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The Honourable Hedy Fry

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• (1110)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.)): I shall call the meeting to order.

This morning, as you can see from your agenda, we have officials from the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development.

As you know, witnesses present for ten minutes, so I just wanted to know if each of you will present for ten minutes or are you sharing your time?

Mr. Paul Thompson (Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Skills and Employment Branch, Department of Human Resources and Skills Development): I will be the presenter.

The Chair: You will be the presenter. Thank you, Mr. Thompson.

All right, then we will begin. Mr. Thompson, would you like to introduce your colleagues?

Mr. Paul Thompson: I would.

[Translation]

With me today is Louis Beauséjour, Director General, Employment Insurance Policy, and Allen Sutherland, Director General, Labour Market Policy. My name is Paul Thompson, and I am Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Skills and Employment Branch.

I am pleased to appear before the Standing Committee on the Status of Women to discuss the current Employment Insurance program and the impact this program has on women in Canada, as well as highlight some additional labour market programs.

Today we are faced with the unique challenges raised by an unprecedented global economic downturn. At such a time, programs such as employment insurance are crucial supports for Canadians and their families as they face job losses and significant changes to the labour market.

There are many positive achievements to report at this time regarding the situation of women in the labour force. Over the last 30 years, one of the most dramatic labour market trends has been the increase in women's educational attainment and labour force participation. This places women in a strong competitive position for the future, when we emerge from the downturn and continue the shift to a knowledge-based economy. At the same time, we recognize that continued efforts are required to address the challenges that women face as they seek to prepare for, find, and maintain employment. Gender-based analysis is embedded in our ongoing

analyses of the labour market at both the strategic policy and program levels.

[English]

There is good news to report concerning the educational attainment of women as well as their labour force participation. In the area of post-secondary education, Canadian women have steadily increased their participation and now represent a clear majority, 60%, of all new university graduates.

Canadian women have the highest rate of post-secondary educational attainment among OECD countries. These high levels of educational attainment have positioned the younger generation of Canadian women for success in a globally competitive, knowledge-based economy. At the same time, women's labour market participation and employment rates have risen strongly. Since the early 1990s, the labour force participation gap between men and women has been cut in half and now stands at only eight percentage points.

In 2007, the proportion of Canadian women who were employed, 70%, significantly exceeded both the G-7 average and the OECD average. Similarly, the labour force participation rate for Canadian working-age women was 74.3%, the highest among G-7 countries, and was sixth among OECD countries. As well, since the early 1990s, women's unemployment rates have been below those of men. The rate of unemployment for women is currently 1.8 percentage points below that of men. In 2007, the unemployment rate of 5.7% for Canadian women was comparable to the G-7 average and below the OECD average.

Women still earn less than men in Canada. However, with the increasing education of women, the gender wage gap of full-time employees is narrowing, from 74% in 1995 to 79% in 2005, and this gap is narrowing further for young women with post-secondary education.

I'd like to turn to the current economic context. During the last few months, the global economic situation has clearly deteriorated further and faster than anyone but the most pessimistic forecasters would have predicted. As a result, many Canadians are experiencing difficult times of transition during the current economic slowdown.

It's important to note that past recessions have affected men and women differently. In the recessions of the eighties and nineties, fewer women than men lost their jobs. This was primarily due to a higher representation of men in the goods sectors, such as manufacturing and construction, where most of the job losses actually occurred. Women were and still are more highly represented in the services sector, which traditionally experiences less employment loss during turbulent economic times.

To date, we have seen that the impact of the current downturn has varied by age group and has been felt disproportionately by men. Women account for a minority of net job losses to date in Canada as a result of the downturn, which is consistent with the experiences in both the United States and the European Union.

The International Labour Organization indicates that while the current economic downturn is expected to be more detrimental for females than for males in most regions of the world, it is less obvious whether there will be such a gender impact here in Canada.

[Translation]

Now let's talk about our programming. In addition to Employment Insurance (EI), HRSDC offers a variety of programming to support Canadian men and women, such as Aboriginal Human Resources Development, Targeted Initiative for Older Workers, Trades and Apprenticeship Strategy, and the Opportunities Fund. Through Labour Market Development Agreements with provinces and territories, the federal government also supports a variety of initiatives designed to improve the labour market participation of Canadian men and women. I will begin by discussing the EI program and its impacts on women.

[English]

A deck presentation of the materials has been distributed, which goes into more detail on some of the facts and figures I will be presenting.

First is the question of access to the employment insurance program. Particularly during an economic downturn, employment insurance is the first line of defence. It is an insurance system for the loss of employment income where access is determined by individual work patterns of the contributors and not, of course, by gender specifically.

Currently the EI program divides the country into regions based on similar labour market economic conditions. As unemployment rates increase in a given region, the number of insured hours required to access the program is reduced, and the duration of benefits increases. These requirements are adjusted on a monthly basis to reflect the latest regional economic situations. This allows for a certain measure of automatic stabilization and responsiveness to local job markets.

EI access is high for those who have been contributing to the program. The rate of eligibility has been between 80% and 84% every year since 2000.

Women's access to EI regular benefits is also high. In 2007, 81% of unemployed women who had been paying premiums and were then laid off or quit with just cause were eligible for regular benefits.

The EI program contains many additional features of particular importance to women in light of their broader societal role and the disproportionate burden of unpaid work that they do in the form of caring for children, the elderly, persons with disabilities or chronically ill family members. For example, the fifty weeks of EI maternity and parental benefits plays a critical role in supporting Canadian families by providing temporary income replacement for working parents of newborn or newly adopted children. These benefits help provide flexibility for many women and men to stay home and nurture their child during that all-important first year.

The EI program also provides compassionate benefits to provide some income support to enable workers to take time off to care for a critically ill family member. Women's access to these EI special benefits, which include maternity and parental, is very high. In fact, 97% of women working full-time qualify for these special benefits.

Women accounted for 68% of the special benefit claims and received 84% of the \$3.7 billion paid in special benefits in 2006-2007. The majority of new compassionate care claims were also established by women at 75.1%, and women received 76% of the claims associated with the family supplement.

Beyond these benefits, which support balancing work and family responsibilities, it is recognized that women make up a large portion of the non-standard workforce: contract or self-employed or part-time workers. Among women working part-time, 66% have sufficient hours to be eligible for special benefits such as maternity leave, and part-time workers can access EI regular benefits having worked as little as eight to fourteen hours per week over the course of the previous year.

The government is also creating an expert panel to consult Canadians on how best to provide self-employed Canadians with access to EI, maternity, and parental benefits.

Overall, women are net beneficiaries of the EI program, as they receive more in benefits than they contribute in premiums.

Turning to some of the recent improvements or changes to the EI program, in response to the extraordinary economic circumstances, the government has made a number of adjustments to the program to support Canadians in making transitions during the current economic slowdown. Budget 2009 committed to making available nationally the five weeks of extended EI benefits that have previously been available only through a pilot project in regions with the highest unemployment rates.

This measure also increases the maximum duration of benefits available under the program from 45 to 50 weeks. And it is our estimate that about 400,000 claimants would benefit from these changes during the first year.

Other improvements that would benefit workers affected by the downturn in the economy, regardless of their gender, include extending income support for long-tenured workers that are undertaking training, allowing earlier access to EI benefits for those workers investing in their own training using part or all of their severance pay, improving the work-sharing program by extending the duration and making the agreements more flexible, and freezing EI premiums in 2010 at the levels of 2009 and 2008.

So EI income benefits are one pillar that supports the participation of Canadian women in the labour market, but as mentioned earlier, there are other programs that do this as well. One notable example is the aboriginal human resource development strategy, funded in part through employment insurance, which helps first nations, Métis, and Inuit women prepare for, find, and keep their jobs and offers important supports for women in areas such as child care.

Another area is the targeted initiative for older workers, which provides support to unemployed older workers in communities that are affected by significant downsizing or closures and/or ongoing high unemployment. It does this through programming aimed at improving their employability or integrating them into employment. Budget 2009 committed an additional \$60 million over three years to this program to expand eligibility and to include more cities. Women make up approximately 50% of the participants in this program.

