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● (0910)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.)): I would like to call the meeting to order. This is meeting eight of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women.

We're pleased to have with us today some additional officials to help us along with our study on the economic security of women.

We have with us Sheila Regehr, director of the National Council of Welfare; Cathy Oikawa, senior researcher and policy adviser; and John Anderson, senior researcher and policy adviser. As well, from the National Advisory Council on Aging, here today is Robert Dobie, interim chairperson, division of aging and seniors.

Welcome. We're pleased to have you with us this morning.

Ms. Regehr, I'll turn it over to you.

Ms. Sheila Regehr (Director, National Council of Welfare): Thank you very much.

As you've done the introductions—and as, I understand, we have limited time—I will launch right into the presentation. I would like to say, though, on behalf of the chair of the council, John Murphy, and the members, who met this past weekend in Quebec City, thank you very much for inviting the council to appear.

It's very timely for this committee to be looking at women's economic security issues in light of the recently released report of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The committee expressed its great concern about poverty among women, especially lone mothers, precarious workers, women trying to leave abusive relationships, and homeless girls.

Our presentation today, a copy of which you have in front of you, is in four parts: first, a brief word about poverty measures; then a portrait of women's economic security, or lack thereof; an overview of the policy context; and lastly, some possible ways forward. The three of us will then be pleased to respond to any questions you may have.

The first couple of tables identify some ways to measure poverty. I won't go into detail, but they highlight three main points. One, as you likely know, is that there is no official poverty line in Canada, nor are there specific plans, targets, or benchmarks to direct efforts to reduce, prevent, or eliminate poverty.

The second point is that this is not for lack of statistical capacity. There are several good and useful measures. You'll see there the low-income cut-offs that have been used for many years. The low-income

measure is used internationally, although in Canada it's calculated a bit differently, at 50% of median income, while in Europe it's set at 60%. Quebec uses that 60% measure as well.

The market basket measure is interesting. It's based on what it actually costs to buy a basket of goods. It was designed by governments, federal and provincial, in Canada largely in response to a sense that these earlier measures were set too high, and rather exaggerated poverty.

The third point, as you can see, is that there's not as much difference among these measures as expected. They can tell us different things, however. Canada's been involved.... Many people argue about *the* indicator that we should have. Most countries, including the United Kingdom, have concluded that we actually need a set of measures; they have three.

Another indicator of poverty is tracking social assistance rates. In Canada, only the National Council of Welfare publishes this information in its regular reports.

Section 2, the bulk of your presentation, shows a series of charts portraying women's economic security. Sadly, the picture is not a pretty one. Women are more vulnerable to poverty than men throughout their whole lifetime, and they face different types of risk, in particular a high price for raising children and caring for others, and a high economic price as survivors of gender-based violence and abuse.

We focused deliberately in the presentation on women on their own, or raising children alone, as this is where women's risk of poverty shows up most clearly.

We'll mention here how important women's incomes are to couples as well. Many more families would be in poverty if it were not for wives' earnings. Women are actually the primary breadwinners in over a quarter of Canadian husband-wife households. Often it's by default—if a husband loses a job, say, or develops a disability.

Chart 1 shows poverty rates over the last quarter of a century—it's the trends that are important—for the three populations we're focusing on.

Chart 2 provides the same information for women. Note that there's a clear trend in decreasing poverty rates for seniors and a very sizable difference between 1980 and 2004. So we're doing some things right.

For the unattached population under 65, the story is markedly different, with women and men both worse off in 2004 than they were in 1980. Clearly we have a growing problem there.

As for lone parents, the gender differences are large, and the trends for lone mothers are much more erratic than for other women. It's evident that we have a long-standing problem that we've not yet figured out.

Charts 3 and 4 present after-tax poverty rates.

Charts 5 and 6 show a narrowing of the gap between senior women and men as well, which is interesting. In chart 6 we see the effect of lone-parent poverty on their children.

In 2004, just to give you actual numbers from these charts, the after-tax poverty rate for unattached women under 65 was 38.4%. For female lone parents it was 35.6%. For senior women it was 17%.

The committee has expressed an interest in other forms of diversity in addition to family type. In charts 8 and 9, we provide information on women who are immigrants, members of a visible minority, aboriginal, or who have a disability. It's important to note the effect of the intersection of minority and family status as well. In addition to what you see on the charts, for example, the poverty rate for aboriginal lone mothers in 1995—it goes back a bit, but that's the most recent information we have—was 73%, compared with 45% for non-aboriginal lone mothers.

Chart 9 looks specifically at the senior population. Of note here is the fact that unattached senior immigrants and members of a visible minority have higher poverty rates than their younger counterparts. Many may have had less ability than other women because of late arrival in Canada to contribute to CPP, to save, or to qualify for OAS/GIS.

What we have shown so far is sobering, but it's far from the full picture. The next few charts look more closely at what's going on below the poverty line, where many women and their children live in situations of severe deprivation. Imagine yourself trying to live with \$6,000 or \$7,000 less than it costs to purchase the food, housing, clothing, and other basic necessities that most Canadians take for granted. As charts 10 and 11 show, many Canadians do face that situation.

Charts 12 and 13 tell the story another way, showing the distribution of women above, close to, and far below the poverty line. Note the extremes among unattached women under 65, where they tend to be in situations either well above the poverty line or in deepest poverty.

Charts 14 and 15 show that, contrary to popular misconception, many people receiving social assistance are also employed. It's not as simple as being on or off welfare, as it's often characterized.

Chart 16 is a very interesting one. I'm going to take a little bit more time here. This gives you an idea of how well Canada's income security concepts and systems are working. The first thing that jumps

out—or that we hope jumps out—is how abysmally low average provincial welfare rates are.

To put a human face on this, the \$6,000-and-change income you see there is what Mary, for example, an older woman worker, would receive if she lost her job and couldn't qualify for or ran out of EI. In most jurisdictions, she would first have to use up almost all of her savings, and in some jurisdictions she would even have to sell the old car she uses to get to work, which further limits her options, because you're not allowed to have assets

Let's imagine Mary then was 63. A couple of years later, after a couple of birthdays, she's 65. Despite the fact that the maximum OAS/GIS benefits she's entitled to are far below the poverty line, the amount is double what she had last year, but not likely enough to buy her car back.

If Mary had been able to get maximum CPP and OAS/GIS, she would be much better off, as you see in the \$22,000 column. We have to point out, however, that women on average receive less than 60% of men's benefit rates. So it's not likely she would reach that level.

Let's now look at Mary's younger neighbour, Sophia. She's the one who's working for the average provincial wage. She, like most Canadians, always believed the best security was a job. She works full-time, full-year. As I said, she only makes minimum wage, but at least she is better off than Mary by \$1,000—or is she? What about the EI and CPP premiums she has to pay; the bus ticket she needs to get to her job every day; the additional clothing, shoes, and other necessities she needs in her workplace? She actually ends up quite a bit worse off than this appears.

Now we come to employment insurance, the major income security program that Canadian employees pay for. At a replacement rate of 55%, an unemployed worker getting a full benefit is still managing but isn't much above the poverty line. Remember, women are less likely than men to get maximum benefits, if they qualify at all.

In 2004, only a little over 40% of unemployed Canadians received EI, a big drop from about 80% in 1990.

In the interests of time, I will cover the next points very quickly, but they are extremely important. They're in areas that I know this committee is aware of.

● (0915)

Research shows that women, especially lone parents and their children, stay in poverty longer than other Canadians. And income is not the only measure of poverty. "Time poverty" affects women raising children, women with disabilities, and women caring for others with disabilities. It's women's unpaid work that makes their risk of poverty higher in the first place. So if this is not factored into solutions, they will fail.

There's another dimension, which we might call "safety poverty", and that's the lack of freedom from violence, especially from physically, psychologically, and economically abusive partners and ex-partners, that prevents many women from taking advantage of economic opportunities.

