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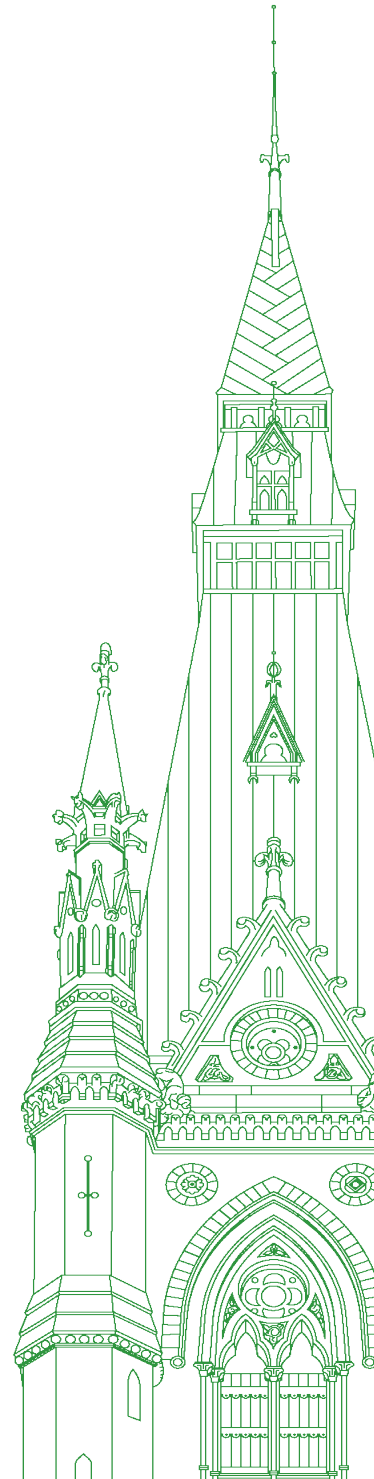
Standing Committee on the Status of Women

EVIDENCE

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Tuesday, June 9, 2026

Chair: Dominique Vien



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• (1125)

[Translation]

The Chair (Dominique Vien (Bellechasse—Les Etchemins—Lévis, CPC)): Good morning, everyone. Today is a day unlike any other. Welcome.

I call this meeting to order.

First, I want to let you know that there will be votes today, so that will disrupt our proceedings a bit.

This is meeting number 43 of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women. For the first hour today, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Thursday, April 23, 2026, the committee will resume its study on women's shelters and transitional housing.

During the second hour, we were supposed to begin a new study, which will focus on menopause. Before I came into the room, I spoke to my colleagues—who will let me know publicly if they still agree—and I received their consent to proceed with the study on shelters during the first hour and to postpone the study on the impact of menopause on the labour market. The goal is to ensure we do not run out of time for this meeting. We don't want to gloss over it, since it's quite important. We will resume it by the end of the session or, at the latest, in the fall.

Is it still the will of the committee to move forward with this plan?

Voices: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your understanding.

Before we proceed, if members agree, I move to adopt the budget for the study on menopause. That way, it will get done. You received this information yesterday. The budget is \$36,400.

Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt this budget?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

There's also another item on the agenda regarding the study on menopause, and we will address that right away, as well.

If members of the public wish to submit briefs and comments on this matter, we give them the opportunity to do so until September 30, as usual. Since everyone seems to agree on this, we have covered all the points regarding the study on menopause. We're ready to begin it, but we won't start it today. September 30 is the

deadline, but I forgot to mention that submissions are limited to two pages, or approximately 1,000 words.

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, as usual.

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

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 members on Zoom, please use the "raise hand" function.

For those on Zoom, you can select at the bottom of your screen the appropriate channel for interpretation: English, French or floor. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece in front of you and select the desired channel. I want to remind the witnesses that members of the committee can ask their questions in French or English. If interpretation is needed, please take a moment immediately to select the desired channel. That will save us valuable seconds.

I remind you that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair, but since I don't want to disrupt the flow, participants don't have to address me directly. They can address the members who are asking them questions directly. That will make the discussion flow more smoothly.

Before we welcome our witnesses, I would like to provide this trigger warning. We will be discussing topics related to gender-based violence. This may be triggering to viewers with similar experiences. If any participants feel distressed or need help, please advise the clerk. For all witnesses and members of Parliament, it's important to recognize that these are difficult discussions, so let's all try to be as compassionate as possible.

I will now welcome the witnesses.

[English]

I will now welcome our witnesses. We have, from Faye Peterson House, Debbie Zweep, executive director.

[Translation]

From SOS violence conjugale, we are welcoming Claudine Thibault, who is the lead for issues involving intimate partner violence.

[English]

From the Women's Centre for Social Justice, we have Nneka MacGregor, executive director; and Sonya Boyce, director of stakeholder outreach and engagement.

Welcome. We will begin with opening remarks.

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

Thank you.

Debbie Zweep (Executive Director, Faye Peterson House): Good morning, everyone. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.

I'm going to try to keep my speed relatively slow.

My name is Debbie Zweep. I've been the executive director here at Faye Peterson House in Thunder Bay, Ontario—

[Translation]

The Chair: Ms. Zweep, I'm sorry to interrupt you, but we seem to be having a problem with the interpretation.

Can you speak a little, to see if it's working?

[English]

Go ahead, Madam Zweep.

Debbie Zweep: My name is Debbie Zweep, executive director of Faye Peterson House. I've been working here for 28 years. I'm happy to speak to you today about violence against women and the role that shelters play.

The Chair: Everything is fine, Madam. Go ahead.

Debbie Zweep: Again, my name is Debbie Zweep. I'm here at Faye Peterson House in northern Ontario, where spring has not really reached us yet. I'm happy to be with you to talk about the role shelters play in violence against women here in Canada, specifically in Ontario.