• (1115)

The trades and apprenticeship strategy is another area designed to build and strengthen the infrastructure and capacity of apprenticeship systems across the country, particularly the interprovincial standards red seal program, to respond effectively to labour market requirements for skilled and mobile tradespeople.

According to Statistics Canada's registered apprenticeship information system, the number of women in apprenticeships has been increasing considerably. Since 2001 the number of women registered in apprenticeship programs has increased by 68%, from 16,365 in 2001 to over 27,000 in 2006. In terms of the percentage of the total number of apprentices, female participation has grown from about 9.2% to over 10% in 2006.

Another area of activity is the youth employment strategy, which supports Canadian youth as they move into the world of work. The YES provides young Canadians with access to programs and services to help them gain the skills, knowledge, career information, and work experience they need to find and maintain employment, and to make transitions in the labour market.

In budget 2009 the government committed to provide a one-time grant of \$15 million to the YMCA and the YWCA to place youth, both male and female, in internships in not-for-profit and/or community service organizations, with a focus on environmental projects. This initiative will assist young Canadians and provide them with valuable work experience and earnings to support their further education.

• (1120)

[Translation]

In conclusion, I have outlined the contribution that EI and other programs make in supporting women's participation in the labour market, as well as how they assist women to manage roles they play as caregivers, parents, and workers. While much has been achieved, we must not lose sight of the varied needs of Canadians, particularly during these difficult economic times. In order to maintain these gains, and to improve upon them, the government will continue to support and promote full participation of vulnerable groups, including women, in the labour force.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we will open this up to questions.

Ms. Neville.

Hon. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you for attending this morning.

I wish I had brought some other materials with me, because I'm having a little bit of difficulty reconciling some of what you've told us this morning with some of what we've heard before.

Before I begin my line of questioning, there was a series of e-mails going around last night indicating that the government had extended employment insurance, not just by the five weeks they had announced in the budget, but also by an additional four weeks. Is that the case?

Mr. Paul Thompson: I'm not aware of the specific e-mails.

Hon. Anita Neville: It would be a total of nine additional weeks.

Mr. Paul Thompson: No. The measure announced in the budget was to extend the benefits by five weeks, as I indicated.

Hon. Anita Neville: I realize that.

Mr. Paul Thompson: Yes.

Hon. Anita Neville: But there haven't been an additional four weeks added on to that?

Mr. Paul Thompson: There are no additional—

Hon. Anita Neville: That information was certainly floating around fairly aggressively last night, and I don't know where it emanated from. Okay. Thank you.

I don't quite know where to begin, because I'm having a little bit of difficulty. You've certainly given us an outline of the employment insurance program and all that it covers.

You say you've done a gender-based analysis of programs. Could I ask that we receive it, please? I would find it very helpful if we, as a committee, saw the gender-based analysis you did.

Mr. Paul Thompson: The gender-based analysis is generally integrated into our ongoing labour market analysis. The statistics that I gave you are part of our ongoing assessment of gender issues in the labour market at large. We also embedded into the analysis of our programs one of the documents we prepare regularly with respect to employment insurance, the annual monitoring and assessment report, which includes, interspersed throughout it, various statistics on the access women have to employment insurance.

Hon. Anita Neville: And you have disaggregated figures in it that show women's access to programs both nationally and regionally.

Mr. Paul Thompson: Louis can speak more to some of the details in it, but there are certainly breakdowns of EI use by gender. I can't recall specifically if we have it by gender and region at the same time. That's something we could look at.

• (1125)

Mr. Louis Beauséjour (Director General, Employment Insurance Policy, Department of Human Resources and Skills Development): We don't have all the statistics for all the regions, but we do have some statistics that we do present by regions. I think we never presented both by region and by gender.

Hon. Anita Neville: You don't present it by region and by gender. Are those figures available, and do you put that into your considerations when you're making recommendations and policy?

Mr. Louis Beauséjour: To the extent that we look at the impact the program has?

Hon. Anita Neville: Regionally, by gender.

Mr. Louis Beauséjour: We don't look at it more specifically, region by....

Mr. Paul Thompson: The gender analysis is usually done at a national level unless specific issues arise that there's a particular gender issue in a given region.

Hon. Anita Neville: How do you determine that?

Mr. Paul Thompson: We're doing ongoing analysis from a labour market perspective. Allen Sutherland can speak to the nature of the gender-based analysis that is usually undertaken in the department. We have a unit responsible for that.

Mr. Allen Sutherland (Director General, Labour Market Policy, Department of Human Resources and Skills Development): As Paul mentioned, gender-based analysis is mainstreamed into all our policy developments. For instance, in the labour market we would do a gender-based analysis as part of good public policy assessment. In addition, we have a group that is devoted to gender-based analysis in our strategic planning and research group. They're nested in with our medium-term policy planning as well as some of our cabinet planning.

Then in addition to that, as part of making sure that gender-based analysis is integral to our assessments as a whole, we have a devoted training program. We've had some 219 analysts undertake gender-based analysis. It's a two-day program. It's part of our orientation; it's part of our policy development guide. It's integral to all the work. For us, for instance, just a simple example is getting prepared for this session when we found out late last week that we were going to appear before you. We didn't have to develop new analysis. It was a case of collating some of the work that we'd already done.

Hon. Anita Neville: Except you can't give us the gender-based analysis because you say it's embedded.

Mr. Allen Sutherland: Yes.

Hon. Anita Neville: And yet you also say you don't have disaggregated figures on a regional basis. So how valid can a gender-based analysis be in terms of the impact?

Mr. Paul Thompson: It's just the way the information is displayed in the monitoring and assessment report. The gender issues have been looked at in various ways. We just have to confirm whether it's done on a regional basis and by gender at the same time. It's not something we've displayed in our report. We would have the capability of generating that, though.

Hon. Anita Neville: We know that all women, whether they're full-time or part-time employees, pay into the EI program, but we also know that a part-time employee does not have the same benefits as a full-time employee. Do you look at that? Do you comment on that? Do you make recommendations on that?

Mr. Paul Thompson: I guess there are a number of differences in terms of part-time versus full-time. I don't know if you're referring to the benefit level or the entry requirements into the EI program.

Hon. Anita Neville: Both of which are discriminatory at some level.

Mr. Paul Thompson: They both operate on the insurance principle, so the amount of work experience that you have and the level of earnings are what drives your benefit level. That's a fundamental principle of that.

Hon. Anita Neville: Do you comment on that insurance piece? Do you make recommendations on that insurance piece, on the fact that there should be modifications to it, that there should be some adaptation for it, both on a regional basis and on a gender basis? I understand it's an insurance scheme with parameters that are identified. Do you make recommendations that those parameters should be changed?

Mr. Paul Thompson: One of the areas we've been looking at very closely in the context of the downturn is more on the entry requirements and the duration of benefits, because that's a policy issue that's very much at the forefront these days. That's where quite a bit of regional adjustment happens. I referred to the variable entry requirements. On a monthly basis, as the unemployment situation changes, it's easier to get into the EI program. The number of hours required drops by 35 hours for each 1% increase in the unemployment rate. So the access to EI automatically adjusts with changes in the economic conditions. So that's something we've been looking at.

• (1130)

Hon. Anita Neville: Have you done a gender-based analysis on the impact of these changes?

Mr. Paul Thompson: One of the issues we've looked at is that the economic downturn seems to be affecting men more than women at this point. A disproportionate number of men in the goods and manufacturing sectors are experiencing—

Hon. Anita Neville: But they're full-time employees.

Mr. Allen Sutherland: Perhaps I could comment on that.

So far, if you look at the path of the recession, most of the jobs lost have been full-time.

Hon. Anita Neville: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Quite often, when we have just two presenters and you ask questions and the answers are longer, I let it go. I don't always keep you to seven minutes, because the idea is to get the information and the answers you require. So sometimes I let you go to eight minutes, etc. It works out in the wash, so don't worry about it.

Ms. Deschamps.

[Translation]

Ms. Johanne Deschamps (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Good morning, gentlemen.

I have a lot of questions to ask you about your presentation. I view it from a very different perspective than the presentations of other witnesses we have previously heard from as part of the study. I have a question along the same lines as Ms. Neville, concerning statistics and priorities.

How often do you adjust the rate for each region? How is that done?