The last two or three pages focus more on the policy context. You've already seen some of this from chart 16, but I'll recap very quickly. EI coverage and replacement rates are low compared to the past in Canada and compared to other countries. EI, maternity, and parental benefits are least accessible to those mothers who need them the most, although EI evaluations show that there are wonderful benefits for workers and children if they qualify. Minimum wages are not enough to keep individuals out of poverty. There are child care gaps. There are just not enough quality affordable spaces to go around. Welfare regimes, in addition to low rates, strip people of the assets they need to build towards a better future, and they do not allow lone parents to get student loans for post-secondary education. The recipients can't keep much of anything from their earnings if they have paid work. So it's a vicious cycle.

The Canada child tax benefit is a really interesting and very positive program. It's intended to help families stay attached to the paid workforce. However, it's based on the number of children, not the number of workers in the household, which makes it of much more limited value to lone parents. As a comparison, the guaranteed income supplement for seniors, which you're familiar with, provides different rates for singles and couples. Some formula like that might actually make the Canada child tax benefit more accessible for lone parents.

There is no recognition within employment insurance, social assistance, the Canada child tax benefit, or other income supports that women dealing with violence have barriers to employment. With the Canada and Quebec pension plans, much of their impact in reducing poverty for older couples and individuals is based on women's employment. That's important, because if women's employment falls off, poverty levels for seniors will increase.

OAS/GIS benefits, as we've shown, are below the poverty line, and they don't take into account the actual cost of living, such as the exorbitantly high rents in Toronto.

Poverty is costing society and all Canadians a great deal. We brought with us—you'll have it later—a copy of a document called *The Cost of Poverty*, which outlines that it's not people living in poverty who pay all the costs, it's all of us. Examples of costs include increased health care costs, social disintegration and associated crime and justice, untapped potential, and lower labour market productivity.

In the last slide, to conclude on a more positive note in moving forward, it's important to highlight that there's no shortage of concrete, realistic, and cost-effective recommendations that have been made, including, most recently, by a consortium that includes the Toronto-Dominion Bank. So even corporate Canada is starting to think we might have a problem.

There is no shortage of examples from different parts of Canada, from other countries, of initiatives that have worked. There are also a lot of good intentions. But something is missing, and it's in the neighbourhood of political will, I think. What really is needed, according to the council, is an anti-poverty plan with clear goals to reduce the risk of poverty, to increase the living standards of those living in deepest and most persistent poverty, and to restore dignity to the way in which people are treated. The plan needs targets, indicators to measure results, the assignment of responsibility, and the resources to make it work.

Gender analysis is, of course, an integral part of the way forward in addressing poverty, and addressing poverty is integral to achieving gender equality. Gender analysis means looking at the diverse and dynamic realities of women over the course of their lives.

Thank you.

● (0920)

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

Mr. Dobie.

Mr. Robert Dobie (Interim Chairperson, Division of Aging and Seniors, National Advisory Council on Aging): Good morning, and thank you very much for inviting us.

The mandate of the National Advisory Council on Aging is to advise the Minister of Health on all matters related to the aging of the Canadian population and the quality of life of seniors.

For more than 25 years, NACA has endeavoured to bring the issue of population aging to the attention of the federal government and the people of Canada. In developing its recommendations, the council takes into account the most recent research, but it also makes a point of consulting with seniors.

Over the years, the council has developed expertise with regard to the economic condition of seniors. In 2005 NACA published a report entitled *Aging in Poverty in Canada*. This report looked at issues that affect the economic vulnerability of seniors and made policy recommendations to improve seniors' economic situations. In addition, our report cards, one of which will be published within the next few weeks, raise concerns related to seniors' economic status.

In terms of the issues, there have been clear improvements in the economic situation of Canadian seniors since the 1980s, both in absolute terms and relative to younger population groups. But this catching-up period is over. A substantial number of seniors, often women, continue to live under very difficult economic conditions. While Canada's combined public-private retirement income system is often considered a success story, poverty among senior women is not a rare occurrence. For a good number of senior women, the prospect of a golden retirement simply does not exist.

Compared with senior men, senior women are more likely to live below the low-income cut-offs. In 2004, 3.5% of senior men and 7.3% of senior women were below the low-income cut-offs. Almost 20% of unattached senior women were below these cut-offs.

Statistics Canada estimates that 219,000 seniors were living below the low-income cut-offs in 2004. More than 60% of these were unattached senior women.

Senior women are far more likely to depend on old age security and GIS as important sources of revenue. Close to one-half of women over the age of 80 depend on the GIS.

The OAS and GIS are not enough. Unfortunately, sometimes the OAS and GIS are insufficient to allow seniors, especially those who are unattached, to live above the low-income cut-off. In 2003 an unattached person who received only OAS and the GIS had an average annual income of \$12,031, an amount much less than the low-income cut-off for urban areas, where the cost of living is high.

Our first recommendation is that the amount of the guaranteed income supplement should be increased so that the sum of the GIS and OAS is equal to or greater than the low-income cut-off, as determined by Statistics Canada.

The income gap between genders is still very evident. In 2004 the average income of women over 65 was 67% that of men. The income difference between men and women in 2004 was \$10,800, virtually unchanged from 2000.

Older women tend to have lower incomes than men because they participated less in the labour force, and their wages were less, on average, if they were employed. In 2004 about one in five senior women had never worked outside the home. In addition, because women live longer, they are at a greater risk of running out of savings over their lifetimes.

Women who are divorced or separated have much lower retirement incomes than do single women and widows, as most divorced women do not claim a portion of their former spouse's pension, despite being entitled to it. Single women have likely invested in their careers and therefore have higher retirement incomes. Many widows have inherited assets from their husbands and are entitled to a survivors benefit.

• (0925)

Our second recommendation is that a more systematic sharing of the pension of their former spouse would improve senior women's economic security. NACA considers it important to increase the income of divorced and separated women, and reiterates the recommendation it made in 1993, that governments ensure automatic and compulsory sharing of pension rights under the CPP, employer

pension funds, and retirement savings plans following divorce or legal separation.

Housing is another issue. Despite an average increase in income of 20% for seniors between 1980 and 2000, housing affordability problems decreased by only 1% between 1981 and 2001 among seniors. In 2001 almost 50% of all senior women renters living alone had core housing needs, the highest level of any household type. We recommend that provincial governments should reinstate rent control policies to benefit senior renters and fund new affordable housing units, including supportive housing.

The concerns outlined today are not likely restricted to today's retirees. Fully one-third of Canadian women between the ages of 45 and 59 believe they are not financially prepared for retirement. Moreover, it is expected that economic inequalities among seniors will increase as the CPP and OAS retirement benefits system matures, and as seniors' additional sources of retirement benefits vary in accordance with respective private retirement pension plans and RRSPs. These latter forms of savings are more prevalent among workers with higher earnings.

The percentage of women contributing to private pension plans is now catching up to the percentage of men. The difference was just 0.7% in 2002, whereas it was over 8% in 1991. Still, women receive smaller pension incomes because of the wage difference between men and women, and because these plans do not compensate for absences to raise children or to look after sick relatives, absences that are generally taken by women.

Job insecurity, which is more often the lot of women, has a considerable impact on retirement income. Self-employed workers, part-time workers, and workers who experience extended periods of unemployment have a harder time saving for their retirement. Part-time workers contribute to the CPP, but the benefits replace a relatively low percentage of contributors' incomes when they retire. Also, most part-time workers do not contribute to employer pension plans.

Finally, I'd like to thank the standing committee for inviting NACA's views on senior women and poverty. The council urges the federal government to take immediate action to address the concerns mentioned so that senior women's poverty does not persist into the future.

Thank you very much.

● (0930)

The Chair: Thanks to all of you. That was a lot of information. I think we're going to need to have you back to talk about these issues a lot more, considering the brief time we have this morning.

Our first speaker is Ms. Minna.

Hon. Maria Minna (Beaches—East York, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

First of all, I want to thank both of you. You couldn't have given us a more concise, superb presentation on the issues—very direct and very clear.

As a former member of the welfare council some years back, I can say that at the time we were looking at the myths and realities of the welfare state system, with a whole host of other things.

Ms. Regehr, you mentioned to us that basically it doesn't matter what we look at—the senior woman, the single mother, the person on welfare, the family making minimum wage—because poverty goes right across. It has many different reasons; welfare is low, wages, taking time out to look after family. I'm not going to go over all the reasons you've said, but obviously there are many different reasons. So the solutions have to be multi-approach, multi-target.