Today, I wanted to talk to you about second-stage housing. We have just built, on our same property here, eight units. It took us 10 years to build this property, and we finally got funding from the feds, from the City of Thunder Bay, and from, of course, fundraising within this community. I wanted to acknowledge that the federal government's initiative for funding housing navigators was certainly the key to our success, both at a federal level and also at a local level.

Once we started working with Women's Shelters Canada and their navigators and the city, we were able to put all the funding together. I also wanted to let you know that we had envisioned a bricks and mortar version, but we then switched to a modular build, which reduced our capital costs probably by at least 50%, if not more, and that we were successful in starting on time, completing in time, and—I'm happy to tell you—coming in under budget.

What is unique about our second stage is that our vision is, or our dream is, to have two women share a unit. These would be single women, typically over the age of 55. There's not a lot of research on that, but we have begun. There are two single women we had housed here within our first-stage shelter who have now been living together for the last month. We also have a family with two

teenagers. We are using lots of information from our sister shelters, but also the document that was produced by Women's Shelters Canada with best practices or the practical guide for second-stage housing in developing policies, but really it is the women who are guiding us as we move through this process.

I think one of the things that are of the most importance at this moment as we implement second-stage housing is that there is no operational funding. I'm sure you have heard that before. While they are supported by workers here within the first-stage shelter, transitional housing and support, with maybe a family court support worker and certainly a little child care, there is no sustainable funding. A community of 120,000 in the north here has committed to raising \$30,000 a year to contribute to that break-even that we have to provide to what was CMHC. I'm not sure whom we'll be providing that to now.

With the second stage, I think it's important to recognize that women have moved out of crisis but haven't moved out of danger, and that's why we've built second-stage shelter: We can keep them safer right on this property with the same systems, but they do need specific programming. Their children need specific programming in order for us to evolve with them, so that they can be fully active participants within our community and live safe as well. Our vision is that they will probably be here two to three years and, with our work with them, we will move them forward into the community, into regular housing. That's our goal, anyway.

The second thing—I know I have only five minutes—is to talk to you a bit about custody and access, and how difficult this period of time is for women. Women are often spending \$10,000 at least if they are trying to negotiate custody. It is a long process. If a woman chooses to go to trial, they are at \$100,000, and if they are on legal aid they are not usually going to trial and their outcomes are often not as successful.

One of the difficulties with custody and access is certainly the process, working with defence lawyers on both sides or family law lawyers who are dragging this out in regard to the participants. It is often taking two to three years, and within that time women are living in poverty. They aren't getting support payments. They can no longer manage to have their house or their vehicle. They have to use public transportation to move their children to appointments, to activities. There continue to be long battles on section 7 and extracurricular activity.

• (1130)

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Zweep. It's all the time you have.

[Translation]

Good morning, Ms. Thibaudeau.

You have the floor for five minutes.

Claudine Thibadeau (Lead, Issues Involving Intimate Partner Violence, SOS violence conjugale): Good morning.

Madam Chair, members of the committee, I want to begin by thanking you for the opportunity to speak today. Like Ms. Zweep, I have been working in the field of domestic violence for 28 years.

I represent SOS violence conjugale, which serves as the central resource for referring victims of domestic violence to shelters throughout Quebec. For nearly 40 years, our mission has been to provide information and referral services to victims, their loved ones and professionals on a 24/7 basis. Every year, we receive from 50,000 to 60,000 calls, text messages and requests by chat. We also offer this service 24 hours a day, and seven days a week.

Behind every one of those requests is a person trying to regain their power, improve their safety and, sometimes, save their own life. Among the services we provide, one of the most critical ones is to quickly find a space in a first-stage shelter for a victim who wants to leave a violent situation. Each year, we receive from 15,000 to 20,000 requests for shelter.

Data from our most recent activity report reveals an extremely concerning reality. Year after year, our ability to find an available space continues to decline. Six years ago, we managed to find a space for nearly two out of every three requests. Today, that placement rate is down to just 45%. In other words, more than one in two people who contact us to escape violence cannot be referred to a shelter with available space when they need it.

This provincial average masks even harsher realities. For example, in Montreal, where a significant portion of the requests are concentrated, we find a space in only 37% of cases. In Laval, the rate is 41%; in Mauricie, it is 42%; and in the Outaouais, it is 44%. These figures reflect tremendous pressure on the specialized shelter network.

However, the reality is even more worrisome when we consider that available spaces are not always in the area the person prefers. So, when we can't find a space nearby, we at SOS violence conjugale will always suggest going a little further—and sometimes even much further.

This year, for the first time, we measured the proportion of placements made outside the local area—for example, women from Montreal placed in Sainte-Thérèse or Joliette, women from Gatineau placed in Lachute, or women from Sherbrooke placed in Lac-Mégantic. This exercise made us realize that more than half of the victims we were able to refer to an available space were placed outside their local community because no spots were available nearby.

In concrete terms, this means that these women have to leave their city, their support network and their job. It also complicates their overall efforts to regain power, as well as their legal or medical-social efforts, for example. We know that once we've connected people with a shelter resource, many women will refuse the placement because the distance makes the process impossible. That's why a placement outside the local area can't really be considered a true success.

Therefore, when we consider only placements made within the right area, our actual placement rate for women seeking shelter drops to only 22.4%. In other words, across Quebec, barely one in five victims who request a shelter placement can be referred to a resource that truly meets their needs and reality.

Even these annual figures are merely averages. Some days are much more difficult. For example, on May 16, 2025, we received 79 requests for shelter across Quebec. Only 18.7% of those who applied could be referred to a shelter with an available space. The majority of those spaces were outside the area the person had requested.

Certain populations also face additional barriers. We found that allophone women were placed in shelters in only 37.5% of cases this year, likely because fewer of them were able to accept a placement outside their preferred area.

This data leads us to a clear conclusion: Access to housing for victims of domestic violence is currently critical in Quebec. When a person decides to leave an abusive partner, the window of opportunity is often fragile and time-limited. If there are no spaces available when she is ready to leave, the consequences can be major for her safety and that of her children.