Mr. Paul Thompson: It's done on a monthly basis. Statistics Canada monitors the labour market, and we receive their data every month. Then we make changes to program parameters.

Mr. Louis Beauséjour: It's a moving average of the last three months observed.

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: You mentioned the economic crisis. There have been a lot of job losses in sectors mainly occupied by men, but I'd like to stand back a little further. I'm from a single-industry region that depended on the forest industry. We're really feeling the wave that's directly hitting jobs, workers, but also employment sectors occupied by women, particularly the service sector. There is an impact: working hours are being cut back, there is

a deep economic slowdown. I wanted to know how you take into account, in the regions, job losses among men, jobs that women occupy in the service sector and the fact that there is a crisis. There is an exodus. People are heading to the major centres and joining the labour force.

I also want to go back to the program that was established to assist older workers leaving their jobs. Where I'm from, two out of 1,500 workers managed to qualify for that program. I wonder whether the program really meets the expectations of workers in my region who have held a job for 40 or 50 years. They won't be able to retrain; there are no other industries.

Mr. Paul Thompson: As regards the need to target older workers, this is a program that is offered in close cooperation with the provinces. They suggest the priorities and specific projects. There are eligibility criteria. Participants are usually over 55 years of age, but that's not rigid, it's not strict; there is a little flexibility. As I mentioned, approximately 50% of program participants are women, and there is an increase in funding as well. I imagine there will be better access in future with greater flexibility and more funding for the program.

As regards the other aspects of employment insurance—

Mr. Louis Beauséjour: Other programs also assist single-industry communities. There are the transition funds for the communities, among other things, which are administered in close cooperation with the provinces, I believe. Then there is the Strategic Training and Transition Fund, implemented under the budget, that will also provide funding for training people, those who qualify for employment insurance and those who do not. Then they'll be able to get money for training and to be directed to other industries and be prepared for when the economic situation improves. They'll be better prepared to return to the labour market at that time.

• (1135)

Mr. Paul Thompson: I'd like to add that this point is very important. The rules are very flexible. This isn't limited to employment insurance eligibility. It's much more flexible to make it possible to accept self-employed workers, and so on.

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: We on the committee heard from Mr. Richard Shillington, a statistician and mathematician by training. I don't know whether that name rings a bell for you. He came to make a presentation and painted a somewhat more sombre picture of the system in its present form. He emphasized some things and I entirely agree with him because I'm seeing them in my region. I'm experiencing them back home. You're presenting a framework that follows from a national plan, with figures relating to the number of applications. That's different, and I don't recognize my region. I'm not the only person in this case. You're presenting us with an overall picture, but it's somewhat more the picture of the major centres. I don't sense that the problems the regions are currently experiencing are clearly defined.

Mr. Paul Thompson: You're talking about eligibility for employment insurance or other programs?

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: Even though you're saying that the rate and variation are reviewed periodically, I believe the statistics presented don't reflect the current reality of unemployment in my community. It's much higher. In my opinion, there is an imbalance that I find discriminatory. It has to be made more accessible to more people, particularly since we are in economic distress. That's my comment: there isn't enough sensitivity.

Mr. Paul Thompson: I don't know what the question is; that's an observation. The figures give an indication of the eligibility situation. There have been a lot of regular changes since October: 19 regions have had eligibility changes.

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: Is it possible to know how many people have their applications rejected?

Mr. Paul Thompson: How many rejections there are?

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: Their applications are rejected either because they do not meet the standards or because they aren't eligible. There are all kinds of reasons. How many people in a given region apply for benefits and are rejected for one reason or another?

[English]

The Chair: This is your last question, so maybe you can make your answer short.

Mr. Paul Thompson: I think my answer would be a long one, unfortunately, because access to EI can be a complicated subject.

[Translation]

Some people aren't eligible for a number of reasons. One of those reasons is that a number of those people do not contribute to the program. Nearly 30% of unemployed workers don't contribute to employment insurance. In that case, they aren't eligible for benefits. Another 16% aren't eligible because of their job separation. It might have been a voluntary leaving or something like that.

Ms. Johanne Deschamps: Can we get some figures? These people file a claim and register.

[English]

The Chair: You'll have to wrap that up now. Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Paul Thompson: It's hard to get specific figures on people who don't receive benefits because a number of them don't file claims.

Mr. Louis Beauséjour: Among the unemployed workers—

• (1140)

[English]

The Chair: Monsieur Beauséjour, perhaps we can give that answer some other time, in another round.

Mr. Louis Beauséjour: Okay.

The Chair: I now have to go to Ms. Davidson.

Mrs. Patricia Davidson (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you very much for presenting here today. We've heard some interesting comments and clarifications on some of the things we've heard before when other witnesses were discussing EI and the program in general.

It's encouraging to see the statistics you've presented showing an increase in women in the post-secondary field, and the proportion of Canadian women employed exceeding the G-7 average. Those are all extremely good things that Canada needs to be proud of. Women's unemployment rates have been below those of men since the early 1990s, and I don't think that is always recognized. So I thank you for pointing those things out.

However, you've said that women still earn less than men in Canada, and it's important we keep that in mind. There's also the fact that the current downturn has been felt more by men than by women. You've addressed that to a certain extent by saying that most of the unemployment to this point has been in full-time positions. That certainly does make a difference.

We have a lot of things already in place that assist and favour women, such as maternity benefits and compassionate leave. But are there things in the action plan that's been put forward that will proportionately favour women?

Mr. Paul Thompson: A number of the measures are not gender-specific, so we expect there would be significant benefits for women from them.

One I would point to that has particular importance for women is the commitment the government made to establish a panel to look at self-employed individuals and their eligibility for parental and maternity benefits. That can be a fairly complex issue that will require a bit of consultation because of the different nature of self-employment, the different circumstances people find themselves in, and the different needs of this population. So the idea of establishing a panel to look at the nature of that program is one of the commitments I would note in particular.

On some of the other measures, insofar as their concerns about access to employment insurance, I would again point to the program that Louis Beauséjour spoke to—the strategic training and transition fund that the government has established and is administered by provinces—with \$500 million over two years. It has none of the eligibility limitations of EI-based training. That's one area that's been made more flexible, and provinces can use it in that manner.

Mr. Louis Beauséjour: If we look at part-time workers versus full-time workers, we know that people working part-time qualify for fewer weeks than full-time workers. If you look at what the part-time worker is qualified for, the proportion is bigger—it is five weeks more for the 40 minimum. People who have the minimum hours to qualify now only get 14 weeks. In providing five more weeks for all workers they will get 19 weeks. This is more significant in terms of proportion than if they qualified with more hours.

Mr. Allen Sutherland: You mentioned the government's action plan in general. There are certainly some things outside of HRSD that also benefit women, particularly vulnerable women. There's the commitment to the working income-tax benefit. They increased it to some \$580 million. That's important, as well as the increase to the national child benefit supplement. That helps vulnerable women, as does some of the investments in social housing—some \$2 billion.

Mrs. Patricia Davidson: Thank you.

I'd like to give the rest of my time to Madame Boucher, please.

• (1145)

[Translation]

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher (Beauport—Limoilou, CPC): Good morning, gentlemen. Thank you for being here today to talk to us about employment insurance. A number of people have given us contradictory information, and the question is becoming a bit complex.

Some say that 40% of unemployed persons have access to employment insurance, whereas the percentage you've just cited is 82%. Can you give us some details?

[English]

Mr. Paul Thompson: I will ask Louis.

[Translation]

Mr. Louis Beauséjour: The information comes to us from an annual survey by Statistics Canada. Four times a year, that department asks unemployed workers whether they are receiving benefits and, if not, why they are not receiving them.

Nearly 30% of unemployed persons have not contributed to the employment insurance program. These may be people who haven't worked at all over the previous 12 months or self-employed workers. Then, approximately 16% of people have left their jobs without a valid reason or to resume their education. They have contributed to the program but are automatically disqualified because of their behaviour. Lastly, 10% do not qualify because they have not accumulated enough hours.

Consequently, 82% of people who have contributed to employment insurance are eligible.

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: You say that 10% of people leave their jobs for no valid reason or to resume their education. If I decide to leave my job because I no longer feel like working, that's not a valid reason. I have to have a valid reason, whether it's a health problem or whatever, in order to have access to employment insurance.

