exactly what you just said. Ms. St-Pierre-Gaudreault spoke earlier of a vicious cycle. When we talk about the spiral of homelessness for women, this is exactly what we mean. Women want to avoid ending up on the street. They're aware of the dangers involved and they also often have children. If they were to end up on the street with their children, they would probably lose custody. They'll do everything in their power to avoid ending up on the street. They'll stay with family and friends or find other temporary accommodation solutions. We've already seen women put their children up with family and friends. The women sleep in their cars or in parks to avoid overburdening their family and friends and to ensure their children's safety first. These are all effects and they have a direct bearing on what happens afterwards, unfortunately.

We're working with a researcher who is currently carrying out a longitudinal study. All the women who end up homeless have experienced violence. However, the vast majority of them have failed to find a housing solution at some point. Either they had trouble getting people to recognize the type of violence involved, or there wasn't any place for them. It's a real issue. These women have fallen through the cracks in our safety net.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Bigaouette. I must interrupt you, unfortunately. Time flies.

Mrs. Goodridge, you have the floor for five minutes.

**Laila Goodridge:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to thank the witnesses for joining us today.

[English]

Ms. Bookchin, I find your effort at prevention with schools and giving space to that really important.

Could you speak for maybe a minute on the successes you've seen with that program?

**Sue Bookchin:** In the school system in Nova Scotia, we've been advocating for some years for violence prevention and healthy relationship training from primary school to grade 12. Just recently, the Department of Education invited community-based organizations to review some new curriculum outcomes, so that there would be that curriculum from primary school to grade 12.

There has been a little bit of training for teachers. It was rolled out in grade 10 this past fall, and now we understand that it's on pause because there is concern among teachers that they don't feel prepared to teach the material, to grapple with disclosures and, maybe, to deal with their own trauma they're carrying, if they get triggered. We are working with a number of community organizations to see how we can develop some tools, videos and resources to help teachers and administrators feel more comfortable and confident about teaching to those curriculum outcomes.

There are a lot of resources provided by the school system, but still, I think there's fear. It's hard to grapple with that. There's also a program called GuysWork, which was funded provincially and federally.

• (1715)

**Laila Goodridge:** Thank you. I'm sorry I had to cut you off, but I have a very limited amount of time.

Ms. De Fina, I'll switch gears and go to you now. I've had the opportunity to meet a number of survivors of human trafficking. One thing that many of these exceptionally brave and incredible women have shared with me about their path towards recovery is how complicated it was for them to go into a space, with all the trauma they had from that, and face their demons as they went through recovery without having enough wraparound supports. When I was reading up about your guys' organization, my heart melted.

I'm wondering if you could speak a little bit about how you guys get women into recovery from addiction.

**Jasmine De Fina:** Thank you so much.

When we start working with women in an outreach capacity—once we receive a referral, whether it be from a hospital, police officer or other agency—we start working with the individuals in community. We meet them where they're at. We wrap around the supports right there.

We try really hard to get them into different addictions programs throughout the country. We try within Ontario first, and then we often have to go across the country. We support them in our outreach capacity while they're still in the addictions recovery program. Once they come to our stage-two housing, it's a sober living facility. We have an addictions counsellor there who has lived experience as well. She's been doing addictions services supports for 36 years. She works one-on-one with the individuals.

We work very closely with the NA community. Once the survivors leave our home, we continue with our follow-care program to ensure that they are able to stay sober and continue on a good path.

**Laila Goodridge:** Thank you very much for the work you guys do. I think that's so incredibly important. I myself have had the privilege, coming from Alberta, of working with none other than the spectacular Paul Brandt and his #NotInMyCity. We named Fort McMurray, my home airport, as the third #NotInMyCity airport to be able to identify human trafficking and stop it in its tracks. Every little piece counts. A lot of people think human trafficking happens in some faraway place in some faraway area. They don't realize that it happens to the girl next door.

I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about the demographics you guys see so that people who are listening, who are tuned in today, can hear exactly how local this problem really is.

**Jasmine De Fina:** The majority of the women we support are local Canadians. Actually, I don't think we've supported anyone who's been from another country. Over the 15 years I've done this work, I've supported only a handful who came from overseas. The majority are domestic trafficking cases. They were born and raised in Canada.