Shelters are doing remarkable work under intense pressure. However, the figures show that the needs currently far exceed the network's capacity. As a society, we must understand what these figures are telling us. Behind every percentage are women and their children, who are seeking a safe place to rebuild their lives. When a victim of domestic violence seeks refuge in a shelter, there should always be a logical and accessible solution.

Thank you very much.

• (1135)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Thibadeau.

Good morning, Ms. MacGregor and Ms. Boyce. Welcome.

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

[English]

Nneka MacGregor (Executive Director, Women's Centre for Social Justice): Good morning, Madam Chair and honourable members. Thank you for this opportunity.

I am Nneka MacGregor, co-founder and executive director of the Women's Centre for Social Justice, better known as Women at the Centre. I'm appearing today with my colleague Sonya Boyce.

We're a survivor-led organization of diverse women, gender-diverse and trans survivors. Our community shapes our priorities, our research and our policy recommendations. Over the past five years, Women at the Centre led a groundbreaking initiative entitled "Truth & Transformation: Advancing Gender Equity For Black Women, Girls And Gender Diverse, and Trans Peoples In Canada". It was funded by Women and Gender Equality Canada, and we engaged over 700 participants from across every province and territory. It is, to our knowledge, the first pan-Canadian study to centre Black survivors' and advocates' experiences of gender-based violence in their own words. The peer-reviewed literature on this specific population and their experiences of the shelter system is very thin, and this study, in significant part, begins to fill that gap.

Black survivors are the proverbial canary in the coal mine. Their experiences reveal the structural gaps within the shelter and transitional housing systems that might otherwise go unnoticed—gaps that affect many survivors across Canada but are experienced differently across populations. We know that you've heard that women and children are turned away from shelters every day, and Women at the Centre's evidence is on the survivors who never reach the door. We're going to share three key findings from our research.

Canadian scholar Patrina Duhaney found that Black women who sought institutional help for intimate partner violence frequently experienced increased scrutiny, monitoring and criminalization as a direct result of disclosure. Our research confirms this pattern at scale, with survivors describing encountering the trope of "angry Black woman" when seeking safety. Expressions of fear, distress and self-advocacy were viewed as aggression. They described having to adjust their tone, body language and facial expressions, all while in crisis and trying to find support. Survivors also described avoiding shelters entirely, because entering a shelter meant contact with police and child welfare and immigration systems, which are sites that research has shown to be embedded with gendered anti-Black violence.

When they did access shelters, Black survivors described spaces without culturally appropriate food or products for black skin or black hair, and with staff not equipped to recognize violence that was both gendered and racialized. In the north, survivors described a Black woman who was fleeing violence and was turned away from the only shelter in the community.

I'll pass it over to Sonya.

• (1140)

Sonya Boyce (Director, Stakeholder Outreach and Engagement, Women's Centre for Social Justice): Survivors also told us that when GBV systems fail, they turn to their kinship networks. This includes grandmothers, aunties, sisters, faith groups and Black-led organizations like ours. This is where many survivors found housing, child care, transportation, emotional support and advocacy. In the words of one survivor, "The shelter turned me away. My auntie took me in. The church helped me with groceries and my kids' school. A Black women's organization helped me find a lawyer. None of that would show up in any government data. But that's what kept me alive."

These are not informal coping strategies. They are culturally grounded approaches to safety and healing that are rooted in Afro-

centric values of kinship, collective responsibility and community care.

I'm going to share five recommendations with you now.

First, expand the scope and language from intimate partner violence to gender-based violence to capture the diverse range of survivors in need of emergency shelter.

Second, establish a dedicated funding stream within bilateral agreements for housing that is specifically designed by and for Black survivors. Funding must include capital investment and operational costs.

Third, fund Black-led, indigenous-led and survivor-led organizations as primary providers of safety and support.

Fourth, mandate the collection of race-disaggregated data across shelter, housing and gender-based violence systems.

Last, require all federal GBV policies, bilateral agreements and shelter funding frameworks to explicitly address gendered anti-Black violence and misogyny.

In closing, and just to reiterate, there's no robust peer-reviewed literature on the experiences of Black women, girls, gender-diverse and trans survivors in the shelter and transitional housing system in Canada. Our research exists in large part because the literature does not.

Thank you.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Boyce.

We'll begin the discussion between members and witnesses.

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

• (1145)

[English]

Connie Cody (Cambridge, CPC): Thank you.

Through you, Chair, I want to thank the witnesses for coming today. It's been a very engaging topic and a lot of information has been shared.

My question is for Debbie Zweep.

It's nice speaking to you again. As you're aware, Thunder Bay is very much like my community of Cambridge, in that we both share a major concern about human trafficking. Stats Canada states that Thunder Bay had "the highest average annual rate of human trafficking".

What factors do you see playing a role in making Thunder Bay a major hub for human trafficking?

Debbie Zweep: It's such an easy question to answer.

One of the things is that we are on the highway. The highway has to come through Thunder Bay, so there's lots of access for transporting people.

We also have the water right in front of us, so you can use the shipping methods of moving women across the water. That form is definitely alive and well here.

We also have a number of gangs. They're from the Ottawa and Toronto regions, mainly. They are very active in Thunder Bay in substance use. Although the local police and the Ontario Provincial Police work collaboratively to try to get a handle on that, our courts are definitely backed up with these perpetrators. It really provides the ground for this kind of work to happen.

It is a difficult situation, for sure. It isn't getting any better here in the north.

Connie Cody: Do you see the shelter systems being able to accommodate survivors of human trafficking?

Debbie Zweep: There are a couple of things around that, Connie, that I would comment on.

First of all, when survivors come into shelter, it has to be their choice, and that doesn't always happen. The police may come with a referral, but the woman may not want to stay. There's that piece I want to respect.

The other piece is that, as much as we can, we like to allow that woman individual space. I have eight bedrooms, and I have 26 beds. If we are not full, then I'm definitely providing an individual space for someone who has been trafficked, but that is not always possible. Both Beendigen, my sister shelter down the road, and my shelter are often full, so that does make it more difficult.