Mr. Louis Beauséjour: You would normally be entitled to—

Mrs. Sylvie Boucher: I would be entitled to something else.

Mr. Louis Beauséjour: Exactly. Employment insurance offers up to 15 weeks of benefits to people who are sick. There are other reasons, such as when a person joins his or her spouse who has been relocated. Similarly, someone who is harassed on the job and who can prove it could be eligible.

[English]

The Chair: Ms. Mathysen.

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Thank you, Madame Chair.

I want to thank you for coming.

I have a number of questions. I want you to understand that I have no wish to shoot the messenger, but I'm very concerned about some of the policies I've seen in place. I know you don't make policy, but I'm very concerned and I'm going to pursue my questioning in terms of the policies in place.

Ms. Davidson referred to the action plan. We haven't seen the action plan. Have you seen the action plan we've been promised with regard to Status of Women Canada?

Mr. Paul Thompson: I'm sorry, our reference was to Budget 2009, Canada's economic action plan.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Oh, okay.

You also talked about the panel, the task force that's been established with regard to extending EI to the self-employed. What is the status of that panel? Where are they in terms of their recommendations? When can we expect to see the recommendations in place?

Mr. Paul Thompson: The intention to create the panel was announced in the budget. There has not yet been a further announcement on the composition of that panel or the timelines. That announcement will be coming in the not too distant future.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: I think we do need that.

You made reference to this discrepancy in regard to the access to employment insurance benefits. In the information you provided you said that 97% of women working full-time qualify for special benefits. One of the really significant problems we have here is the fact that women's lives are very often chaotic. They're caregivers, raising children, sometimes they're victims of abuse, and sometimes they're providing support to elderly parents. They're part-time workers, contract workers, so they're falling between the cracks; they are not benefiting.

You also mentioned the supplementary incomes that are available. On page 110 of the budget, the specific reference was to the Canada child tax benefit, and I think this page also refers to the national child benefit supplement. Families making less than \$20,000 receive nothing in 2009, nothing additional in regard to these benefits—nothing. It would seem that these are the very people who are most negatively impacted by some of the other statistics that we have here.

For example, reference was made to the fact that benefits are proportional: if you work full-time you're going to get more than if you worked part-time—if you qualify at all for benefits. But we see here, in a chart that was provided by Mr. Shillington, or one of the groups we saw last week, that actual benefits in terms of hard dollars and cents have actually declined over the years. The peak was in about 1994, but they have actually declined, despite the fact that the cost of living goes up, the cost of educating our kids goes up.

All of these discrepancies are very, very troubling. I'm wondering, do you look at these hard figures instead of looking at percentages, and how do you get out of really analyzing.... Do you look at the fact that the real amounts have actually gone down, and the fact that part-timers and women on contract are negatively impacted by the current public policy? I know that's a hard question.

• (1150)

Mr. Paul Thompson: We certainly look at a number of issues. I haven't had the opportunity to look at the presentation you're referring to, but with access to employment insurance for part-time workers, as noted in the remarks, it depends on the region you live in. So there are some regions with a lower entry requirement, and it could be as little as eight hours per week over the course of a year. In an area of very high unemployment, eight hours per week for a year would ensure access to EI. That goes up to about 14 weeks in the areas of lowest unemployment. So that's the range of hours required to get into the EI program. And as noted, it's one of the fundamental principles of EI that the benefit you're entitled to is based on the income you've earned during that employment, since it's insuring the actual earnings you had. So the benefit level tracks the actual amount of earnings you had.

I would note that there is a built-in feature that raises the level of benefit, though. The maximum insurable earnings increases on an annual basis, which is the basis on which benefits are established, and it's gone up. It was \$39,000 and it's now in the \$42,000 range. That's the amount of earnings that are considered insurable, and the benefits grow in accordance with that level.

These are the types of issues we look at pretty closely.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Do you have statistics on EI eligibility for aboriginal, immigrant, or disabled women?

Mr. Louis Beauséjour: No. The information we have in terms of trying to figure out the eligibility is based on the surveys done by Statistics Canada, and we don't have all the details. We can sometimes get some details by province, and over time we can break it down by gender. The sample size is small, and I don't remember seeing any statistics that indicate whether they are immigrants or not. I don't remember seeing that.

• (1155)

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Would that be helpful, inasmuch as these are the very people who are most vulnerable, the very people we should be concerned about providing income support to? Would that make sense to have those stats, that information?

The Chair: This will be your last question, Ms. Mathysen.

Mr. Paul Thompson: That would be a question of whether Statistics Canada is able to collect that information, the costs associated with it, and the sample size needed to do that. I'm not really in a position to answer whether it's possible to gather that information.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: I meant would that be helpful information in terms of developing the kind of policy.... Clearly HRSDC wants to provide something that works, that meets the needs of people. We're talking about real people; we're not talking about statistics.

Mr. Paul Thompson: Certainly that would be helpful information; I just don't know the complexity associated with gathering it.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Thompson.

I would like to ask the witnesses a simple question.

We heard from Statistics Canada that they could collect particular data, such as the data Ms. Mathysen and Ms. Neville mentioned, but that they aren't asked to collect that data. I think what this committee is trying to get to the nub of is that you cannot do good gender-based analysis if you don't have disaggregated data, not merely between men and women, but if we're talking about women, let's say, women by region, women by employability, self-employability, etc. I think because women have children or because women have children and an elderly parent they may not be able to work more than part-time, and they don't ever qualify. They're always behind the eight ball, because by the very nature of being a woman they often meet these challenges.

It might be helpful if some of that information could be collected. It would help to look at, for instance, in the case of weeks of work or hours of work, which one would be the better way to judge and whether there should be a built-in ability to deal with that difference.

I think we would like to leave you with the concept of that data that isn't there. We cannot answer some of the questions because the data isn't there. Maybe the collecting of that data might be very interesting, if you can do that in the future.

Thank you very much for coming.

We'll suspend for a minute or two.

• (1155)

_____ (Pause) _____

• (1200)

The Chair: Perhaps we should begin.

Mrs. Lise Zarac (LaSalle—Émard, Lib.): The time passed so quickly, but I had some questions I would have liked to ask. May I submit them in written form?

The Chair: Yes, you can.

Now, I want to welcome Lucya Spencer, who is the executive director of Immigrant Women Services Ottawa, but used to be the executive director for the National Organization of Immigrant and Visible Minority Women of Canada. She has a huge wealth of information.

And we have now an individual who is going to share personal experiences with us. This is Athina Ngjelina—is that the right pronunciation?

Ms. Athina Ngjelina (As an Individual): Yes, it is.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

You each have ten minutes, and then we'll open it up for questions. If you could do it in under ten minutes, we would be very pleased, but you have ten minutes.

We'll start with Ms. Spencer.

Ms. Lucia Spencer (Executive Director, Immigrant Women Services Ottawa, Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants): Thank you very much, Honourable Hedy Fry.

I have one small correction. I was the president of the National Organization of Immigrant and Visible Minority Women of Canada

The Chair: Not the executive director.

Ms. Lucia Spencer: —and not the executive director.

The Chair: I stand corrected, Ms. Spencer.

Ms. Lucia Spencer: Good.

It is a privilege to be here with you this morning. As you've heard, I'm representing the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, located in Toronto. Unfortunately, no one could get here quickly, so here I am, and I'll try to represent them as best as I can.

The Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants is an autonomous umbrella body that has been around since 1978. This organization is made up of 177 agencies across Ontario. Many of these agencies provide services to immigrants and visible minority individuals, and the agency has acted as a collective voice for the sector for more 30 years.

To address the particular issue before us, what we have found and what I'm presenting here is based on information that we have gathered from our member agencies.

The biggest challenges that OCASI member agencies encounter in assisting immigrants and refugees to settle and integrate are labour market integration and income security. These two are not unconnected. A stable job and a liveable income are critically important to effective settlement and integration.

Equally important is adequate and effective recourse, in the event someone becomes unemployed, or loses access to a liveable income obtained through other means, such as family sponsorship.