A great percentage of the women we support are indigenous. I myself was a university student. I'm Métis. I'm French and indigenous.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. De Fina.

Ms. Nathan has the floor for five minutes.

[*English*]

**Juanita Nathan (Pickering—Brooklin, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

My first question is for you, Ms. Bookchin. I know from your work that governments often measure shelter systems based on occupancy or short-term outputs rather than long-term survivor outcomes.

What matrix should policy-makers prioritize when evaluating whether transitional housing programs are truly helping women rebuild stability and independence?

• (1720)

**Sue Bookchin:** That's a really good question. We have such a lack of data in Canada about the consequences of gender-based violence in so many different ways. I would love to see a longitudinal study on this. When women go to a shelter, how many of them go back to an abusive relationship? How many of them go on to second-stage housing? How many of them rebuild their lives in ways that are healthy for themselves and their children? How many of them have access to trauma-sensitive supports and mental health work? What is their financial status after they have had to abandon a home and potentially all their possessions?

We don't have that kind of data, and we really need it.

**Juanita Nathan:** I'd like to pose the same question to Jasmine De Fina.

I know that your work is very longitudinal. It takes a long time for recovery. It's not like the other shelters. When it comes to your reports and statistics, and to the funding that supports that, how do you manage that?

**Jasmine De Fina:** We serve a lot more individuals in our outreach and follow-care services because our house fits only five women at a time. As you said, we are long term because it takes several years for survivors to fully get on their feet after leaving these situations. Women can stay in our program for up to seven years, but the longest we've had anyone stay in our home is about two and a half years. They did the recovery program, and then they stayed to start university or get on their feet with other jobs.

Typically, we see that it takes about seven years, I'd say, from the point at which somebody leaves a situation until they're on their feet and ready to take on their own independence. In order to do that, we just can't take as many.

**Juanita Nathan:** I understand. Shelter beds, as you mentioned in your opening, are very scarce. Especially for trafficked victims, there are few and far between. Thank you for what you do.

I'm an MP from the Durham region, and I'm curious about this: What's the youngest victim you have seen trafficked?

**Jasmine De Fina:** The youngest I've personally seen was eight years old.

**Juanita Nathan:** That is very scary. I can understand how you can support teenagers, but how do you work with an eight-year-old? Do you have to involve their parents? What is the care like for anyone who's under 12?

**Jasmine De Fina:** We support adult women, so those 16 plus. We don't work with children, but that was a case that was reported to us through victim services.

We'd have to work with the parents and the children's aid workers. In that situation, they would go through child welfare. There are youth homes for those 12 years old and up. I believe child welfare would handle that solely on its own.

**Juanita Nathan:** I will go back to Ms. Bookchin.

Access to cultural and linguistic services can significantly affect whether survivors feel safe when seeking supports. Immigrant or marginalized women outside of major urban centres face additional barriers when attempting to access shelters and transitional housing services.

Can you talk a bit about what it is like for members of that population who are further marginalized or fall into that intersectionality?

**Sue Bookchin:** It's a huge gap, particularly in rural areas—

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Unfortunately, this will be for another round. The five minutes are up. Sorry.

Ms. De Fina, a technician will call you since your connection is poor. Please answer this call so that we can solve the problem.

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

**Andréanne Larouche:** My goodness. I'll certainly need to follow up with the witnesses. Thank you, Ms. Bookchin, Ms. De Fina, Ms. St-Pierre-Gaudreault and Ms. Bigaouette. We'll need to talk again.

Your brief referred to women who are facing multiple issues and who are sometimes denied access to services owing to overly rigid criteria. How could the federal government make its programs more flexible to better take into account the journeys of these women?

When you talk about overly rigid criteria, what do you mean?

• (1725)

**Julie St-Pierre-Gaudreault:** Both federal and provincial action plans and strategies often address issues of violence according to categories. For example, funding is provided to combat domestic violence, homelessness or mental health issues. However, we need programs that take a comprehensive approach.

For example, we noticed that some shelters are unable to provide the services required to meet women's needs on the ground. When funding is available, it's limited to a specific area. We're calling for a slightly more comprehensive approach to the services provided.