I have women on the crisis line asking directly, "Will I get a room to myself?" If we can't provide that, then they aren't coming in for service.

Connie Cody: You mentioned the justice system. If section 810 of the Criminal Code is not effectively being applied within the justice system to protect women victims of intimate partner violence, would it be safer for women if these violent offenders were kept behind bars rather than being released on bail? Would this improve the safety of shelter spaces, especially if the locations of shelters were made known to the abusers?

Debbie Zweep: That's an interesting topic for sure, because we have very limited jail space here in Thunder Bay, so we are often seeing perpetrators of abuse against women released, and then they are in our community, which definitely escalates the opportunity for risk to both women and children.

I don't believe everyone deserves to be behind bars. I want to see first offenders, for instance, in that early intervention program. However, I do want repeat offenders to have that accountability within the justice system. I'm hopeful that, when the new jail that they're building opens and we have the additional spaces, we will have some more accountability.

I do believe our Crowns are working very hard in regard to listening to risk assessments that we provide to them to keep perpetrators within the jail system or within corrections. However, there just isn't the space. I don't think there is an unwillingness, but in regard to repeat perpetrators, we have Canada Court Watch reports and many other reports on that, and we do believe that the repeat offender has to do some time.

Connie Cody: Thank you.

I'd like to move on to Claudine Thibaudeau with some questions, if I might.

Elder abuse is an under-reported yet growing concern, and senior women are less likely to reach out. Are you hearing more from seniors experiencing violence?

Claudine Thibaudeau: We are, but there's still quite a lot of work to be done. We've released some new promotional material lately, some of which has been aimed at women over, say, 55, because we've portrayed a grandmother in our new sign. We really hope that we can better reach people to help them recognize violence as it is but also recognize that the stakes are different when you reach a certain age.

Leaving a violent partner is often a long-term safety plan. It's something that will bring more peace to someone's life, but rarely in the short term. It will be in the mid to long term. As you advance in age, differences in stakes will change decisions, because you may not have as long and you may choose to be as peaceful as possible. That also needs to be taken into account.

We have second-stage shelters. As I said earlier, they're too full. They might not be well adapted to someone over a certain age in terms of physical adaptation, but, also, the environment might not be a comfortable one for some women. There's also the question of what's going to happen afterwards.

The same goes for women who have handicaps. If a partner plays a support role in any sort of way, whether it's physical support related to a handicap or financial support, how are these people going to have a truly safe life later on?

● (1150)

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Thibaudeau.

Colleagues, I'd like to make a brief aside. As you can see, the bells are ringing.

Is it the pleasure of the committee to continue the meeting and vote using the app?

Laila Goodridge (Fort McMurray—Cold Lake, CPC): We can continue for a little while, but not during the vote in the House. I would like to go vote in the House.

The Chair: Okay.

Then we will continue the meeting. I will suspend in due course.

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

Chi Nguyen (Spadina—Harbourfront, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I thank the witnesses for being with us today.

I will ask my questions in English.

[English]

Thank you again for your excellent testimony today and for helping us to understand the context in which shelters are operating in this country.

Ms. Zweep, you talked about some of the best practice work and some of the resources for women's shelters. I would love for you to highlight a couple of those pieces that you found in rolling out this transition housing. I'm also curious as to whether you're experiencing a lot of wait-lists, what the demand is like, and whether or not you're able to meet the needs you're seeing in Thunder Bay.

Then I want to ask about the province's role and whether or not the provincial government is supporting any of your work. You mentioned the municipality and the feds, but I'm curious as to whether the province is stepping in as well.

Debbie Zweep: We used the best practices guide from Women's Shelters Canada right from the beginning in regard to programming or what our rooms looked like. There's quite a bit to do on harm reduction. There's the ideal, which I hope we get to someday.

As for what we are doing currently, for instance, when I set up a woman's goals with her as she comes into the second stage, we look at our relapse prevention. We have a document, and we'll work with the woman to say, for instance, "I've had a slip with my substance use. Here's what you're going to see. Here's the plan I have for myself. How will you know if I'm not able to incorporate that plan?" That was extremely useful.

There was a whole conversation around a pet policy. I have a no-pet policy, but there were lots of conversations about what kinds of pets...comfort pets and those kinds of things.

The policy development gave us key points and links to be able to do that.

On second-stage housing, for us, my board built this. The women and children going into that will be women and children who work with Faye Peterson House, so we have lots, for sure. We are going through what we determine in an assessment, based mainly on risk. Marginalization is another one, and so is the ability to live communally. Women come in here first. They get to know each other. We get a bit of an idea of whether they could live with another 55-year-

old woman. As it has already been articulated, differences happen at that age.

Can I meet the demand? No, I don't think I'll ever be able to meet the demand for safety. For people who leave the shelter right now, they're here about three months. That might sound like very little to the people in Toronto, but that's double the amount of time we used to have a wait-list for.

Chi Nguyen: Thank you.

Is the provincial government resourcing any of your operational pieces at the moment?

Debbie Zweep: Certainly. First-stage shelters are fully supported by MCCSS. Yes, definitely. There's nothing for the second stage though.

Chi Nguyen: Thank you.

Madame Thibaudeau, you also talked a bit about the needs exceeding the capacity. We heard from a witness last week who framed the work of shelters and supports for women fleeing gender violence as core infrastructure. One piece of this is responding to the emergency end.

Do you have any reflections on what we can be doing on the prevention side and what some of that work could look like?

● (1155)

[Translation]

Claudine Thibaudeau: It's clear that a great deal of work needs to be done on prevention. Right now, across various platforms, we are seeing a rise in masculinist, anti-feminist and anti-women rhetoric that outright advocates for men's power over women. We will have to create campaigns for young people to counter all this.