OCASI member agencies are particularly concerned about the experience of immigrant and refugee women, particularly women from racialized communities, because these women are significantly disadvantaged in the labour market and in accessing services and whatever recourse they might have when things just don't work out.

The Colour of Poverty campaign is a campaign of a group of individuals and organizations in Ontario who have been addressing the issue of poverty over the last year or two. OCASI is a founding member of that organization and a part of the leadership, and it has done extensive research supporting the findings of OCASI member agencies.

The Colour of Poverty income fact sheet describes the situation that immigrant and refugee women, particular those from racialized communities, face in the labour market. According to the Colour of Poverty fact sheet, a growing number of immigrants and women “are

employed in part-time and unstable work. This means they do not have employment insurance, even though they pay into the EI fund”.

Statistics Canada has documented the existence of the troubling income gap between men and women in Canada. It has also documented the growing income gap between racialized and non-racialized residents of Canada. Citing census data from Statistics Canada, the National Working Group on Women and Housing reports that “35% of all women who immigrated to Canada between 1991 and 2000 live in poverty and 37% of all racialized women live in poverty.

In our country, economic restructuring has impacted many women. Even those who are highly skilled and well educated have found themselves accepting part-time or contract work just to survive. Immigrants, particularly women and women from racialized communities, are over-represented in contingent work. The rise of contingent work and the growing presence of the most disadvantaged workers in this sector is widely documented. Immigrants and refugees experience massive systemic barriers to labour market integration, including racism and discrimination. Contingent work, most often work obtained through a temporary help agency, presents a practical but harsh option to become and remain employed.

● (1205)

OCASI member agencies have said that most clients get their first jobs in Canada through temporary agencies. Clients remain in temp work for many years, often up to and beyond ten years. Often they work at more than one job at the same time. They are rarely employed in a job that allows them to use their skills and qualifications, particularly those that made them desirable candidates for immigration to Canada, which results in them becoming what we call de-skilled immigrants.

Most immigrants, including immigrant women, pay EI premiums. Many clients have said that the premium is deducted from the cheque by the temporary agency or other employers. However, given the contingent nature of the work—temporary, part-time, on-call, or piece work, just to mention a few—most immigrants, and most immigrant women, who are overrepresented in these types of work situations, rarely, if ever, qualify for employment insurance benefits.

A report released by the Canadian Labour Congress about six years ago indicated that in Canada we're seeing a drop in EI benefits to Canadian women. In Ontario, only 27% of workers qualify for employment insurance. The other 73% cannot access benefits in the event of job loss or for maternity, parental, or compassionate leave. It is deeply troubling that the majority of immigrant women who pay into the EI fund cannot access benefits. Neither can they access training opportunities that are tied to EI eligibility.

So what is the current and future impact on immigrant and refugee women? "Time For A Fair Deal", a report of the task force for modernizing income security for working-age adults, highlights the fact that income security in Ontario does not work due to the fact that there have not been fundamental changes to it since the 1960s. Immigrant women who have paid into EI but don't qualify have no recourse other than our increasingly tattered social safety net. Sponsored immigrants who turn to social assistance face serious consequences that can impact on the sponsor. Specifically, there may be a demand from the government to repay benefits, or they could be barred from the possibility of future sponsorship undertaken, even after the individual's economic situation has improved.

In the absence of any form of meaningful skills-training opportunities that would lead to labour market reintegration, the lack of access to EI-funded training has a particularly harsh impact on immigrant women. These systemic barriers are severely disadvantaging immigrant women, locating them and their families forever in a subordinate position. The impact is particularly harsh on lone parent households and will be felt by more than one generation in that family.

The lack of a safety net for sole-parenting immigrant women means a lack of access to adequate housing, post-secondary education, health benefits, and full security for them and their dependents. In the case of elder care, this can mean lack of services that help to maintain health and well-being. In the case of the children, it could mean lack of funds for child care, extracurricular paid recreational activities, or post-secondary education.

These realities are especially alarming now, when we are in the midst of a recession. We need the federal government to act immediately to fix the EI program but also to invest in measures that would include labour market integration opportunities for immigrant women and would provide income security, if not improve income security.

• (1210)

In June 2006, the Standing Committee on the Status of Women released its report entitled "Improving the Economic Security of Women: Time to Act". In this report, they presented 21 recommendations to the government. I would just like to pause at this moment to highlight two of those recommendations, recommendations 13 and 15. Recommendation 13 states:

The Committee recommends that the federal government change the eligibility criteria under the Employment Insurance Act to increase access to benefits to persons in part-time or part-year work.

Recommendation 15 states:

The Committee recommends that the federal government amend the Employment Insurance Act to allow self-employed persons to opt into the special benefits programs under the Employment Insurance (EI) program, such as maternity and parental benefits and the Compassionate Care Benefit.

OCASI calls on the committee—you—to reintroduce these recommendations. The next few years are going to be most challenging for OCASI members as they attempt to help clients survive the recession. Our members cannot do this alone. The crisis is already upon us, and we urge the government to act quickly.

Thank you.

The Chair: That's great.

Thank you.

Ms. Ngjelina.

Ms. Athina Ngjelina: I must first say that as grateful as I am for being here today, I am very emotional, and I am very nervous, so forgive me, please. I must say first that I truly appreciate all of you here and the work you're doing.

I heard many times "the woman, the woman," and I am the woman, and I am the mother. I want you to forgive me today, because this is one of the greatest days of my life, because I have the chance to bring out the voice of the mother and the woman who lived without EI benefits for four years.

As a very young child, I had the true benefits of love and care and guidance of exceptional parents, who taught me that education will always open my path. They taught me how to learn from the teaching of the greatest minds of humanity from the ancient time to the modern time. I faced political discrimination since a very young age, and I know how it feels not to have the freedom of speech, the freedom to learn. I was refused three times the opportunity to have good schooling, but with my parents' support I made it. We all talk about the importance of the early years, what a difference the early years make to our children, and how important and significant our investment in those first years of life is. I do believe that those first years of my life and my love and passion and dedication and determination to give my son a better future have got me here today in front of you. I thank you very much for giving me this opportunity.

It was about ten years ago that Canada would be my home, and I never will be able to articulate how it feels to be free, with no fears and not running for my life. I was reminded all my life that I always could build something from nothing, if only I could be a free citizen, a respected one, and could be given opportunity to live in a democratic place. I worked for my first three years in four different restaurants as a waitress. It was very difficult to balance the schedule so I could do a few hours in each one of them, but it was good enough to help me learn quite a bit of the language, and how things worked in my new home, and to make me self-sufficient to support myself, and even make a little bit of savings, because I have learned how to live with very little.

I took my savings, and I opened a business with a very minimal investment. It took very long hours, but it didn't seem that long at the time. It took a lot of physical work to build a business with no money for advertisement, for equipment, for almost anything. I was very proud and very happy that I could build something from nothing. Afterwards, I learned that treating each one of my guests as a very special person was the success of my business.

• (1215)

I was blessed to have a wonderful son in the second year of my business. I did not have an opportunity to have maternity leave. I did not have much money to have a lot of employees and bookkeepers and all that is needed to run a business.

I returned to work three weeks after having a C-section and I still was very happy. About a year later my precious child started losing his words and the first signs of panic came. I am not very comfortable telling you that I have lived in panic for the last four years. But I am very comfortable telling you that I have learned how to live one day at a time and one hour at a time, and I hang on to the hope that one day someone representing the government will hear me—not just me, because I truly believe my voice represents a lot of mothers like me—and will make so much needed change by giving access to some kind of help.

I have knocked on all the doors, and I am very happy and grateful to my God that I have found the strength, on my son's behalf, to advocate and try to knock on all the doors that I can to find the help. There is not much available out there.

But I am not angry. I am desperate, but I am hopeful.

I did not have a day off. I did not have a sick day for all those years. I was working in the beginning to build a dream, to build a better life, and now I am working full-time and overtime every day to help my son, little by little, to break down the information and to build a little communication skill. I know that no one can make it alone and I cannot make it alone also, nor can my son.

At the end of the day, the bills need to be paid. Having a special needs child right away made me a special mother. Besides severe autism, my son has a lot of other issues related to his immune system. I have spent countless nights in an emergency room chair.