One of the things that has been discussed—I just throw this out—in addition to the child tax credit, which we have tried, is a guaranteed income, I guess, for all...and I'm not just talking about for seniors, but for all wage people, a working tax credit. That would only apply to working people, which wouldn't actually work for...

Can you give me an idea on this? If we were to get all of our programs into one pot and try to create in this country a form of guaranteed income, would that go a long way toward helping or not? Have there been studies by the council on those things?

Ms. Sheila Regehr: Thank you.

It's very interesting that you raise that question. As I mentioned, we just finished a four-day council meeting in Quebec City, and that was one of the things that was talked about in those discussions, the idea of having some sort of guaranteed annual income or guaranteed living income; I've heard it described in different ways. There are people looking more and more at that kind of concept.

For a while it was an issue that one couldn't talk about at all, and now it's back on the table. As I said, with the Toronto-Dominion Bank and some of the other corporate players interested in looking at how to resolve these issues, their particular focus was working-age adults. That's where a large part of the problem is, and I think both presentations have highlighted that. You have to address poverty where it starts, and continues, for women.

One of the interesting things that might do, just based on a few other things that I know about.... There was a really interesting study, briefly referred to in *The Cost of Poverty*, by a woman at McMaster University. It was a big consortium project, but they were looking at lone parents and they were looking at different things, at what helps. One of the things they found that surprised them—and maybe shouldn't have—was that there were hugely high rates of depression among lone parents. In our system, the way things work now, because of the way things are paid and the way our income security

system works and because we have such a good universal health care system, logically those people would then be sent to psychologists and psychiatrists to deal with the depression.

What worked? Two hours' worth of recreation for their kids every week. They were depressed for a reason; they couldn't get a break.

● (0935)

Hon. Maria Minna: They needed a break, yes.

Ms. Sheila Regehr: One of the things a kind of guaranteed living income would do is remove a whole portion of pathology from people, those for whom it really is income poverty that matters—people who are competent, and capable, who know how to manage their money, whose lives are in order, but who just don't have enough money.

It would remove that huge problem from other parts of the system, and it would free up a lot of other money. It would then also allow you to really focus on particular areas that need more specific attention, such as people with disabilities, addictions, and those sorts of things where different types of resources really are important.

Hon. Maria Minna: That kind of program would also take a tremendous load off our health care system, I would think, because of the fact that people who are constantly struggling financially are constantly struggling for nutrition for their children and a host of other things that they can't attend to early on in their lives, and that's a problem.

Before my time is up—I have a lot more questions for both of you, actually—I want to talk about how immigrant women and visible minority women have a different challenge, if you like, as senior women; they may not have accumulated much of a pension, or came here maybe in mid-life at some point, or are working for low wages.

I apologize, because I missed part of your presentation, and I think you might have made some mention of this, but did you find that there was even an additional burden with respect to immigrant and visible minority women in terms of their ability to access incomes and to build savings?

Mr. Robert Dobie: In our particular case, our studies have indicated that immigrant women, when they do retire, have very little income to count on. Most rely on just the pension and the supplement, and that's really insufficient. Obviously the single, unattached older woman is very vulnerable.

Hon. Maria Minna: Maybe you could lump into that aspect the other women you had mentioned.

Ms. Sheila Regehr: Charts 8 and 9 show that. The top chart looks at poverty rates for women 15 and over, so this is basically all adult women. If you look, for example, particularly at the bars belonging to a visible minority group, look at the very high red bar for unattached individuals—this is all women—and go directly below that to look at those unattached members of a visible minority, you see that it jumps from 55% to 69%. Those women, when they reach 65, are that much more vulnerable.

• (0940)

Hon. Maria Minna: I'll have to come back to that.

Thanks, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Yes, Ms. Minna, your time is up.

Ms. Mourani.

[Translation]

Mrs. Maria Mourani (Ahuntsic, BQ): Good morning. Thank you for your presentations.

I want to ask you essentially three questions, one of which is a follow-up to what Mrs. Minna asked.

Last week, we met senior officials from Human Resources and Social Development. They told us that our Canada Pension Plan was the best in the world.

First, I would like to hear your views on that subject. Second, how do you explain the difference that exists with poverty among immigrant women? Is it because they mostly stay at home and do not have the opportunity to contribute to a private pension fund?

Finally, you talked about an antipoverty action plan. Can you fill us in on that subject? How would this action plan apply in practice? Do you have any idea on this subject?

[English]

Ms. Sheila Regehr: Thank you very much.

Very briefly, according to my experience, the departmental officials are right, in a way; Canada really is looked at as a model for the CPP and the way it works. One of the reasons it works really well is that it does have those particular features in it that address a lot of women's needs, like the child-rearing dropout. As Robert mentioned, it doesn't work perfectly, but like credit-splitting, there are ways that it could be improved. Because it has those kinds of features, it really does offer some advantages that a lot of other government pension plans don't in other parts of the world, and advantages, certainly, that most private pension plans don't.

Evidently, as well, there are areas in there to work on. If some things are working really well, you look at those as models and see how you can make them work better.

In terms of poverty among immigrant women, I'm sure there are others who could talk to this better; there are so many issues. A lot of it has to do, for example, with foreign credentials, the ability of immigrant women coming into Canada to be able to get employment in the fields that will get them a decent income.

If I understand correctly, there also seems to be quite a gap amongst immigrant women. Some come in very highly skilled and do really well; others don't. Another trend I've heard people talk

about is that for a lot of immigrant women, even though it shows that their economic situation looks not bad in terms of income, it's often because they're working two, three, and four jobs. So there's a lot going on there to look at, and I think you need to look at a lot of statistics underneath the major trends.

In terms of the plan of action, this was, again, a major subject of discussion at the council meeting, and the beginnings of something that we're really hoping to launch, to develop in more detail, to consult with some other organizations and other Canadians on. I think a lot of the inspiration we got in Quebec City was from listening to what the *collectif* described to us. We invited them to meetings and they described the efforts of a whole coalition of groups in Quebec for a poverty-free Quebec, and the law they have in place, the plans they have in place to develop a set of indicators, some very specific goals. Our council has been in existence since 1965, and, to my knowledge, theirs is the only other council that's been created in Canada. There's also some really interesting work going on in Newfoundland, and we hope to look more closely at that. Some of the work that John and I and Cathy did, going into the council meeting, was looking at what's happening in other countries. The United Kingdom and a lot of the European countries are developing that.

It's pretty basic; if you want to get something done, you figure out what needs to get done and who's going to do it, and you assign the resources. But there has to be some more accountability for that to happen.

• (0945)

Mr. John Anderson (Senior Researcher and Policy Advisor, National Council of Welfare): Perhaps I could add to that.

I think it's very significant that in Canada two provinces have now adopted laws or anti-poverty strategies. One is Quebec, where it's been adopted by all parties. It was a unanimous decision of the National Assembly. It is being implemented by a Liberal government right now. In Newfoundland, which has just recently adopted an anti-poverty strategy, it's a Conservative government that is moving ahead with this anti-poverty strategy.

That's very significant, because work around these issues should not be linked to partisan issues. Eliminating poverty is really an issue that all parties should see they have an interest in moving forward on.

[Translation]

Mrs. Maria Mourani: I would like to specify something for Mr. Anderson. In Quebec, the antipoverty law was tabled by the Parti québécois.

[English]

Mr. John Anderson: But it was adopted unanimously by all parties; all parties voted for it.

[Translation]

Mrs. Maria Mourani: It is true but it is nevertheless important to take note of the differences in Quebec.

I hope your report will take into account the differences that exist between the provinces. Since some provinces already have adopted a law, it would be important to take those differences into account.

[English]

The Chair: You have one minute left.

[Translation]

Mrs. Maria Mourani: You say there is always room for improvement in the pension plan of Canada. Could you briefly mention two or three improvements that could concretely benefit women?

[English]

Ms. Sheila Regehr: There are some things that are not necessarily directed to women, but recommendations have been made generally on increasing the replacement rate. CPP provides only 25% of income.