At SOS violence conjugale, we launched a campaign for young people a few years ago on the website cestpasviolent.com. It's also available in English at itsnotviolent.com. The campaign is aimed at young people. It's a turnkey platform for any stakeholder who wants to use it in the province or in the country. There are no geographic limitations to this platform.

The idea is that it shouldn't be just shelter workers or resources like ours who are tasked with doing this work. There is far too much work to be done. We will need to broadly mobilize school staff and all professionals working with young people. We will need broader masculinism prevention campaigns.

Young people are being pushed to extremes right now, and men in particular. We are seeing a major divide between women and men. Women are increasingly adopting left-wing ideologies and are becoming more informed about violence, while young men, on the contrary, are increasingly accepting violence or even believing that a woman deserves to be harassed if she doesn't listen.

Some research has recently been done on the topic. So I am very afraid that there will be an increase in violence and risk for women.

Chi Nguyen: Thank you, Ms. Thibaudeau. I think I have just one minute left.

[English]

I'm going to ask questions of Ms. MacGregor and Ms. Boyce.

Ms. MacGregor, we first had the chance to meet when we were announcing Bill C-16. It just passed at report stage yesterday. I'm so proud that our government's been able to support this and work with survivors to make sure we're getting this legislation right.

One concept that I would love for you to unpack with me is the idea of an ideal victim and what that looks like. I know there are real barriers for racialized women in accessing some of the services and making sure they're culturally appropriate. I was wondering if you could speak a bit more in terms of how you approach that at your organization.

Nneka MacGregor: Our submission today is really talking about the non-ideal—

[Translation]

The Chair: I'm sorry, Ms. MacGregor. I knew you wouldn't have time to continue. You may have an opportunity to elaborate on your point in another exchange.

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

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

I want to thank our witnesses Ms. Boyce, Ms. MacGregor and Ms. Zweep. I've taken a lot of notes.

I will first turn to Ms. Thibaudeau, from SOS violence conjugale.

Ms. Thibaudeau, in your opening remarks, the figures you provided are somewhat worrisome and alarming. There are also figures regarding your help line. It is able to meet all needs. We can see that the situation is becoming increasingly complex.

Beyond the figures, are you also seeing, through your help line, a shift in the forms of violence, particularly in terms of coercive control or even tech-enabled violence?

In the Protecting Victims Act—the former Bill C-16—there is, among other things, one aspect that is especially important. That's the recognition that violence is not always physical, but that it always causes pain.

Claudine Thibaudeau: Yes, absolutely.

In fact, we've developed two tools on our website that help victims identify various types of violence and recognize the power being exerted over them. That enables victims to more clearly articulate many of the types of violence they experience.

We hear a lot about post-separation violence and judicial violence. Just this morning, a woman testified that she was enrolled in a highly specialized academic program with her partner. She invested \$100,000 in her education, but her partner arranged for her to be expelled from the program. That's a situation I'd never heard of before, but it's a type of economic violence.

Indeed, we hear a lot about this. I think there's still a lot of work to be done to help women recognize the types of violence they're experiencing. More than half of the requests we receive through chat and text messages come from people who generally aren't ready to call the helpline. Writing is easier. These are often people who wonder whether what they're experiencing is truly intimate partner violence, or whether it's truly coercive control. They often have a hard time putting their experiences into words, even though what they describe to us is sometimes very serious. It can go as far as choking.

So, we see that people are better able to recognize subtle forms of violence. At the same time, we also see many people who hesitate for a very long time to put their experiences into words for fear of making false accusations, accusing someone wrongly or exaggerating—because it's often said that women exaggerate or misinterpret things.

This means we need to continue doing a lot of work to help people recognize different types of violence. The two interactive tools on our website were used 400,000 times over the past five years, which demonstrates the significant demand for information on this topic. That extends beyond Quebec's borders, by the way.

● (1200)

Andréanne Larouche: What was used 400,000 times over the past five years?

Claudine Thibaudeau: There are two interactive tools. The first helps you identify the types of violence you've experienced in your life. The second helps you assess your ability to exercise the power you should be able to exercise in your life. These interactive tools are available online on our website. They are completely anonymous. Together, these two tools have been used over 400,000 times.

Since making them available online, we've seen the number of requests to SOS violence conjugale rise from 25,000 per year to 50,000 or 60,000 per year. That increase is clearly linked to those two tools. They have a huge impact.

Andréanne Larouche: My goodness, well done! Once again, these are some chilling statistics, Ms. Thibaudeau.

I spoke with the Minister of Women and Gender Equality yesterday. She wanted to speak to me. We passed Bill C-16, the Protecting Victims Act, which strengthened the Criminal Code. That's good. However, given current housing needs, this legislation alone will not be enough to address all the requirements for combatting domestic violence. We really need to view this as a continuum of services. So it's good, but it won't be enough.

The issue of shelters and housing is certainly crucial. Indeed, a woman will not want to break free from the cycle of domestic violence if she cannot afford housing and if she believes that her safety—and especially that of her family and children—is at risk.

You mentioned that, across Quebec, 22.5% of housing units truly met the needs of victims. You also mentioned that on a single day—May 16th—only 18.5% of women could be referred to a shelter. You also spoke about housing located outside the area where the victims live.

Can you tell us more about that?

You said that housing must truly meet the victims' needs. I would add that this also involves accommodating their families. That is extremely important.

Claudine Thibaudeau: When we refer someone to a shelter, we first ask them which city they're calling from, how many children they have and whether they have a disability or personal needs that require special attention at the shelter location they're seeking.

Of course, if I refer a woman from Montreal to a shelter and the only spot I can find is in Joliette or Trois-Rivières, there's a good chance that, in the end, she won't be able to agree to travel that far to find safety. There are too many challenges associated with that decision. There are even women who are criticized by organizations—in court, for example—for taking their children 200 kilometres away from their home, even though it was for their safety.