I am very sorry if this is not something that you wish to hear today, but I am very grateful that you are listening to me.

I urge you to please do something. Use any power that you have and provide something for fathers and mothers like me, and for children like my child.

I have worked very hard. I truly have worked very hard and I believe I deserve some support. I do not really have a place to go and I just want to hope that someone will give me another opportunity. I hope someone here knows what autism is, but I know what living with it is.

Give me another opportunity to talk to the experts, because I have to be the speech pathologist, the occupational therapist, the physiotherapist, and the service coordinator.

•(1220)

I have to do the laundry. I have to blend the food. The sensory issues are very complex. My son's disorder is very complex and it requires a very complex intervention.

I want to hope that some of you today will join me and make a difference, not only for the EI contribution. It could be something else that I'm not aware of; I don't have that commodity any more, not even watching the news. I am a full-time caregiver.

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

Now we begin with our questions.

Ms. Zarac.

•(1225)

Mrs. Lise Zarac: Thank you, Madam Chairman.

Thank you for your very touching testimony, Mrs. Ngjelina.

[Translation]

First you introduced yourself as a woman, but also, second, as a mother. The one can't be detached from the other. Most women are mothers, and they must not be penalized for that. The government of Canada must be seen as a government that recognizes that women bear children and that, to a large degree, they are responsible for caring for them. Both Ms. Spencer and Ms. Ngjelina say that immigrant women are at a disadvantage with respect to employment insurance, mainly because they hold temporary jobs when they arrive in the country and are not considered as re-entering the job market.

Ms. Spencer, you talked about the report entitled Improving the Economic Security of Women: Time to Act and about Recommendation 13, which concerns employment insurance criteria. What criteria should be changed to improve the plight of immigrant women?

[English]

Ms. Lucy Spencer: As we spoke about earlier, they're working part-time and contributing to the system, but they're not getting anything out of the system, so OCASI is calling for changes to the system that will allow women to claim.

As Athina just said, she works so many jobs. She's speaking for thousands of immigrant women in this country who are working triple days in order to succeed and who are contributing to but not getting anything out of the system. Even though they're sick, even though they're on parental leave, or even if they're looking after their kids, they have nothing whatsoever to fall back on.

We want to see some change in the system that would allow these individuals to claim something when such situations happen in their lives.

Mrs. Lise Zarac: Can you be more specific? What criteria would you like to see?

Ms. Lucy Spencer: I'm speaking for myself now, because OCASI did not give me permission to do this. What I would like to see is criteria put in place such that after women have worked a certain number of days, hours, or weeks, they would have access to EI, to the employment system. I think I heard the previous speaker talk about an additional five days or something like that, which would allow women to have that access. That is one of the things.

There should be no barriers whatsoever given the fact that these women have contributed and also recognizing that they do have skills. They bring a lot of skills into this country, but those skills are not utilized, and they're taking whatever they can get in order to help themselves integrate into society.

Why do we put up these artificial barriers when their lives change? That's the very point when they really need some help. We want to see criteria that will allow them to have access to the system.

[Translation]

Mrs. Lise Zarac: I agree with you. Sixty per cent of university graduates are women, and yet there is still a 19% wage gap between women and men. Women earn lower wages than men, which has a direct impact on employment insurance benefits. Women are penalized from the outset.

You also talked about returning to the labour market. As an immigrant, what could facilitate your job market entry?

[English]

The Chair: Before you answer that, Lucya, we're starting all over again with the new set of witnesses, so you do have three minutes.

Mrs. Lise Zarac: Thank you.

Ms. Lucya Spencer: Hard taskmaster.

One of the things you mentioned earlier was the pay, that women earn far less than men. One of the things we have been working for over a number of years in this country—and when I say “we”, I'm referring to the women's movement—is equal pay for work of equal value for the women in this country.

We have seen some incentives. We have seen some changes, but they're not enough. As long as women are at the bottom of the totem pole, we'll always have a problem in this country. So we need to improve that.

We need to improve the minimum wage. What is it now? Seven dollars or six something? What can that buy in today's economy?

So we need to see these changes put in place to allow women to earn the type of income they require to really integrate and to really take their place in society.

• (1230)

Mrs. Lise Zarac: Do I still have time?

[Translation]

Employment insurance offers training programs to help people enter the labour market. In your opinion, what changes to training would help improve the plight of immigrant women?

[English]

Ms. Lucya Spencer: Yes, there is another recommendation in the standing committee's report on income security, which I didn't mention, and I think it's recommendation 3, which talked about the eligibility criteria for access to LINC training. I think we need to re-look at that, we really need to rethink that, to ensure that women are not barred from participating in some of these training programs. Because of the eligibility criteria barrier placed there, many women who would really like to access these programs are denied that opportunity.

Mrs. Lise Zarac: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

My goodness, Ms. Demers, you have at least 20 seconds left.

[Translation]

Ms. Nicole Demers (Laval, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you very much, Ms. Spencer.

Thank you, Ms. Ngjelina. I have a lot of sympathy for you. I have a 38-year-old son who is a hemophiliac. When I had him, there weren't any services for the parents of hemophiliac children either, and it was considered more serious than it is today. I sympathize with you a great deal and I thank you for your courage in coming and presenting that to strangers, in front of strangers, not knowing what you could get out of it. Unfortunately, I'm afraid that it will be quite little, but, on the other hand, I believe that every time a woman takes a step forward, every time a woman who has a need dares to express it, dares to say it to people who represent her in government, she may have a chance to open an ear or a heart. I believe that because I am a very confident woman.

I previously worked a great deal with immigrant women. I congratulate you all the more for all the work you are doing, Ms. Spencer.

Ms. Ngjelina, I would like to know what has happened to your business since you had your son and discovered that he is autistic. In addition, if you don't have a job, perhaps you are eligible for the new program for women who have been unemployed or out of the job market for a number of years and who need to requalify in order to find a job. That's part of the new employment insurance program. Ms. Boucher could perhaps give you some additional information on that; she is the parliamentary secretary for Status of Women.

As regards your son, Ms. Ngjelina, I don't know what services you can find, but there is no doubt an organization for natural caregivers. Do you belong to that kind of organization? If not, we can no doubt give you contact information to help you find support. There is also an organization for autistic persons. We can give you the references so that you can find support in that area as well. You deserve all our sympathy, but also all our recognition for everything you are doing. Thank you very much for being here.

Ms. Spencer, I would like to know one thing. We've made recommendations regarding immigrant women who work as household workers under the Live-in Caregiver Program, which more particularly serves women from the Philippines. These women also have a lot of problems as a result of the situation with which you are no doubt familiar. They must live at the home of their employer for two years before they can obtain documents legalizing their residence and before they can look for another job. As a result, some women experience situations of abuse because they have to live in the same place for two years. Do you know whether the situation has improved?

In yesterday's newspapers—this is beginning to come out—it was reported that the economic crisis is currently affecting immigrant women more than women in other communities. I would like to hear what you have to say on that as well. Thank you.

• (1235)

[English]

Ms. Lucya Spencer: I'm not too clear on the last part of your question. Are you asking if live-in caregivers are experiencing greater problems or difficulties because of the EI situation?

[Translation]

Ms. Nicole Demers: No, Ms. Spencer. Yesterday the papers reported that immigrant women are currently being hit harder by the economic crisis. I wasn't talking about immigrant women who work under the Live-in Caregiver Program; that's another component. I'm asking you whether the status of those women has improved, but also to tell us about the situation of immigrant women who have jobs other than as domestic workers.

[English]

Ms. Lucya Spencer: Has their situation improved? No. And I'm saying no because, as I said earlier, a lot of our information comes from the clientele we see in the various agencies.

I don't know how OCASI gathered the information, but my understanding is that there was a discussion among some agency members, and the reports coming back to the workers seeing and hearing from the clientele they serve are that many of the women are still experiencing difficulties in accessing EI programs. There may be situations where others have been successful in finding employment, or longer-term employment, but the numbers are so minuscule they're not even worth talking about. The majority of individuals are still having difficulties; hence, we haven't really seen the type of improvement that we would like to see for women in this country, especially racialized women.

[Translation]

Ms. Nicole Demers: Ms. Ngjelina, can you give me some more information on your business?