That's a generalized thing, but for women specifically, one of the recommendations I've heard put forward, by Monica Townson and others, is to build on the child-rearing dropout formula for allowing the system to kind of compensate for time that was spent outside the labour force, or with very low earnings, raising children, and to look at expanding that for other kinds of care-giving. If you have, say, a disabled relative that you need to care for over a period of time, some of that could be dropped out as well. Or if you have a child with a disability, even when they reach school age they require more care, and that sort of thing.

So that's one idea.

Mr. John Anderson: Another idea that's been talked about and that I think would be very helpful to women would be to allow all working Canadians to contribute to the maximum contributions of CPP. Right now if you're a low-income worker, as many women are, then you only can contribute a certain amount. Therefore that affects the pension you receive later on.

If you could contribute the full amount, and maybe get your employer also to contribute an extra amount, or contribute both the employee and employer amount yourself, this would be much more useful than actually purchasing an RRSP with the same amount of money. You would be doing yourself a much greater service to assure yourself that when you retired you had the full CPP. It would be allowing all Canadians, those who wanted to, to up their contributions to get the maximum.

That would be a very easy change. I've heard the actuaries from both QPP and CPP say how this would be possible to do. The plan is set up. A very easy thing would be a voluntary program, which would allow people to actually assure themselves that they could get a full pension.

The Chair: Sounds fascinating.

Thank you, Ms. Mourani.

I'd just like to acknowledge Ms. Stronach, who is now going to be a permanent member of our committee.

Welcome, Ms. Stronach.

Ms. Guergis.

Ms. Helena Guergis (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Thanks very much.

Good morning to all of you. I appreciate you being here.

No doubt you're familiar with income-splitting—you maybe had the conversation a couple of times in some of the research you've done—where in the traditional family one parent has stayed home to raise the child, and they haven't had any acknowledgement of their unpaid work. Some of you have referred to the unpaid work.

In fact, Mr. Dobie, you talked about perhaps making it mandatory for separated and divorced spouses to share or split their pensions. Something that I have been very focused on in the past 10 years is actually income-splitting—aside from the petitions, actually engaging in conversations with a lot of retirement associations, national associations, and having that conversation. They would like to see us implement that, starting with seniors.

If we had implemented this ten years ago, say, what would be different today if women, with the work they had done in the home, were actually considered to be contributing equally, splitting the income, contributing to the pensions, in the same way as the husband had? What do you think would be different? Is this something that perhaps you have done some research on, even going forward, and that you could share with this committee?

● (0950)

Mr. Robert Dobie: In our particular case, the example I gave was of an unattached older woman; consequently, there is no income-splitting there. As a matter of fact, that's the problem, that they are relying only on their own particular income. Many of them, for many reasons, have not even asked for the pensions, or half the pensions, that were due them.

It was a different mentality at that time, and unfortunately for them, they're paying the price for it right now. Had those rights, that are theirs, been applied for, they would been in a much better situation today.

In some of these cases, the couple has divorced, and the woman has never claimed what was rightfully hers. I think there's a sensitization aspect. It's very hard to try to convince an 82-year-old or a 74-year-old to go after the guy, that they're entitled to it. She'll say, "Oh everything's all right," when she's living on \$12,000 a year. I run a seniors home, and I've had that experience. It's a very hard barrier to break. They're still madly in love for whatever reason, and want to let things lie. I don't think we'll be able to change that.

That's why we're recommending that if this were automatic, it would resolve so many problems. An 82-year-old doesn't want to start a new conflict, either, especially in that particular field. So that's the nature of our recommendation.

Ms. Sheila Regehr: Thank you. It's an interesting question.

I should preface this by saying that what I'm about to say is not a council position; it's just kind of some things I know, and my thoughts on things.

First off, dealing with the seniors population, there is a really neat income-splitting thing for seniors that it appears a lot of people don't know about. Robert has talked about credit-splitting, which is one aspect of things, but there also is an ability to split your pension if either party applies. Just like the guaranteed income supplement, the cheques go out to both parties. If you apply, you can have that done with CPP as well.

That's interesting, because for a lot of women, who maybe haven't had control over their finances over a certain portion of their lives, just having their own cheque, having equality in the household, knowing that they are very likely to outlive their partner, it gives them some ability to plan and use their own money to plan their own future.

So that's one thing. If I'm correct, though, what you're referring to is more an income-splitting for tax purposes in younger households, that type of thing.

Ms. Helena Guergis: Yes and no. Some of the seniors groups I have spoken with are well aware that they can split some of their pensions, but over the years, and the income they have coming in from their pension.... It might be interesting for you to have a conversation with them to see what they have to say. It's not just specific to that; they are asking for some laws to be changed, specifically to help them, other than what's existing right now.

Ms. Sheila Regehr: As Robert alluded to, though, it really is a very complex thing that needs to be sorted out. Any time you make one change with one population, you have to see how it affects others, and I understand that income-splitting for tax purposes runs into a few problems.

First of all, it gives kind of a tax subsidy to those households compared to lone parents, who can't split with anybody and have to do all the work and earn all the income. That gets kind of complicated; you don't want to penalize lone parents.

The other issue I've heard talked about is that if you could make the theory of income-splitting in a household a reality, if you could actually ensure that the wife got the income for the unpaid work she's doing, that would be one thing. But you have a lot of enforcement issues there. For instance, how do you guarantee that's actually happening?

One of the other ways around that...and it came up around the committee hearings that were looking at tax treatment of dependent children and that led eventually to an increase in the maternity benefits system. Another way of managing that unpaid work situation is to, at least for the youngest years, try to open up the employment insurance maternity and parental system so that it's available to all mothers who have newborns, not to base it just on past labour force participation. I mean, it's for a more limited time, but it would provide a much more egalitarian start to households with children, to women who aren't immediately put into a situation of dependency. It becomes de facto income-splitting, because she has, for that year, her own source of income and her own ability to plan to re-enter the labour force when the time is right for her family, and that type of thing.

A number of things can be looked at, and there are different, creative ways to do them. But it is complicated.

• (0955)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Mathysen.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Thank you very much for your presentation. You gave us a lot of really good information that certainly we have to get out to the general public. There are these populist notions about poverty that simply aren't true, so I appreciate what you had to say.

I want to come back to Ms. Mourani's question in terms of the anti-poverty plan. You said that Quebec and Newfoundland have begun that process of putting in place a strategy. What would be the components of that strategy? What do we need to look at? Is it a national child care program? Is it a national affordable housing program?

There was a reference to the provinces coming up with affordable housing, but some provinces have more ability than others in terms of all of these kinds of programs. What role does the federal government have to play here, and how would these programs address some of these issues of poverty among young women and young families?

Ms. Sheila Regehr: That's a really easy question. I'll answer it on two levels, I think.

Starting with the Quebec experience, I think it's really interesting; they have looked at putting the infrastructure in place first. They focused not on specific, one-by-one policy areas but on the mechanisms and the things that will make it run. So they have a law that requires certain things to be done. They're going to have indicators so they know exactly what they're measuring. They know when they're achieving results or not, and therefore know how to plan better. They've created this consultative committee and a research body so that they know they have the information they need. They have a mechanism to consult with the people who are going to be affected.

Those are major pieces in place, and I think you have to look in a comprehensive way at your own situation.

With regard to child care, for Quebec in particular they're well advanced compared to the rest of the country in that, but they're looking at other areas of family policy. They're looking at starting to increase welfare rates. Newfoundland is looking at similar kinds of things.

In terms of the role of the federal government, again, I don't want to speak for other organizations, but there are a lot of examples of things out there. The group that I referred to before, this coalition that produced the report, is Ontario-based, but it has a lot of applicability to the rest of Canada. It's called MISWAA, or Modernizing Income Security for Working-Age Adults. They've made a series of recommendations for different things.

I believe the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives recently put out a paper calling for a much more expanded federal role in social assistance so that the federal government would have a more comprehensive role in income security generally, given that it already has employment insurance, the pension plan, and those sort of things. If they had a greater role in social assistance, things would work a little more seamlessly.