I think we also need to talk about the child protection system. The child protection system can sometimes fall short in its understanding of the reality faced by victims of domestic violence. Sometimes these situations are viewed as mere conflicts rather than violence. I think we need to learn to use the word “violence” to describe violent behaviour. We shouldn't be afraid to do so. Victims must have the right to assert that their situation is a violent one without being blamed for it.

There is still a lot of work to be done to truly shelter women. However, from our perspective, we certainly find it very difficult to be forced to tell women on a daily basis to call us back the next day or the day after that.

The Chair: What I find difficult, Ms. Thibaudeau, is having to cut you off, unfortunately.

I'm going to have to suspend the meeting because there's a vote. The bells are ringing. There are 15 minutes left. Members who wish to go vote have time to do so. As agreed with the whips and as the clerk has informed me, 10 minutes after the vote begins, if there is quorum here, I can resume the meeting. Obviously, if no one is here, I won't be able to hold it on my own.

The meeting is suspended. There will be about half an hour of the meeting remaining afterwards.

• (1200)

(Pause)

• (1235)

The Chair: We will resume the session where we left off before the vote.

Thank you so much for your patience.

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

[English]

Anna Roberts (King—Vaughan, CPC): Thank you to the witnesses for your patience. I know it's a little hectic with understanding these votes. We don't understand them either. It's okay.

I have a question, and I'm going to start with Ms. Debbie Zweep.

Thank you for the work you do.

This committee did a study in 2024. We travelled from coast to coast to coast on human trafficking. I have to tell you, it was very educational for me. One of the things I recently discovered is that the worst provinces in the country for human trafficking are Nova Scotia, Ontario, New Brunswick, Saskatchewan and P.E.I. The worst city—I hate to tell you this—is Thunder Bay.

It is a huge issue—

Debbie Zweep: It's a huge issue.

Anna Roberts: We need to do better.

I can't even tell you.... I've lost count of how many survivors I've spoken to. They've all said to me that they fear for their life because the penalties do not justify the crime.

Debbie Zweep: This is true.

Anna Roberts: I know you mentioned earlier that jail is not always the answer, but here is the problem. Even if it's a repeat offender and they go to jail.... I recently did an undercover stint with the York Regional Police. Do you know what they told me? These criminals—I'll call them animals—are still running the business from the jail.

How do we ensure that these survivors, who have the will and the courage to come to testify, are protected, if we can't even protect the criminals who are in jail?

Debbie Zweep: Thank you. It's a big question.

Yes, I understand our designation as having the highest HT in the country. Women seeking shelter or any kind of safety may not be able to do that within Thunder Bay. We use the very elaborate shelter system where we transfer people and work with the assistance of the police force to do that.

On the issue of criminals running their criminal activity out of jail, I think we're all well aware of that. I can't actually make that change, but perhaps an internal change of monitoring those activities, which I am sure they do.... It has to change. There has to be a way for us to stop that activity from continuing. It continues in jail, and then that work also continues outside of jail.

As I said to you earlier, a lot of the backups within our criminal justice system here in Thunder Bay have to do with gang substance and, of course, HT criminals going before the court and being released. In some cases, they are being incarcerated, for sure. Incarceration is part of the answer as that first step for repeat, or what I call serious, offenders.

However, I don't have an answer for how we stop that criminal activity from happening within jail. Everyone knows it is a huge issue. Nobody wants it to continue—certainly not the people who work within corrections.

Anna Roberts: Thank you for that.

My next question is for Ms. Claudine Thibaudeau.

Did you say that you have a lack of between 5,000 and 20,000 homes? Is that correct?

• (1240)

Claudine Thibaudeau: I'm talking about shelter services. It's the emergency shelter spaces. We do have a huge lack. We can refer fewer than half of the victims who are seeking shelter.

Anna Roberts: Here we are. We're being faced with an increase in intimate partner violence. As we all know, 76% is a huge number. We don't have enough shelters. We don't have enough secondary housing that they can go to with their family, their children.

I will speak about a special organization called EVE, or End Violence Everywhere. It was founded by Cait Alexander, who was so terrified for her life that she had to leave this country.

What suggestions do you have for this government on how we can improve the housing situation?

[Translation]

The Chair: Ms. Thibaudeau, you may answer the question.

Claudine Thibaudeau: All right.

There are several things we could do, particularly on the financial front. As for the housing shortage, it's largely due to the fact that housing has become very expensive. If we could provide victims with financial assistance to help them find housing—

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Thibaudeau. I'm sorry to interrupt you. Mrs. Roberts' speaking time is up.

[English]

Madam Nathan, you have five minutes.

Juanita Nathan (Pickering—Brooklin, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair. Through you, I will ask some questions of Ms. MacGregor.

Many witnesses have emphasized that survivors do not experience violence in isolation from other social and economic realities, including poverty, disability, racism, immigration status and hous-

ing insecurity. Which populations of women and girls are currently the most underserved by Canada's shelter and transitional housing systems? What targeted interventions would help close these gaps?

Nneka MacGregor: Part of what our submission today is alluding to is the fact that there are populations, especially Black women and girls and gender-diverse and trans communities, who are the individuals who are not seen in the shelter systems. When you talk about who are the most isolated and invisible, they are these particular communities.

One of the things around shelters is that we know that, whilst they are critical services, a lot of survivors don't actually go to shelters. A lot of survivors don't have the opportunity to access the services that are there. Some of that community are Black trans individuals who are experiencing violence, Black youth who are experiencing violence, and indigenous communities.

Would you like to add to that, Sonya?

Sonya Boyce: I would add that survivors who have precarious immigration status often struggle accessing mainstream housing and other supports. It's primarily because their precarious status is often tied to a temporary work permit and, because of that, their income and housing can be jeopardized if they, for example, have to go to a shelter or have to call in sick and lose time at work. The fear, really, is that it will jeopardize their immigration status.

Juanita Nathan: That's understandable. Thank you for that.