The Fédération des maisons d'hébergement pour femmes has a specific characteristic. Some shelters provide services, but not necessarily on the basis of a one-off experience of violence or an immediate exit from an intimate partner violence situation. The women may have endured the repercussions of the violence a few weeks or months ago. We can meet the needs of women who had to leave a violent home, who ended up in a hidden homelessness situation for a few months and who are looking for a place in a shelter. Some more rigid resources might refuse to take them in. However, when we take a broader view of their experiences and needs, we realize that we must respond.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. St-Pierre-Gaudreault.

I'll now give the floor to Ms. Cody for five minutes.

[*English*]

**Connie Cody:** Thank you, Chair.

I'll just reiterate my colleagues' thanks to all the witnesses. It is a big job.

I have a lot of questions, but I'll start with Jasmine De Fina, if I may.

Recently, I attended the premiere of a documentary on the prevalence of human trafficking along the 401 corridor and the unique needs of the survivors who are rescued—the supports that help them recover from the deep trauma and extreme abuse they experienced.

In your view, do you think the current shelter system provides the unique support needed for these survivors of trafficking?

**Jasmine De Fina:** Absolutely not. The shelters are designed for women fleeing intimate partner violence and domestic abuse, which are very different from extremely complex cases of human trafficking. It's not a good fit for any of the people utilizing these spaces. As was mentioned before, the staff don't have the capacity due to lack of standardized training and lack of understanding of the complexities. Simply having one staff available, sometimes, doesn't support that need.

**Connie Cody:** This is for you, Ms. De Fina: For individuals trying to escape violence, addiction in the home or trafficking situations, does the presence of active drug use in standard shelters recreate the very conditions they are trying to leave?

How does that affect their sense of safety, their recovery and even their willingness to stay in the system at all?

**Jasmine De Fina:** In my experience, through the work I've done, all survivors are different. They all have different needs, routes and services that they think are best for them.

I will say that the majority of the women I have supported prefer to be abstinence-based and to go into sober living environments. They find it harmful to live in harm reduction spaces. However, there is a need for harm reduction spaces, as well, for those who aren't ready for sober living just yet.

• (1730)

**Connie Cody:** Unfortunately, we're hearing a lot about elder abuse, and the trafficking of seniors is on the rise.

Would you agree that government Bill C-16 should also include persons of trust within the definitions of “coercion” and “intimate partner violence” to further protect seniors escaping violence and abuse?

**Jasmine De Fina:** Absolutely. We are seeing this as well. I agree with that.

**Connie Cody:** That's perfect.

We're also seeing more youth entering shelters and encampments. When young people are placed in general shelter settings alongside adults dealing with addiction or violence, what risk does that create? Is that an appropriate model for these vulnerable youth?

**Jasmine De Fina:** Absolutely not. It's an inappropriate model. The adults who have been in these situations for years pose a threat to the youth who are coming in. They often recruit them into gangs, violence, trafficking, drug use and the trafficking of drugs and other stuff.

**Connie Cody:** My next question is for Sue Bookchin.

There is often an assumption that shelters are stable, controlled environments, but the day-to-day reality can be much more unpre-

dictable, especially when staff are managing complex behaviours and safety concerns.

How much control do staff actually have with regard to maintaining order and safety, and what impacts do burnout and fatigue have on maintaining safe environments?

**Sue Bookchin:** I can speak about transition houses.

I know less about shelters not built specifically for women escaping violence, but I have heard a lot about women feeling unsafe in them. There are far fewer parameters and contexts in which staff have control over that. Again, it's short-staffing.

Even in transition houses, people are limited in terms of how they can ensure that the workplace environment is supporting everybody's well-being, staff as well as clients. It has a lot to do with the leadership of the organization and whether they have been trained and—

**Connie Cody:** Thank you.

I have one question I would like to ask Julie St-Pierre Gaudreault.

In your last appearance before this committee during our study on section 810 of the Criminal Code, you noted that the section often creates a false sense of security for women in abusive relationships due to unenforced peace bonds.

Can you speak to how the lack of enforcement on this issue creates additional dangers for women entering shelters?