That's something we hear constantly from people living in poverty, that this gap between EI and social assistance puts people in horrendous binds. It's hugely problematic. There are so many cracks. I mean, when you fall between those two programs, you fall through more than a crack; it's more like the Grand Canyon.

● (1000)

Mr. John Anderson: I would add that most of the jurisdictions that have embarked upon an anti-poverty law or strategy have, as Sheila said, first set up targets that they're going to reach. Then they've begun to coordinate existing policy. This is extremely important in the sense that at the federal government level, there are often many different programs going on but no coordination between what we're doing around housing, or what we're doing around child care, education, literacy, etc.

So part of that is developing coordination and breaking down some of the silos that exist in government, around programs and areas within government that can help to move the anti-poverty strategy along. This is extremely important.

There's obviously also an important role for the federal government in this area of work jurisdiction—it has about 10% of the labour force that it can do, which is extremely important—and a role in terms of working with the provinces, taking that role of coordinating with the provinces, which are beginning to develop these strategies themselves.

Ms. Sheila Regehr: Especially in terms of the major income transfer programs.

Mr. John Anderson: Yes.

Mrs. Irene Mathyssen: I read through the report, and just very quickly—I asked this question last week, and I'll ask it again—in regard to women in Quebec who have not applied in time, or have not accessed their full old age income security, there's a recommendation that Canada adopt the Quebec model of five-year retroactivity instead of the current 11 months.

I just wondered if you could comment on that.

Ms. Sheila Regehr: Yes: it's a good idea.

Mrs. Irene Mathyssen: Thank you; that was succinct.

Mr. Robert Dobie: You mentioned something about housing. That's something we haven't really discussed today. The flavour of the month in aging is home care. Home care dictates that you live in a home or you live in a residence for seniors. The Canadian government has not been in the business of offering affordable housing for almost a decade now, or more than a decade; I think it was 1993. Although it's a provincial jurisdiction, and there are lots of discussions about that, there are no transfer payments that have been going out from the federal to provincial governments, and affordable housing is very much a need.

The recommendation we're making is to keep seniors at home or in an autonomous residence as long as possible. First of all, the quality of life is much better. Second, you have support systems that are usually given by volunteers and by the community. Third, it's so much cheaper than having a person in a chronic-care or hospital situation. So far, 3% or 4% of seniors are in those types of institutions. We can diminish that—seniors are much more healthy now—by at least half a percent, but there are no residences, no affordable housing.

It would be such an easy investment. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to see it. People are very anxious to go in. At the residence I operate, we have a waiting list of four years. It's absolutely ridiculous; four years.

Consequently, the affordable housing thing has to be looked at very seriously.

● (1005)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dobie.

Ms. Neville.

Hon. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): Thank you.

Thank you for your fine presentations. They have certainly been very informative.

I have three areas of questions. I'm going to put them all out, because I know my time is limited, and I'll let you manage the time in the responses.

You talked about the fact that there is no official government-mandated poverty line here in Canada. How do you analyze not only the incidence of poverty but the depth of poverty? How poor are the poor, and how long are they poor? Do you do that kind of analysis? So that's one line of questioning.

Second, I was particularly interested, Mr. Dobie, in your comments about pension reform. I was surprised to hear you say that many do not take up the mandated pension-splitting for the Canada Pension Plan. You also raised something that a number of us have talked about for a period of time, which is the importance of a mandated pension-splitting of other government-supported pensions, like RRSPs and employment pensions, which are supported through the tax system. Are you aware of any studies that have been done on that or of advocacy that has been done in that area?

My third area of questioning relates to aboriginal women or seniors. I look at the poverty rates you have here, and the rate is high as it relates to aboriginal women. What it seems to say, though, comparing the two graphs, is that many more aboriginal seniors live in a family setting, or move into a family setting, than perhaps do other groups. I don't know whether that's fair or not, but I'm interested to know if there are any studies.

The time is short, I know, but I'll leave it to the four of you to manage in terms of the responses.

Mr. Robert Dobie: On the question of income-splitting of pensions, I'm not aware of any studies that have been done, but it would seem kind of easy to legislate if there was the political willingness. I understand it's already on the books in certain provinces. Quebec is certainly one of them, with *le patrimoine*; people can avail themselves of it.

If that were part of the legislation, at least it would make it more comfortable for those who are vulnerable to make those applications. Right now there is a lack of willingness on the part of aging single or divorced women to ask for that. It needs a certain amount of education on our part to tell them what their rights are, but if more information goes out, it would be easier for people to avail themselves of that particular provision.

Now, for many of them, it's too late—the former husband has either remarried or is deceased—but for the future, I think we can anticipate that.

Hon. Anita Neville: Aboriginal people, the depth of poverty; those analyses.

Ms. Sheila Regehr: I'll turn to John to talk about that, perhaps, because he's in the process of writing an aboriginal report for the council.

On that one, it's just so hard. Trying to understand the trends, from some of the limited data we have, is tricky too. It's important to recognize that comparing the aboriginal population to the non-aboriginal population with any of the measures we have is a bit limited. If aboriginal people are on reserve, they're subject to a different tax regime. If you're looking at pre-tax or post-tax LICOs, you get different numbers.

The other thing that's really critical to understand is that the aboriginal age structure and family arrangements are so different from the non-aboriginal population that it does take a lot of analysis and putting together a lot of different bits of data. I'll let John talk to that a little bit more, if he wants.

I just wanted to talk a bit about the no official poverty line and how we analyze things. You'll notice, for example, we gave you a chart that shows a number of different poverty measures. Some of those apply better to some situations than others. Actually having those different measures gives you a good basis for analysis. People say that the LICOs are just a relative measure, they're too high, and it doesn't really make sense; we want to see what poverty really looks like, and that's just a fake relative measure, complicated for people to understand.

The market basket measure—unfortunately, we have only one year for that now, although I understand two more years are in the works—was created as an attempt to show that, in some senses, those lines were too high, that for people to live and meet the basic necessities, you need less income. It turned out that when they looked at what it actually cost to buy things, that wasn't the case at all.

So the market basket measure, or something like it, could be used as a good target to start looking toward if you want to increase welfare rates. That's something for the provinces to look at.

In our publications—we've left copies for you—*Poverty Profile* on a regular basis looks at a whole range of things. A lot of the information here, Cathy has derived from the work that she's done on *Poverty Profile*. It does look at depth. It looks at persistence. There is also data available from Statistics Canada that allows you a certain longitudinal look.

So we have lots of data, lots of information beyond just those poverty lines, that are useful in analyzing the situation, but until there's an agreed understanding amongst governments and the population that we have a certain set of indicators that describe what we mean by poverty, and that those are the levels and have to bring them down.... It doesn't matter what they are or how you measure them, you have to start bringing them down. That's the important part.

Did you want to add anything...?

•(1010)

The Chair: We've run out of time here.

I'll go to Ms. Smith now.

Mrs. Joy Smith (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to thank the panel for their presentations. It's been very insightful today, and very worthwhile. Certainly it's a panel that I would like to see come back, because we will be running out of time today.

I taught school at the junior high level for 22 years. A lot of my students—quite a few of them, an inordinate number of them—over the years landed up pregnant because they were older kids, and if they had a baby in our province, they were allowed housing. They were allowed an apartment. Of course, this was all under the social welfare program in the province.

The thing that always struck me as a teacher—I taught in the area of mathematics and science—was that in the teaching of students, when you start young, I believe, and you educate a population, it's very important to give them information. Here in our committee we have discovered that many older women do not know what they can apply for, so they don't apply for it. I know that many young people going out into the workforce do not know about RSPs and what they should do. They don't start planning for their retirement when they enter the workforce, which, as we now know, is what people should do.

I'm wondering if the National Council of Welfare has ever had an initiative that worked with schools, especially starting at the junior high level, where they had lobbied to have courses put into schools that would actually teach the population: this is what the world is like out there, this is what it costs to live, this is what happens if you make choices and become an unwed mother, if you make choices and have to leave home for whatever reason or leave home because you want to, to get in with peers. The courses would teach about the practicalities of living out there, the meat and potatoes of surviving and building a household.