I just want to follow up to say that research consistently shows that Black women and other racialized women often face unique barriers when accessing services, including experiences of discrimination, distrust of institutions and culturally inappropriate services and supports.

What policy changes are needed to ensure that violence prevention and survivor support systems better meet these needs of Black women and other racialized communities?

Sonya Boyce: I'll speak to a couple of things.

The national action plan identifies Black women as a priority group, but when it comes to the issue of the bilateral agreements with the different provinces and territories, the specificity around these priority groups often gets lost in the schedule B. For example, many of the schedule Bs do not mention Black women as a priority group.

At the federal level, I think a robust national action plan, when it comes time for renewal.... I would also echo previous submissions that have talked about the need for an independent, federal oversight body like a federal commissioner to oversee the implementation of the national action plan all the way down to the jurisdictional levels.

• (1245)

Juanita Nathan: Thank you for that.

Witnesses throughout this study have emphasized that economic dependence often limits a survivor's ability to leave an abusive situation safely. I think you alluded to that in your preamble as well. What role do employment supports, income security measures, affordable child care and housing affordability play in preventing violence and supporting long-term recovery? Can you speak specifically to the groups you serve?

Nneka MacGregor: These are essential backbone supports that need to be in place. Without economic independence, you cannot leave. Without the ability to support yourself or your children, you cannot leave. Without the ability to access affordable housing, you cannot leave.

Having a robust infrastructure that addresses women's abilities to be economically independent, that allows women to be paid a living wage and that allows women to have access to affordable housing—

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. MacGregor. That is all the time we had.

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

Andréanne Larouche: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I'll try to be brief.

There has been much discussion about the need for shelters and about Bill C-16, which strengthens legislation by providing the criminal justice system with more tools to help victims break the cycle of violence. The recognition of coercive control is one example.

Following my meeting yesterday with the Minister of Women and Gender Equality, my concern remains whether she will have a discussion with the Minister of Justice. We vote to pass laws at the federal level, yet the administration of justice and support for victims who call your office will be managed by Quebec and the provinces.

Ms. Thibault, as someone who assists victims, do you believe there will be recognition that, by giving police forces more tools under the Criminal Code, they will need additional resources?

There will come a time when the federal government will have to consider some form of funding transfer to support the justice system in the provinces and in Quebec.

Claudine Thibault: Yes, that's clear. The police system is already struggling to meet needs related to domestic violence. For example, at the Sûreté du Québec, investigations aren't conducted by detectives. They're handled by patrol officers. Obviously, investigations conducted by patrol officers aren't the same kind as those entrusted to detectives. I think we need specialized investigators throughout the province. Right now, services are inconsistent. In some cities, victims have access to specialized investigators, while in other cities and regions, domestic violence investigations are conducted by patrol officers.

Clearly, when we introduce the concept of coercive control into the Criminal Code, it will require a massive investment in police forces as well as in the entire justice system. Some examples are the criminal court itself, Crown prosecutors, socio-judicial support services, victim assistance centres and, of course, shelters. It is therefore obvious that this will require significant investment.

Andréanne Larouche: Thank you very much.

Ms. Zweep, let me ask you a quick question, and I'd like you to answer in under 30 seconds.

In your opening remarks, you addressed the issue of women aged 55 and older. I am also the critic for women's issues, gender equality and seniors. We hear about the growing poverty among senior women.

Have you also observed—even among women aged 65 and older—that their financial resources, including their benefits and fixed incomes, do not allow them to break free from the cycle of violence, which leads them to seek refuge in shelters?

[English]

Debbie Zweep: Women over the age of 55 are our growing group, for sure, in Ontario. The second-stage shelter that we built was targeted for women over 55. The idea is that they are sharing units. Right now, they're paying \$517.50.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Zweep.

I must interrupt you because I don't want to cut into other colleagues' speaking time.

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

Laila Goodridge: Thank you, Madam Chair.

[English]

Thank you to all our witnesses for being here today and accommodating our parliamentary schedule, which is a bit complicated sometimes, especially when we have all of these votes.

Ms. Zweep, I really appreciate what you have designed and the work you guys do in supporting rural and northern communities. I'm the member of Parliament for Fort McMurray—Cold Lake. It's a lot further north and a lot more rural, but it has a similar sort of idea and similar sorts of issues.

I was wondering if you could talk about some of the demographic breakdowns you see in terms of the number people from Thunder Bay versus from surrounding communities who are utilizing your services.

• (1250)

Debbie Zweep: We have three smaller shelters around us. Atikokan is two hours away, and Marathon and Greenstone are three hours away. We have three smaller shelters, and we have transportation policies and protocols for how women in outlying areas can access the shelter in Thunder Bay and vice versa.

I'll give you my shelter breakdown. Demographically, for this shelter, we have seen a huge increase in newcomer and immigrant women. I would say we've moved from 5% to 20% or maybe 25% over the last two years. I believe that that will increase.

That presents us with lots of opportunities to change. For instance, there's the language barrier and the question of what app we are using when we are accessing services and all of those things.

I would say that 40% of women are indigenous and often from this community or those surrounding communities. I would say that the rest are Caucasian.

One of the things that we have is that Sioux Lookout and Red Lake—very north from here—have a transportation policy as well. How do we get women out of the far north into our shelters? From there, if women aren't staying in Sioux Lookout, we have another policy of moving women to locations where they might be better served.

That is the demographic.

We have my sister shelter here, Beendigen. They are almost 100% indigenous and serve almost 100% indigenous women. Most of those women would be from Thunder Bay and surrounding areas.

Laila Goodridge: I really appreciate that, and I know that when I have met with people from a variety of different shelters across northern Alberta, through my riding and further out, there are often those cases where some of the smaller communities don't have a shelter, so they do have to send them out—

Debbie Zweep: Yes.

Laila Goodridge: —but then what are the policies to be able to get those people back into their communities so they continue having those supports? Do you guys have any programs or projects that you work on about trying to make sure they can reintegrate into their communities when it's safe to do so?