[*Translation*]

**Julie St-Pierre-Gaudreault:** We did indeed appear as part of the study on breaches of peace bonds imposed under section 810 of the Criminal Code. We noticed that Quebec saw multiple breaches, which are sanctioned under section 811. So, when women had to apply for a section 810 order for their own protection, they had a false sense of security. Again, in fact, there are—

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. St-Pierre-Gaudreault. I gave Ms. Cody more time as a result of a technical glitch.

Ms. Ménard, you're bringing up the rear. You have the floor for five minutes.

**Marie-Gabrielle Ménard:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'll turn again to the representatives of the Fédération des maisons d'hébergement pour femmes.

With the creation of Build Canada Homes, we can support the construction of new homes. Should we be looking at any specific characteristics? I'm thinking of first-stage housing and—to get back to my dream—third-stage housing.

What type of models should we consider?

**Julie St-Pierre-Gaudreault:** We have some concerns. In fact, they aren't necessarily concerns.

Build Canada Homes is currently a fairly large and unclear machine. Many criteria have yet to be determined. We know that new first-stage housing may be funded. In the beginning, this wasn't necessarily clear. The idea was probably more to support the development of transitional housing or somewhat more permanent housing.

On our end, we consider it a priority to ensure that the housing is affordable. Of course, we also want to build housing outside the private market. This is vital to maintaining affordability. Certainly, first-stage and second-stage housing are among my priorities. The networks are currently overwhelmed. We see this need on the ground.

Moreover, when it comes to building permanent housing, the housing must be accessible. It can be low-cost and single-sex housing, meaning housing for women. Again, it can also be long-term, permanent and single-sex housing.

In the national housing strategy, 25% of the budget was earmarked for women's housing. In our opinion, this should be renewed in any new strategy.

• (1735)

**Marie-Gabrielle Ménard:** Ms. Bigaouette, you're obviously based in Quebec. However, in your opinion, should certain regions be given priority? Are any of them really lagging in terms of the services provided?

**Mylène Bigaouette:** Quebec has a task force working on this issue. This task force is made up of a number of partners. Of course, regions such as Montreal are overwhelmed right now. We're particularly concerned by the fact that a number of regions lack shelters that have broader missions and that can take in women who have experienced different forms of violence or violence other than domestic abuse. I'm thinking in particular of Côte-Nord, Abitibi-Témiscamingue, Chaudière-Appalaches, Bas-Saint-Laurent and other specific regions that don't have any shelters of this nature.

For example, if a woman is experiencing violence at the hands of the owner of her home or has experienced domestic violence and

hidden homelessness, as Ms. St-Pierre-Gaudreault explained, this woman must move to another region to find housing because she won't be able to find a shelter in her own area.

**Marie-Gabrielle Ménard:** Ms. Bookchin, my constituency has an organization called Avant Coup that works with men who have anger management and violence issues. The organization serves only these clients. We've had a number of discussions with this organization. The organization laments the fact that women victims of domestic violence are often the ones who must uproot themselves. Their children must also move to a different region and sometimes enrol in new schools. This adds a great deal of turmoil to the transition.

When we come up with new models to support women trying to escape domestic violence, do we need to rethink how we help women get a roof over their heads?

[English]

**Sue Bookchin:** Absolutely. That is really, desperately needed. The burden that is on the shoulders of women is just untenable. When you've been traumatized and abused, to have to leave your home and not know where you're going to live or not know how you're going to support yourself or your children is torturous. It's a torturous path for women.

We need to think about ways to hold men accountable. If the people who are committing violence are the people who need to be removed, how do we do that in a way that keeps them accountable and also provides them with the services they need in order to change their behaviours? Otherwise, they just go on to do the same thing with other partners.

I think it's an innovative idea that we need to really pursue.

[Translation]

**Marie-Gabrielle Ménard:** Thank you.

I just want to remind each of you, since you were interrupted at times, that we would appreciate any recommendations or additional information that you can send to the committee.

**The Chair:** I would like to thank all the witnesses for joining us today. It was quite helpful.

I would also like to thank my colleagues, who once again elevated the level of the debate.

I hope that you have a good evening.

The meeting is adjourned.







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