When we talk about poverty, we all sort of shake our heads and wipe our brows and say, "My, this is a terrible problem, and we need to solve it." We try to implement initiatives that will help that. But have we done anything to actually target the younger population before they enter the workforce so that they go out with the tools, with some sort of understanding of what they have to face, when they get out there?

There's a whole population in the public and the private school systems that.... I can tell you, as a teacher of 22 years, that what you teach in that classroom makes a huge difference. I'm wondering, when you look at all these alarming charts, if some of the focus should be right on the school systems.

I know it's a provincial jurisdiction, but here at Status of Women we also put transfer payments into the provinces for post-secondary. By the time they get to post-secondary, I think there's an overlap there, as there always is, in everything. When you're talking about affordable housing and things like that, it's a symbiotic relationship. Transfer payments are sent to the provinces, and the provinces make those decisions.

So we can't just make gross general statements, we have to be very targeted. I'd be very interested to know if there's any concerted initiative to do that, or if we can think about doing that, in all the provinces across our nation.

•(1015)

Ms. Sheila Regehr: Thanks.

That's a very interesting question. As you said, it is a provincial jurisdiction. On the specific question of whether the National Council of Welfare has been involved in schools in that regard, I can't say with any certainty, but I think probably not. What the council does do, though, is put out a lot of information that's used within the school system.

It is an interesting question. In a lot of the work I've done previously, on women's economic situation and that type of thing—

Mrs. Joy Smith: Can I just interrupt you and ask you a question?

The Chair: Ms. Smith, you have only 12 seconds left.

Ms. Sheila Regehr: There probably is a general lack of knowledge amongst the Canadian population about our income security programs, about financial information generally, particularly among women—and particularly among older women. It has been suggested that there is a role for the federal government to at least provide the information that people need, not to interfere with what's happening in the school system but to put the information out.

The other major source that other people with more money have access to are financial advisers and lawyers and all of those people that low-income earners can't afford. The banks have no interest in providing information to low-income earners.

So it's hard to get the information you need, and I think lots of people can have some roles to play in that.

The Chair: Any other quick comments on that to Ms. Smith?

Mrs. Joy Smith: Yes.

You said that information was provided to schools—

The Chair: Just quickly, please.

Mrs. Joy Smith: I have to—

The Chair: I know, but I was asking if our presenters had any further comments to your questions. We'll try to see if we can get back around again. It's just that our time is getting short.

Mrs. Joy Smith: Yes.

You were saying that information has been sent to schools. How do you get it into the schools? What avenue do you use to get it in there?

Ms. Sheila Regehr: We have a regular distribution list of people who seek our publications, but that's more at the university level.

I was going to comment just anecdotally that I learned about Canada's income security programs in graduate school. So I agree with you, it's a bit late. It's either then or through experience; when you run up against the problems with a program, then you start understanding it.

The Chair: Madam Bourgeois.

[Translation]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois (Terrebonne—Blainville, BQ): Ladies and gentlemen, good morning.

This is very interesting and I am very happy you are here. Your two presentations complement each other, even if there are some minor differences between the two and even though you work at different levels. I nevertheless think you are very bold and very courageous to dare speak the truth.

My first question is directed to the two presenters. If I correctly read your presentations, your organizations are both advisory councils. To whom do you usually speak?

Mr. Robert Dobie: We are the advisory for seniors and the big boss is the minister of Health.

•(1020)

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: Have you recently spoken to him?

Mr. Robert Dobie: I will meet him in 15 minutes.

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: When did you speak to him last?

Mr. Robert Dobie: We met him in February, a few days after his appointment. We were in Ottawa for a meeting. It was an opportunity to see him and we will see him again this morning.

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: Excellent, Mrs. Regehr.

Mrs. Sheila Regehr: For us, it is the minister of Human Resources and Social Development.

[English]

It was a little bit prior to my time. I was with the council before, and I've just come back. At the March meeting of the council members in Ottawa, they met with the minister. And we expect that we will meet with her again in October.

[Translation]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: I agree.

I have been trying to improve the situation of women for a number of years. There is nothing new in what you just told us this morning. We have been hearing for years about that, to the point that the government of Quebec decided to do things on his own because in Canada, nobody listened to the people who talked about the situation of women.

Our researchers have just handed out a very nice report, written by Monica Townson, a colleague of Ruth Rose. I don't know if her name is familiar to you. In Quebec, we have been using since 1993 the studies of Ruth Rose to adopt various policies aimed at developing the autonomy of women.

It is easy to understand that there are direct costs related to poverty. Have your organizations measured the direct costs associated with women's poverty? We talk about poverty, and you also talked about mental health and costs for lone women. Have you done any studies on the inherent costs of poverty?

Mr. Robert Dobie: Not as far as I know. I must tell you I have been only three months in this position. But I can ask around.

It is difficult to know the direct costs related to women's poverty, because that population changes rapidly. The number of seniors will increase considerably in a few years. I should mention that 24 or 25% of Canada's population will be 60 and older.

But about those costs, I have to admit I don't have those figures. I can try to get them for you.

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: Thank you.

Madame Regehr.

[English]

Ms. Sheila Regehr: I agree that it's hard to get at the direct costs of poverty, but what this document, which we've copies of in English and French, has done is put together a compilation of different studies in Canada and the United States that show very clearly what the costs of poverty are, but also that there are remedies that involve significant investments up front, but that end up paying off tremendously afterwards. They virtually pay for themselves, and more.

A lot of the examples in here, if I recall correctly, are related to women. I mean, child care is one of the areas that really has been costed out quite well. There are examples in here around lone parents. There are other health care examples.

So a lot of them relate very directly to women's lives.

[Translation]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: Madam Chair, I will finish with a comment.

In Canada, there is no family policy. I think that as members of the Standing Committee on the Status of women, we should make an exhaustive study of the employment insurance system effect on women's living conditions.

All the material we have read up to now show beyond any doubt that the employment insurance program is inadequate as far as women are concerned. We should recall that 48 billion dollars have disappeared from the employment insurance coffers.

Last year, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation had a surplus of 2 billion dollars. We could simply have shared that money and offered social housing adapted to people with a disability, to immigrants and seniors.

Whether they speak of equalization or about tax disparity, the provinces ask for a fairer distribution of wealth.

Poverty among women is a multifaceted problem, and if we want to study each of those facets this morning, I can tell you it will take some time. If the committee want to do a good job, he will have to address each element of this problem and ask the government to do something about it.

I have been working on the status of women for 13 years and we have been talking about it for 13 years. Groups like yours should flash a red light and demand that something be done.

I thank you for having been so frank this morning.

• (1025)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Bourgeois. We will keep that in mind as this study moves forward. I think one of the things that's concurrent when you're a member consistently is frustration in terms of seeing things move forward. We will certainly take that into consideration.

The report that Ms. Regehr has referred to is being distributed to your offices now. I understand we were asked not to distribute it until after the meeting.

Ms. Mathysen, for five minutes.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: Thank you very much.

I have a couple of questions. My first one is with regard to the cap that's currently on the limits that lesbian, gay, transgendered, and bisexual community members can claim in terms of CPP/QPP survivor benefits. It's been backdated to January 1998. Those involved in challenging that believe it should be backdated to 1978.

I know it's before the Supreme Court right now, and we don't have a decision yet, but I wonder, has there been any work done or any anticipation of a favourable court decision in terms of allowing it to go back the extra 20 years?

Ms. Sheila Regehr: It's not something we have specifically looked at. We didn't introduce ourselves at the beginning, but there's a little flyer that's going around.... We're a very small council. It's not an area we've looked specifically at.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: Is it something you might consider? Because it is a significant population, and they are aging as well, just in terms of the Canadian reality.

Ms. Sheila Regehr: We'll certainly note that and take it to the membership.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: Okay, thank you.

We're planning our work for the fall. As Madam Bourgeois has indicated, it's very frustrating, this whole reality of the lack of action. Could you give us some advice in terms of the priorities of this committee? If we really are going to address the disproportionate poverty faced by women, what should we be doing? What kinds of things should this committee put into its work plan?

Ms. Sheila Regehr: It's a....

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: Loaded question?