[English]

Ms. Athina Ngjelina: For one of them, I just let it go. The other one I sold. I managed to have two of them. I sold it for a very minimum amount of money.

I want to let you know that I have an official education of 19 years. I am an agricultural engineer. I was working on my PhD in genetic engineering. I am very knowledgeable about my son's disorder, and I am very grateful that I am able to help my son every day, but I wanted to bring the voice for the other mothers who don't have enough education and who don't know. They desperately want to help, but they don't know how to help.

The other thing is that I didn't have much savings to live on. If there were an EI support, I wouldn't have to exhaust my business credit line. I don't know how to pay that one. I don't have any income to pay my bills. I had the gas cut off for a week. No one here can imagine what it is like to have that happen. I want to say that I wish I had eloquence and comfort with the language because it has made me handicapped. At the same time, I really see how my son feels, how it feels when you are not able to talk. I'm so proud of the lady beside me who can talk on my behalf and for many other people here. I am so sad I cannot articulate it, but I can if there are programs available to support me. I'm sure I could find a job. I'm sure I could open a business again tomorrow.

The other thing is I want to let you know that when I heard people before complaining about taxes—our taxes are too high of course—but I truly have a great pleasure paying the taxes because I do believe what Gandhi used to say that you must be the change you wish to see in the world. I have been taught this since I was a very little girl. I

always wanted to be the change that I want to see in the world. I paid revenue bills and all my obligations as a citizen literally with great pleasure, and I never complained about it. I have investments because I believe in the contribution that we make to our society, to our country. But I do not understand who made the decision to say to me, “Yes, you're welcome. You work. You build. You invest. But when your child is sick, you are penniless.” You can go from church to church for five diapers at a time. It's very humiliating, Madame, but I didn't feel humiliated because my mother instincts, my mother heart have driven me those last four years. All I wanted was for Llorian to have his diaper on, because my son has constant diarrhea, and he has had a chronic ear infection for more than two years. That's what I wanted.

I have lived on food bank soups for more than a year, and I have a serious iron deficiency. Despite taking a supplement, my body is not producing it. It is not working. I have a lot of health problems, but if I am given the right help to just start, just move a little bit from this hole that I am in, of course I will be able again to give to my society. I have employed a lot of people in my past. I am very proud, and very happy that I did that. I don't want that to turn into sadness, but I think I do deserve a little bit better.

• (1240)

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

Now I will move on to Mrs. McLeod.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I will be sharing my time with Ms. Hoeppner.

First of all, I would certainly like to congratulate you, Ms. Ngjelina, for the great courage you've shown in coming and sharing your story.

Ms. Athina Ngjelina: It's for my son's sake.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: I'm sure it's not easy. It's certainly a very powerful story. Thank you for showing that courage.

There are a few things that you said that particularly tweaked my interest. The first thing is that we are currently in a recession, but we need to be looking at this study as being long term. Yes, we have a recession and we have issues in terms of EI and jobs, but long term we know we have baby boomers retiring, we're going to have many skills shortages. I guess what I'm wanting to focus on is the root cause as we head towards this shortage of people.

You say that you absolutely want the opportunity to contribute your skills, your education. We have many immigrant women who have tremendous education skills. I know that the government has committed significant dollars in terms of supporting that foreign credential review process. I guess I would really be interested in hearing from Ms. Spencer on how she perceives that actually supporting immigrant women—especially as we get towards baby boomer retirement—and even preventing people from needing the EI system.

Ms. Lucya Spencer: One of the things, and I think I mentioned it earlier, is that there are some immigrant women who come into the country where their skills, their education, etc., are part of that whole processing system. However, when they get here, they can't find employment on their own. Some of them are willing; as Athina said, she had two businesses. There are many women here who just want the support that will allow them to launch out on their own and create not only the opportunity for themselves, but opportunity for others, because you hire individuals. There are some women who come to us and say, "I really want to start something. I don't want to go work for anybody. I have a skill, I have some knowledge, all I need is the financial support that will allow me to move forward and start something on my own." I think that is what a lot of women are asking for, some kind of support that will help them move forward, that will help them stand on their two feet, because they need that help.

I'd like to talk about the agency I work for. There are two programs: one is called "job search workshops", which helps women who are job-ready to access the labour market; the other one is called "pre-employment", and that is for the ones who are not quite job-ready. They are highly skilled, are highly educated, but want to learn a bit more about how to build their own self-esteem, how to move forward. Those programs are always packed. When you look at the faces of these women when they come to us, we're saying we wish we could do something more, we wish the government could really help a bit more. Because many women want to start something. They have something they want to contribute to Canada, but they just need that push that would help them.

• (1245)

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Candice Hoepfner.

Ms. Candice Hoepfner (Portage—Lisgar, CPC): Thank you very much.

I want to thank you both for being here.

I want to say to Ms. Ngjelina that I think some of the challenges this committee has, and I'll just be frank with you.... We are studying the EI program, and I think the challenges that you've presented and the story that you shared with us encompasses so much. It encompasses autism and the strategy to help parents across this country with autism. You're addressing other social programs to assist parents who are in the same situation. It's definitely a challenge for this government, and I think for all of us, to find ways that the EI program can best serve self-employed individuals.

I want to thank you for bringing this forward. And I do want to tell you that the good news—and unfortunately it's too late for you, because you're already experiencing this—is that we are looking at providing maternal benefits to self-employed individuals. Part of that

process, though, is that you have to pay in. EI is an insurance program. So you have to pay in and then you can receive some of the benefits. But I really want to thank you for sharing your story. I look forward to us solving some of these issues, even on a broader spectrum when it comes to autism and the challenges that you face. So thank you for that.

Ms. Spencer, one of the recommendations that you made, and I know you said this was your own personal recommendation, was that women who work part-time should be allowed to access EI. What I'm wondering, and here's our challenge, is do we create two systems, one for men and one for women? If we say women working part-time can access EI, how do we tell men working part-time that they're the wrong gender so they can't? That's the challenge. And how do we fund this? Because, again, at the end day, you have to pay in to EI so you can collect, and it has to be funded, because we have a responsibility to the taxpayers. Could you address that?

Ms. Lucya Spencer: Men are also parents. I'm not here to promote the men's side of the issue, but we have men who are single fathers, who are single parents, who also do need some assistance. It's not a matter of telling men that they can't access this system. It's making sure that you look at it from the macro level. You look at what benefits will trickle down, and to whom these benefits will trickle down.

The bottom line is that kids are involved, one way or another. We're not calling for a separate system.

Ms. Candice Hoepfner: So you're not saying a separate system.

Ms. Lucya Spencer: No, I'm not saying a separate system.

No matter what system is in place, there's also a place for modification. There's also a place to create additions. We should look at the realities out in our community. You've heard from one immigrant woman here today. Look at what people are experiencing. Look at the system itself. Look at where the cracks are in that particular system. Let's see if we can plug up these holes, see if we can create something that will not prevent a woman from accessing the system but allow her to be part of it.

Ms. Candice Hoepfner: Do I have any time left, Madam Chair?

The Chair: I'll give you another minute.

Ms. Candice Hoepfner: Oh, thank you very much.

Just previous to you ladies being here, we had another set of witnesses. One of the things they said was that when you look at the entire program, you see that women collect more than they pay in. I didn't have a chance to ask them about this, but from the information I have, typically it's more women who access parental-type benefits. Overall, then, women are net benefactors of the EI program.

To go back to my first question, when we look at the entire program on a financial level, how do we then say that part-time people who are not paying in, or that people who don't pay in at all, should be receiving benefits? How do we—

Ms. Lucia Spencer: But some part-time people are paying into the system. And let us not forget, we are 54% of the population. Therefore, we would take a bit more out of it, I believe.

• (1250)

Ms. Candice Hoepfner: Except that a lot of women aren't actually employed, for voluntary reasons, so they're not paying in.

Ms. Lucia Spencer: Yes: a lot of people are not employed and are not contributing.

Ms. Candice Hoepfner: Right.

Ms. Lucia Spencer: At the same time, they do have certain needs. Some cannot contribute because they do not have the opportunity to contribute. They cannot find the employment they need that would allow them to generate the revenue, that would allow them to participate in the system, that would allow them to contribute to the system.

