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Evidence of the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security, Hearing on Bill C-391, Thursday, May 13, 2010

Ms. Alexa Conradi (President, Fédération des femmes du Québec):

Thank you very much. Thank you for inviting us today to discuss this very important matter.

I am the president of the Fédération des femmes du Québec. I am accompanied by Manon Monastesse, who is the director of one of the federation's member groups. We wanted to make the presentation together.

The mandate of the Fédération des femmes du Québec is to defend the rights of women in all areas of social and political activity. We represent 175 organizations in all regions of Quebec, including the rural regions. We also have 600 individual members.

Several years ago now, the December 6th Victims Foundation Against Violence—the foundation established by the families of the victims of the École polytechnique tragedy—gave us the mandate to make sure that December 6th was commemorated. Events happen all across Canada, but the foundation gave us the mandate to organize events in commemoration. For us, commemoration is not simply remembering the women who were gunned down by that killer 20 years ago, but also remembering the issues and the debates that ensued and led to a firearms registry. In a way, the registry is a response to a major campaign spearheaded by friends of the victims of December 6th.

Our appearance before the committee today is therefore to urge that the Canadian Firearms Registry be kept as a testimony to and a legacy from those friends and the December 6th Victims Foundation Against Violence.

You can imagine how, as women's groups, we are particularly concerned by matters that relate to domestic violence and the registration of firearms.

So, without further delay, I will give the floor to Manon Monastesse, who works at a federation whose specific purpose is to assist women who are victims of domestic violence.



Ms. Manon Monastesse (Director, Fédération de ressources d'hébergement pour femmes violentées et en difficulté du Québec, Fédération des femmes du Québec):

Good afternoon.

My federation operates 41 shelters in Quebec for women who are victims of domestic violence and in distress. This is about half of all such shelters in Quebec. We take in around 10,000 women and children per year. Domestic homicide, more specifically homicide committed by a spouse or ex-spouse where the victims are wives and children, is a major issue. It is the key issue in our involvement with clients at our shelters, whether from the standpoint of safety or prevention.

The Firearms Act has made possible significant progress, especially in reducing the number of armed assaults in situations of domestic or family violence. Rifles and shotguns are the weapons most commonly used in spousal homicide for the simple reason that long guns are the most common in Quebec homes, and therefore the most easily accessible.

Please understand that, in the opinion of those of us who have signed the brief that has been tabled, Bill C-391 sends a dangerous message. If there is no need to register long guns, is that saying that they do not present a real danger? Too many examples prove the opposite, such as the case of Marie-Josée Desmeules, killed by her husband with his shotgun in Saguenay in December 2009. Rifles and shotguns do not just increase the number of victims, they increase the deadliness of the assaults. Like all firearms, rifles and shotguns pose a serious threat.

Let us be clear that, in Quebec, since 1995, the policy called Prévenir, Dépister, Contrer la violence conjugale [Prevent, detect and stop domestic violence] requires police officers to ensure that victims and their loved ones are safe and protected. If possible, firearms are seized as soon as an arrest takes place or, if not, bail conditions are arranged so that they are handed over to peace officers without delay. That is what police officers do in Quebec. The first thing that they

do when they get to a domestic violence scene is to check whether the spouse or ex-spouse has firearms.

No less a person than Christine St-Pierre, the Quebec Minister of Culture, Communications and the Status of Women, said in an interview that, if Ottawa decided to dismantle the national registry, the lives of Quebec police officers and of victims of domestic violence would be put into danger unnecessarily. For us, the direct consequence of eliminating the registry or making it ineffective is to deprive the police of an essential tool of investigation and prevention and to endanger the safety of the women and children who come to our shelters.

In conclusion, we would like to remind you of the importance of the present system of gun control in the context of our ability to assist victims of domestic violence. We ask you to reject this bill, specifically because of the dangerous consequences that it would have for public safety and, most importantly, for the safety of the women and children to whom we provide shelter.

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Ms. Alexa Conradi:

In that light, registering each weapon gives us an indication of the number and the type of the weapons in the possession of a potential attacker in domestic violence cases. Unfortunately, domestic violence also exists in the homes of people with no criminal past. Protecting women from violence is a social and political responsibility. It is even included in international agreements that the Government of Canada has signed. This responsibility is clearly more significant than any inconvenience that may be caused by filling out a few forms.

A Quebec registry, for example, would not be effective in dealing with weapons moving around Canada. That is why we do not want the Canadian registry to be dismantled. Almost half the firearms used in criminal acts are long guns. They are not just used for hunting. In 85% of the murders involving a firearm, the weapon used is a long gun. The registry is working and it is important to keep it. Thank you very much.

[English]