Ms. Sheila Regehr: Well, it's a tall order.

What strikes me most about the work that we put together, to pull out very specific things related to women from the overall work that the council's doing, is that you really do have to take a life cycle approach. That what jumps out most, that if you're looking at any area of poverty, you can't take one population or one moment in time. There's a tendency to talk about "poor people" or to talk about "lone parents", thinking that there's this group of lone parents who are always lone parents, or that somebody living in poverty now is always going to be living in poverty.

Those groups move in and out. A woman who's a very contented middle-class woman is going to be a lone parent tomorrow. In a few years, when her children age, statistically she's not counted as a lone parent any more, she's an "unattached older woman"—but she's experiencing the legacy of her earlier years.

For me, one of the critical things would be to take a really holistic and long-term approach. There are a few underlying things. For example, the whole unpaid work question that's come up in different areas in different ways is obviously new on the political agenda.

We had mentioned the business of time poverty. Ironically, Canada is in the situation of being a world leader in time use measurement. We have an incredible amount of data that's so rich in telling us things, and it's not used. It's not used for policy development. It's not factored into the work we do—and it can be. That one underlies so much of women's vulnerability to poverty and their risk of not having economic security.

• (1030)

Mr. Robert Dobie: I have three priorities with regard to senior women. Number one is that the amount of the GIS should be increased so that the sum of GIS and OAS is equal to or greater than the low-income cut-off. It's much too low right now. Two is that we reinvest in affordable housing, which I mentioned before. And three is that there be more systematic sharing of the pension of the former spouse. That's a recommendation we made as far back as 1993. I don't know if this was the committee that got it, but somebody on the Hill got it, and it's still there.

Hon. Maria Minna: I think it was the social policy committee... [Inaudible—Editor]...three times, but didn't succeed in getting it through; put it forward, though.

Ms. Sheila Regehr: If I might just add one more word—John wanted to say something too—I'm reminded that in the council publications, including the ones we've distributed to you, there are some very specific recommendations on things that we would certainly encourage you to look at, specifically around child care, around the child tax benefit, the clawback issues.

So there are a number of recommendations. I won't go through all of them, but a lot of them do pertain to areas of women's lives that are very important.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Stanton.

Mr. Bruce Stanton (Simcoe North, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, to both councils actually, for taking the time to share with us some of the findings you have gathered over the last few years.

My question is first to Mr. Dobie, in regard to your initial comments regarding the "catch-up" period, as you call it. Many of the charts we saw in the presentation this morning are showing certainly a closing of the gap.

I note, for example, that compared to 2003 and 2004, even the number of senior citizens that are below LICO continues to diminish. When you look at the participation rates of women in the workforce—and I will preface this by saying that I know this doesn't impact the same proportion of women and seniors in general—the level of private pension plans continues to be an increasing share of citizens facing their retirement years.

Taking in all these considerations, wouldn't we tend to see a continuation of that downward trend in terms of the incidence of poverty among senior citizens? It's at 7% now. Why wouldn't we continue to see that trend continue downward?

Mr. Robert Dobie: I think we will, except the point that I was trying to make was that there is still a vulnerable group of seniors, and that's the unattached. That group is not going to see any improvement, and that's the signal I'm giving here today.

Otherwise, yes, you will, because women have been in the workforce longer, and they've been contributing longer to pension plans. For those over 45 anticipating pensions in 15 or 20 years, yes, I think there will be some improvements, and I think a trend will be there. But addressing that particular problem of those unattached women over 80, or over 75, I think that's alarming, almost.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Is the percentage of seniors living below LICO increasing, or is it staying close to that 60% mark?

Mr. Robert Dobie: It's about that 60% mark, yes.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: So it's fairly consistent. Okay. Thank you for that.

I have another question. Much of the discussion we've shared and heard from you this morning certainly relates to the measure of income, and income supports, as a measure of the incidence of poverty. I think it's certainly fair to accept that.

If we mine slightly below that line, is there a measure or an incidence at which for seniors, men or women, who may choose to, for example, share living situations or circumstances with other seniors, or friends, or family...? I don't want to suggest for a moment that there shouldn't be the ability for all seniors to live independently. I support what you indicated earlier, that the very best circumstance is for seniors to be able to live at home. But if we look only at income, are we missing a segment of seniors who in fact may have low incomes but truly may not be necessarily in circumstances of abject poverty? Is there a measure here that 240,000-odd folks, yes, are in that low-income category, but by virtue of their chosen living conditions, they aren't in fact experiencing the kind of abject living circumstances that one might conclude otherwise?

● (1035)

Mr. Robert Dobie: Most seniors that I come in contact with are not very demanding, and their lifestyles are relatively moderate. I don't have any measure, but it would seem to me that if we could spend a very little amount of money on making sure there is a certain amount of security, there is a certain amount of leisure time....

If a senior—or anyone, for that matter—feels secure, feels happy, usually that transfers into better health and better quality of life. It's a very minor investment. Previous governments, or present governments, have a Horizons program. That's the type of thing I would encourage and improve on. If you can keep them happy and secure, amongst their peers and out of institutions—and I'm not degrading the institutions, because there's a certain amount of necessity for that—for as long as possible, then that would be an incredible investment at a relatively low price.

Mr. John Anderson: Just to add to that, the market basket measure is an attempt to measure the costs of housing, the costs of food, and therefore to give a measure of poverty that distinguishes exactly what people are spending on these items. We've only had one year of it, and there are two more years to come out. I think that's going to be very important.

In terms of your previous question, I want to add that it's important to note that while there are trends that are going to mitigate poverty, there are also trends going in the other direction. One of them is the question of housing costs. If housing costs continue to spiral upwards, particularly in our major cities, this is going to affect seniors, particularly senior women, who have not had the paid-up mortgage, or not had the house, or who find the property taxes too high to pay as they are ramped up in many cities. It's very important that we have more affordable housing, and we don't have enough right now.

Second is the question of precarious work. There's more and more contingent and precarious work where particularly women are not working in the kinds of jobs that allow them to contribute to a pension plan on a regular basis. The jobs are not long term, they're temporary, etc.

Linked to that is the question of the decline in private pension plans. Private defined-benefit pension plans are on the decline. There are hardly any new ones being created, and many of the old ones are actually in trouble. This is also a problem, because obviously our retirement system was geared on having the three legs of OAS/GIS, the CPP, and having the private pension. But if you can't get into the

private pension plan because you're working in a job that doesn't have one, then obviously your retirement is not going to be as good as it was for people in the past, who had jobs in companies that had good pension plans.

The Chair: Thank you.

We have about three minutes left. Ms. Minna, Ms. Bourgeois, and Ms. Smith want to ask further questions. I'm not sure we can accomplish that. There's also Ms. Neville, and I'm sure others.

I can clearly see that we're going to have to ask you to come back.

I think it's Ms. Minna who will have the last question.

● (1040)

Hon. Maria Minna: I'll be quick.

First, I was going to suggest that we ask them to come back, so that's a good thing.

Second, Madam Chair, perhaps we could bring all of this back in the fall with an eye toward making recommendations on a poverty strategy for women, developing a poverty strategy solution ourselves—with the help of the supporters we have here today; that would be great.

I have tons of questions, but very quickly, it's obvious that there are some things we can do right now. There are things we can address with respect to the poverty issue, the child care issue, the issue of clawback for income support, the issue of mending EI to make sure that women are...and maybe making the dropout rate for CPP, for caregivers. So there are a number of things the governments could do now in terms of actually beginning to address some of these issues.

You said earlier that most women, regardless...or they're poor in the first place because of unpaid work. On the issue that I suggested earlier, the guaranteed income, would that help, in that case? And how would that work? Ultimately we're looking to address a lot of the things that I have just mentioned that I think could be done, but at the same time, how do we actually do a holistic approach to address the core problem, which is unpaid work for women; would income security do that?

Finally, has your shop done any analysis at this point on the impact of the most recent budget with respect to child care or structure changes and the \$1,200 and all of that with respect to poor families and poor women?

Ms. Sheila Regehr: I'll answer the first bit very quickly and let John talk about budget impact. I have, what, 20 seconds left now?