Debbie Zweep: Yes, for instance, in Sioux Lookout and Red Lake, north of us, they have a policy whereby the woman can return if it is safe, and they will assist them with transportation. Transportation is a huge expense. I think Sioux Lookout's budget alone is close to \$100,000.

The policy really is that we bring them in, and we are not likely returning them to their home community unless that is their wish and unless they are safe. More often than not, women are relocating to the communities, and they more than likely have family and supports within them. The issue is when that community is not safe, such as for instance, in Greenstone. If it's not safe, then we have the protocol. They are brought in to Thunder Bay, and then we can do some more planning. Maybe it's housing we end up on, but maybe it's also a different location with Ontario or Manitoba—we have policies right across Canada for how we move women in regard to risk.

Laila Goodridge: All right. You highlighted one of the questions I have when you were answering questions for my colleague, Ms. Cody. Because of your location, being on the highway, with that ease of transportation, it has given you a space where you're a bit of a hub for a lot of human trafficking.

Debbie Zweep: Yes.

Laila Goodridge: What kinds of processes and programs do you guys have in place to mitigate that and to raise awareness about what human trafficking is? I think a lot of people think human trafficking happens in some far distant, faraway country, not to the person down the street. Awareness is so critical.

Is there anything that you guys do and any message you would share with Canadians?

Debbie Zweep: For sure. We work with Thunder Bay Counselling. Faye Peterson works with Thunder Bay Counselling around the prevention and education piece. We have ONWA right down the street from us as well, so there is a lot of work being done in their courage program and other programs for HT survivors. Victim services provides financial support to them.

We try to work collectively in the cases where women are asking or needing and are able to move on in service.

I think the issue is when the woman is in that situation and perhaps not sure of what actually is going on, so we need to provide education that this is trafficking, as you've already identified. It is a continuum, and we really need to educate the public on that.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Zweep.

The last turn goes to Ms. Tesser Derksen, for five minutes.

Kristina Tesser Derksen (Milton East—Halton Hills South, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

[English]

I've listened with great interest to all of the witnesses today, particularly when they talk about access to justice. I worked as a family law lawyer. I worked in a legal clinic where we helped women who were fleeing violence, and the discussions we had back then, I think, are probably similar to what we're having now, about how women are accessing justice and how the justice system serves them so that they feel confident that they're going to get a result that is fair. Unfortunately, we have a lot of work to do there.

What I would like to ask is particularly with respect to the nexus between family courts and criminal courts, and maybe I'll direct the question to Ms. Boyce and Ms. MacGregor, if you'd like to answer.

There were experiences I had where there was a pilot program in Toronto. They were doing a combined family and criminal court pilot, because we were finding that women were trying to get peace bonds or restraining orders in the criminal courts, and then in the family court a judge would make an order for child visitations where dad would be coming to pick up the kids right at the house, and that would put them in very close proximity to each other.

Unfortunately, the pilot didn't really take off, because lawyers in the criminal bar were concerned that it might prejudice their clients. They were doing their job, representing the interests of their clients that way, but perhaps you could comment on the role you see the federal government playing in making access to justice more realistic and more service-facing to the women you serve.

• (1255)

Sonya Boyce: Maybe I'll take this opportunity just to let you know that we did receive federal funding to provide some training to key medical, legal and social service systems around responding to Black survivors, particularly helping them navigate the criminal justice system. As you know, like all survivors, they have to make a lot of complex decisions in a really short period of time, so part of the work we're doing is training to help the stakeholders facilitate a more healing journey, perhaps, through the criminal justice system.

Nneka MacGregor: I think some of the challenges with the integrated courts that we heard from survivors were that if you happened to get a judge who didn't understand the complexities of gender-based violence and didn't understand the power and control dynamics in one court, and then that judge also had jurisdiction over you in the criminal court, it meant that your ability to get impartiality was compromised at both sides. That system was a good idea, but the way it rolled out had some really complex ramifications.

In terms of what the federal government can do, there needs to be a lot more consultation with survivors around the nuances of their experiences, because it isn't a one-system-fixes-everything type of scenario. You need to have a really good understanding of all the experiences that survivors are going through, and then contextualize that as they navigate the criminal legal system as well as the family courts.

Family courts are fraught with danger at every turn. They're fraught with inconsistencies that actually put women at more risk, so I think there's a call for more consultations with survivors.

Kristina Tesser Derksen: Thanks very much.

Leading from that, specifically with respect to women who need more cultural sensitivity around the services they're being offered,

in my riding of Milton East—Halton Hills South we have a very large South Asian community of women. A fabulous organization called Hum-WE is offering services to women from that cultural demographic in particular, because the way they understand a family dynamic might be different from the way you or I do.

In the sphere that you work in, can you tell us a little about how you've been able to navigate the different cultural sensitivities that are coming through in your work?

Nneka MacGregor: It is "by and for". That's the way we've been doing it. You need to consult with the individuals who are living that experience.

If we're talking with South Asian women, the peer navigators are South Asian, so that they understand, as you said, the cultural complexities. We try to match them with lawyers, if that's the case, and with social workers and counsellors who have a similar cultural background or the same cultural background as they do, because it's so much harder to train people who are not from the community, and to train them quickly and in time for them to provide the services that are needed.

For us, cultural competency and cultural confidence come from working with, by and for the communities that are actually at stake.

Kristina Tesser Derksen: I have a final question.

At the beginning of your remarks, you mentioned issues with data and understanding. That's where we all start. We start with data—

[Translation]

The Chair: Ms. Tesser Derksen, you were off to a great start, but I'm going to have to interrupt you. Speaking time goes by so quickly.

I would like to thank committee members, who helped this somewhat complicated meeting go more smoothly.

Many thanks to our clerk, our analysts and, of course, all of today's guests. This committee meeting was not an easy one.

You witnesses have been very patient, and I thank you greatly.

I thank the committee members, as well as everyone else.

Until next time.

The meeting is adjourned.

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