I'm basically saying that we can't just look at one part of the system. We have to look at the whole system. We have to look at education. We have to look at training. We have to look at opportunities out there in terms of employment, etc.

Once we look at the whole system, I think then we can really fix it thoroughly. If we continue to do this piecemeal, there will always be cracks coming on the other end. We have to look at the whole thing, not just part of it.

Ms. Candice Hoepfner: I guess that's where the training would be of benefit, you would agree.

Ms. Lucia Spencer: Yes.

Ms. Candice Hoepfner: Again, if women, new Canadians and immigrant women, can access jobs where they can work full time, then obviously that will affect the outcomes.

Ms. Lucia Spencer: Of course. You'll have them contributing more into the system.

Ms. Candice Hoepfner: Right.

Hopefully, then, the new money we've put toward training in our economic action plan will benefit immigrant women. Do you see that as a benefit?

Ms. Lucia Spencer: I do as long as the eligibility criteria are fair toward women.

Ms. Candice Hoepfner: For the training?

Ms. Lucia Spencer: For the training; no artificial barriers should be set up to prevent them from accessing the training.

Ms. Candice Hoepfner: Thank you.

Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Ms. Mathysen.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Thank you.

I'd like to start with you, Ms. Spencer. You talked about artificial barriers in terms of women being unable to access the training. I wonder if you could just reiterate those for us. What are those artificial barriers? What do we need to remove?

Ms. Lucia Spencer: For some women, they have to be on EI in order to access certain types of training. We're saying that we need to remove that particular barrier.

If our intent is to make sure that women can access and have the opportunities they require to help them integrate, we have to ensure that we are not saying to them, "Oh, you have to work, and you have to get on EI, in order to get this." What we should be saying to them is, "Here is an opportunity. Make use of that opportunity."

If they require certain supports, make sure those supports are in place. They might require child care, or child minding. I know that in the LINC program, we do have child minding. In some of the settlement programs, we do have child minding. At the same time, we're seeing in some of these programs a restriction on the ages of the kids who are allowed to participate in these programs.

Take settlement programs as an example. Even though we now have child minding in some of these programs, kids must be 18 months and over to access that child care program. A mom coming in for help and assistance with a child who is six months won't have the opportunity to access child minding.

This is one example of what I call artificial barriers. On the one hand, we're saying that we're creating these opportunities for women. On the other hand, we're making it a bit restrictive in that only certain women can participate.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: So a national child care program might be of significant benefit for all women.

Ms. Lucia Spencer: For all women, yes.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Ms. Ngjelina, I too want to thank you for coming here and sharing your story. You said that when you arrived in Canada you worked in restaurants and you paid employment insurance premiums. Were you surprised, then, when you were ineligible to collect any benefits, even though you were self-employed for that period when you created your own businesses?

Ms. Athina Ngjelina: I am very sorry that I came across so emotionally, but I definitely want to make sure that... I do appreciate your sympathy, I really, truly do, but I just wish my language helped me a little bit better. My purpose for coming here today is all about the unemployment benefits.

Yes, I did make contributions. Yes, I would have appreciated it if I had some support, and I didn't have that support, and that is my question today. Where is my support? I am contributing, but what is given to me when I am in such a desperate need? I am very sorry, it has been more than four years, and I am socially insulated, and I am emotional and all those things.

I am very sorry I didn't make clear the point, but that's what it is. Don't I deserve unemployment insurance? I've been working many days, starting from five o'clock and finishing at three o'clock, that's how much I did sleep in that time, and I did make whatever contribution that I could. Just because my son happened to be sick.... I'm very glad that I managed to bring up the issue of my son's disorder in this room, and thank you for that. But the whole thing is, just because my son is sick, I am an unemployed person, and where do I go? I don't have sources to pay my bills because there's nothing available there.

• (1255)

Ms. Irene Mathysen: I don't want you to ever apologize. The story is very important.

If the reforms that we're talking about had made it easier for self-employed individuals to be covered under the EI program, would that have made a significant difference in your life, in your story, in what you experienced?

Ms. Athina Ngjelina: It would have made a day and night difference. In those first years, the beginning is always the difficult part, and then I have learned so much on my way. If it was there, of course it would have made a very serious difference having the benefits of unemployment insurance.

Why am I excluded? I have been working very hard. I have worked for very long hours. I know that everybody in our blessed country deserves maternity leave, but I didn't get it and I didn't complain about that before. Now that I am in need, I say I deserve maternity leave, I should have a few days off. I know that many employees, even when they make mistakes in their workplace, take leave and they are still paid. Just because I decided to be self-employed, should I have sought a government job? I didn't know much in that time. Maybe that would have been a better option for me, and I would have something available to help me in difficult days.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: If you'd had that income security, would you have been able to better access services for your son?

Ms. Athina Ngjelina: Of course. It would have made so many things better, even my own health would have been better. Of course it would have. As I said, again, it would have made a day and night difference if I had that little support. The result is what you see today. I am sorry I look so miserable, but I am the result of non-support. I don't know why I don't deserve any support. I know that there are many other mothers like me. I'm not against the contribution. I was given a chance to contribute and I did contribute. I employed other people.

The Chair: You have another minute.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Ms. Spencer, we've heard from previous witnesses that if you're self-employed there should be a mandatory contribution among the self-employed to make sure that the safety net is there. Is that something you would favour as a way of

addressing some of these discriminatory kinds of practices in regard to income support?

Ms. Lucya Spencer: If they are self-employed, there should be a mandatory in place that they can contribute. I don't know if I want to call it mandatory, but I think the opportunity should be there to allow them to contribute. Because sometimes people can barely break even, even if they're self-employed. I should say they should be encouraged to contribute to the system.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Ms. Ngjelina, was there anything you wanted to say to the committee? Is there anything we haven't asked about that you need to get before this committee?

Ms. Athina Ngjelina: I just want to urge the committee to do whatever is possible to give an opportunity to women like me to have better lives in case they get sick or their children get sick. I hope that our government will give more chances to people like me. Maybe there is not enough information about how it is to be penniless. Maybe there is not enough. Maybe another effort should be made to know how it is, truly, to be in the position I am in.

I really don't have the luxury of reading newspapers anymore or watching news anymore, because I am so consumed serving my child. There is nothing from disability benefits. He receives only \$410 a month, which many times is not enough to pay for his antibiotics. It's part of my duty as a parent to provide my child with toys, but I don't buy toys. I buy teaching equipment, and it is very expensive. And I need to provide some food as well as the medication. There should be something available for my child or for me, some kind of respite. I have only four hours a week. That is too little when you have literally to work 24 hours a day. There's very little time for sleep.

So I would appreciate it if the committee made very serious changes in the employment benefit itself and had some kind of program for the very, very unique and difficult cases. I do not have family. I do not have anyone to go to. I only have the government offices and knocking on doors. I've learned the expression, "I'm sorry, you've fallen into the cracks". I keep falling in those cracks every day. It is too cracky, and I don't know how to make it.

• (1300)

The Chair: I'm sorry for laughing, Ms. Ngjelina. It was what you said, the pun you made on the word "cracks". It was funny in terms of the English language.

I want to thank you very much, both of you, for presenting.

Ms. Spencer, as always, your facts are there. You know your stuff.

I want to thank you very much, Ms. Ngjelina, for coming here and sharing your very personal experiences with us. Because it points out the systemic problems within the system that we must, especially at this committee, look at. It's evident that you have fallen between those cracks, as you say, in a very cracky system. So I think it is up to us to look at the systemic barriers and at those systemic cracks and see what we can do to fix the system in some way or form. So thank you very much.

Ms. Athina Ngjelina: Could I have a second, please?

The Chair: We must leave the room. I'm sorry. But perhaps if you wish, you can have one second. I'm going to time you, because we have to leave the room at this time.

Ms. Athina Ngjelina: I know that I represent many mothers, and I know very well that many times, just being a mother and trying to help your child and yourself survive.... Women are even victims of serious abuse. Things are connected with each other. When you are

not financially independent, you are a vulnerable person, and there are so many other problems coming from that. So giving an opportunity to women like me with some kind of financial support helps in so many ways.

Thank you so much. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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