Yes, a guaranteed annual income would address a number of things, I think, as long as it's developed so that it understands unpaid work and recognizes that women, even if they're in the workforce full time, still have to look after their children when they come home and on weekends and all of those things. You have to recognize that everybody does this to some extent. The time and the money have to be of kind of match.

There was an interesting study, and I can't remember who did it, in the United States where they developed a welfare rate system that compensated lone parents for lost time by increasing their welfare money. It was quite creative; I haven't seen anything like that since, and that was quite a while ago.

So yes, the money would answer some of it in terms of a guaranteed annual income. I think there are still probably other elements around unpaid work that you'd have to look at. You mentioned EI, maternity and parental benefits, CPP dropouts, and things like that.

On the budget, John?

Mr. John Anderson: Very quickly, in terms of budgets in general, I think it's important that, in the future, budgets have a link to them, an analysis of the impact of that budget on poverty. This could be built into the budget itself so that when the budget proposals are being put forward we know the impact. What will the budget do for low-income Canadians? Is it going to reduce the rate of low income, and by how much? It's very important that there be some targets in there, which could be done as well.

Hon. Maria Minna: The council hasn't done an analysis with respect to the most recent budget?

Mr. John Anderson: We haven't done a detailed analysis in terms of that. We've looked at the latest budget, and of course within that budget some of the proposals and how they're going to work, but we haven't done a long-term analysis of the impact of that on low-income Canadians.

The Chair: Thank you.

To all of you, thank you so very much for coming this morning. I said to you that we would have lots of questions, but clearly we could manage an additional good hour with you.

We will be moving forward on our study, and no doubt narrowing in on specifics to do with the issues we're looking at. We would welcome you back at another time. Maybe we can narrow in on some specifics on which you could give us some direction and advice.

Again, thank you very much.

We will suspend for a couple of minutes while our witnesses leave.

• (1040) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1045)

The Chair: Order, please.

The area of committee business that we have on the agenda is just to bring to your attention the revised calendar.

Our next meeting will be another meeting on the study of matrimonial property rights. We have confirmed that Indian and Northern Affairs will come before us, which will give us an opportunity to clearly ask some questions.

Our policy analysts have been busy working. They will have for us draft recommendations that we can go over this coming Thursday, and bring back a draft report for approval on June 20.

Minister Prentice has agreed to come on June 22. I believe Ms. Smith is going to undertake to ensure that the minister is briefed on the draft recommendations as well. We'll have any further comments on June 20, but it would be good to get tabled in the House a report on the matrimonial property rights so that we can keep that issue moving forward.

The other various reports that were referred to this morning are being delivered to your offices now. It was specifically asked that these be delivered after people's comments so that they wouldn't be distracted from their comments this morning, as we move forward.

There has been a request for consideration from Ms. Smith to move the date of our committee to a different time slot in the fall. Again, that is completely up to the whips in terms of how they put our organizations together, but we will pass on that request, through the clerk, and see where we go from there.

If you could be thinking of any witnesses that you want to come before the committee in the fall, as we move forward on both of these studies, it would also be helpful to supply them to our research analyst.

Ms. Smith.

Mrs. Joy Smith: I would just mention that some members of our committee wanted the time slot of 3:30 to 5:30, or whatever it is, those two hours, simply because they have some things that are overlapping and sometimes they have to get substitutes. So it's whatever can be worked out.

The Chair: One thing that would be helpful would be for members who are having these difficulties to speak directly to the whip as well, so they can take it into consideration when the fall comes along.

Any other comments?

Hon. Anita Neville: My comment is that some of us currently have 3:30 to 5:30 commitments.

Hon. Maria Minna: Whichever time slot you go to, Madam Chair, somebody's going to have a conflict. It's the nature of things around here.

The Chair: It's always a difficulty, yes, but it has been asked. They do revise the sessions for the fall anyway, so we can at least pass that on.

Any further comments?

Yes, Ms. Bourgeois.

[Translation]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: I am very surprised to learn that we should already be presenting a report on the matrimonial property rights of Aboriginal women. Have the members of the committee been asked if they were ready to present a report on that subject? For myself, I don't feel I'm ready for that.

[English]

The Chair: When we had our last meeting, all of us were quite concerned about the whole issue of matrimonial property rights. Because both justice and aboriginal affairs had done some extensive study on the issue, with some very good recommendations that were supported by all parties...that those recommendations be brought forward for us to look at, along with some recommendations that would reinforce those, and that we would attempt to get a report into the House as quickly as possible, without redoing all of the work that's been done on the matrimonial property rights. We all agreed that it was an issue and that the work and the recommendations have been done. It was a clear opportunity for status of women to also make a statement on what we feel in regard to that issue.

The policy analysts have been doing that work since then. They are prepared to bring forward draft recommendations to our next meeting.

We'll look at those, then, Ms. Bourgeois, see if we're comfortable with what's there, and see if we want it to move forward at that particular time.

• (1050)

[Translation]

Ms. Diane Bourgeois: Thank you very much.

I would like to come back to a comment that was made earlier, because I found it a bit funny. Someone said that some members of the committee were frustrated. I am not frustrated, even though I sometimes speak a bit loudly, Madam Chair.

In fact, I am a bit tired of watching the Canadian government do nothing about the situation of women. I have been working in this area since 1980, and I haven't seen any major advance since then. If there has been any, it would be because of the National Association of Women and the Law, of the CARA and of the AFAL.

I was rereading the blues of a meeting of this committee during which Mr. Cotler talked about legal aid. We have been talking about that for years. This the eighth meeting of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women this morning. Will we ever see the light? Are there limits? What are they? Do we have any authority? Will our voices be heard?

We have heard witnesses who told us that women were poor, that we should have addressed the situation of aboriginal women years ago. Last week, the parliamentary secretary spoke about the minister. The UN made a statement about the Aboriginal people of Canada. What are we waiting for? Shall we have to make another study?

I am tired of all that. I am tired of hearing the members of the Committee on Social Development say things which go against what we were told this morning. Is this going to be mentioned somewhere?

We are here to represent women. I contributed to the creation of this committee so that Canadian women would be heard, not for Quebec to be heard. We have everything we need in Quebec. We have to make sure Canadian women are heard. It is possible I want to go too fast and you may not be there yet.

Ladies, are you going to do something so that women's groups and all the groups that fight poverty be heard? I am only asking you that question.

[English]

The Chair: I think a lot has been done. You may not tie it directly back to the status of women, but it's an opportunity for women's voices to be out there. If we didn't have this very effective committee to be able to do it, I think it would be more difficult to get the point out there.

I am very hopeful that with the assistance.... I think everybody sitting around this table wants to see some additional action continue to further the voices of women. I can clearly tell, with your passion, how much you care, and I welcome that, because I want to see us accomplish things. Hence, we are already pushing forth a report on the matrimonial property rights.

We're going to target before we adjourn, I would hope, exactly where we're going on the economic issues around women. We don't need to redo what's already been done; it's been done. We need to target it and we need to make sure that we have all the information we need. We need to make sure that our voices are being heard across Canada, and that we move on these issues. We have an obligation, as parliamentarians and as women, to do that.

I have Ms. Minna and Ms. Smith—and two minutes before we're out of this room and the next committee can come in.

Quickly, Ms. Minna and Ms. Smith.

• (1055)

Hon. Maria Minna: I'm assuming that this committee is coming back to the poverty of women, or the economic security of women, in the fall, right?

The Chair: Yes, we are.

Hon. Maria Minna: I very much want to see us put together an actual strategy that's a bit holistic in approach as opposed as to one-dimensional.

The Chair: We're hoping to look at that on June 22. We would take all of what we've gotten on this file and kind of narrow it down into a couple of specific areas that have a huge impact on women. As Ms. Bourgeois mentioned, there's the EI segment of it and so on. Hopefully we'll get that done on June 22.

Ms. Smith, quickly.

Mrs. Joy Smith: Thank you.

On the EI issue, I think we have to make sure that we do have the presentations.

Madam Chair, I want to meet with you on this report, just very briefly, after the meeting.

The Chair: Okay, that's super.

Thank you very much.

Meeting adjourned.

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