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## **Evidence of the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security, Hearing on Bill C-391, Thursday, May 6, 2010**

### **Ms. Nathalie Villeneuve (President, Regroupement des maisons pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale):**

I will start. Thank you very much.

Before I begin, I would just like to let you know that a written brief will be presented. It will be translated and forwarded on Friday.

Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon. My name is Nathalie Villeneuve, and I am President of the Regroupement des maisons pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale. I am also Coordinator of the Maison Hina, in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu. I am accompanied today by Ms. Louise Riendeau, Coordinator of Policy Issues for the Regroupement. We are appearing today on behalf of our 48 member shelters, which are located in 16 of the 17 regions of Quebec.

Founded 30 years ago, the Regroupement des maisons pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale is an organization whose mission is to raise collective awareness of the issues facing women and children who are victims of violence. The specific aim of these safe houses is to work with and for battered women, to bring an end to the violence. These homes work at the individual and collective level to provide a safe place for women and children, and in more general terms, to fight domestic violence. It is based on the experience of these women and children, and the workers in these safe houses who support them throughout the process, that the Regroupement is taking a position on Bill C-391.

In our view, gun control measures are part of a whole package of initiatives and therefore must be consistent with other legislative or policy instruments in both Quebec and Canada. Those instruments are intended to allow battered women and their children to exercise their right to life, liberty and security of the person, as stipulated under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Domestic homicide and infanticide by a spouse or ex-spouse are issues of critical importance that are central to our approach in supporting the women who come to safe houses, in terms of safety and prevention. That is why it is absolutely critical for the Regroupement and its member transition homes that the Canadian Firearms Registry be maintained.

Fighting all forms of violence against women means introducing controls and follow-up measures that force gun owners to be accountable, thereby decreasing the number of deaths and injuries caused by firearms. The registry helps to achieve that objective.

There is also a need to try and prevent intimidation using firearms, something that receives little mention in the current debate. This is a pernicious form of violence that affects hundreds of women in Quebec. Respecting an individual's right to live in a violence-free environment requires the introduction of effective legislation and programs, backed by adequate financial resources, to fight all forms of violence against women.

Furthermore, since tougher firearms legislation was passed in 1991, the number of firearms-related deaths and injuries has dropped. The domestic homicide rate is a particularly telling example. The number of women killed by firearms in Canada went from 74, in 1989, to 32, in 2005. Gun control is an effective way to combat violence.

Bill C-391 is now proposing to repeal the registration of unrestricted weapons, which are the weapons most often used to kill women and children in Canada. It is intended to dismantle gun control in Canada, despite the fact that the legislation has proven its effectiveness and is deemed to be an essential tool for police work.

In our opinion, Bill C-391 pretty much ignores the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which states that everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of the person. Furthermore, this bill is completely contrary to the spirit and letter of a recent declaration on violence against women adopted on March 1, 2010 by member countries of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie at a meeting chaired by Minister Josée Verner, on behalf of the Government of Canada.

By signing that declaration, Canada pledged to respect the fundamental rights of women and girls, particularly their right to freedom, to security of the person, to integrity, equality and dignity; to introduce public policies and appropriate strategies to support them, with a view to responding to this violence; to coordinate actions at the national, regional and international levels to counter such violence; and, to raise awareness and mobilize men and boys through initiatives aimed at preventing violence against women and girls.

Gun control is undoubtedly one of the appropriate strategies needed to respond to this violence. Furthermore, the debate on these issues gives the government an opportunity to raise awareness, among opponents of the gun registry, of the need to prevent violence against women. Gun control saves lives.

It must be said that gun control works. Rifle and shotgun homicide rates have dropped by 52% since 1991, whereas the non-gun homicide rate dropped by only 28%. The number of women shot to death dropped by more than 50% from 85, in 1991, to 32, in 2004. The rate of spousal homicides committed using a rifle or shotgun has dropped by 70%. It should also be noted that the vast majority of gun owners have complied with gun control requirements. Indeed, 1.89 million gun owners now have permits and more than 7 million guns have been registered. Most of them—90%—are rifles and shotguns.

Without the gun registry, there is no way for police officers to keep guns out of the hands of dangerous individuals, to link them to their owners and hold them accountable, or to enforce prohibition orders. Police officers in Canada consult the registry 11,000 times a day and the information they glean using these tools helps them to prevent crime and carry out criminal investigations. In Quebec, when police receive a call involving domestic violence, the call centre checks the registry to see whether the assailant has a gun, thereby allowing officers to answer the call using the safest approach for both themselves and the victims.

Then, depending on the urgency of the situation, they can immediately seize the gun or apply for a search warrant in order to do so. Whether or not the offender has guns, an application to prohibit gun ownership must be filed with the court. This is generally a condition for release. Eliminating the registry or making it ineffective will have the direct effect of depriving police officers of a critically important tool for police intervention and prevention.

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Is the Canadian gun lobby more important to Parliament than the safety of women, children and police officers?



**Ms. Louise Riendeau (Coordinator, Political Issues, Regroupement des maisons pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale):**

Based on results and findings, it is clear that gun control saves lives. Homicides of women with firearms dropped by 63% between 1991 and 2005. The Firearms Act has led to significant progress, and particularly a decline in the number of armed assaults associated with domestic or family violence. In 1989, the year of the tragedy at Polytechnique, 40% of female murder victims were killed with firearms. In 2005, that number had dropped to 15%. Unfortunately, one woman in three killed by her husband is still murdered using a firearm. The progress thus far is encouraging, but this is no time to relax those controls; there is still a great deal to be done.

Rifles and shotguns are the guns most often used in domestic homicides, for the simple reason that there are long guns in many Quebec homes, particularly in rural areas. The Regroupement des maisons pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale believes that Bill C-391 sends a dangerous message. If long guns are no longer to be registered, we are basically telling people that they are not dangerous. And yet these guns, like the others, must be considered dangerous fire arms. Rifles and shotguns are also the firearms most often used to threaten women and children. Threats using firearms are not in the statistics, and yet they have a devastating effect, as we can see on a daily basis in the transition homes. Registration is the only way for police officers to keep all guns out of the hands of people who present a danger to their loved ones and themselves. Otherwise, police officers will have no other means available to

them than to declare the individual to be dangerous, in order to ascertain how many guns must be removed.

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and the Special Rapporteur on the Prevention of Human Rights Violations Using Small Arms both emphasized that states which do not adequately regulate firearms are not meeting their obligations under international law, particularly as regards the security of women and children.

We firmly believe that the safety and security of the women of Canada and Quebec must take precedence over what some consider to be red tape; we see this "red tape" as the normal procedure to be followed in any functioning democracy. Red tape just to save lives? That is not even a question we should be asking. That is why the Regroupement des maisons pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale is recommending that the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security reject Bill [C-391](#) in its entirety.

Every aspect of the gun licensing and registration program should be maintained. The screening that occurs by questioning applicants, particularly with respect to their mental health, violent behaviour and drug addiction, makes it possible to identify those applicants who are likely to engage in domestic violence. Furthermore, the ability of spouses and ex-spouses to be made aware of an application to register a gun and to voice their own concerns in that regard is critical when it comes to their opportunity to ensure that a partner at risk of violent behaviour does not have access to guns.

The fact that there are currently 254,000 prohibition orders in effect is evidence of the need to maintain this process. In both Canada and Quebec, there is clearly very strong support for the gun registry. That is why we are asking that Bill [C-391](#) not be passed into law and be rejected in its entirety.

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