



**PRESENTATION ON BILL C-21 TO STANDING COMMITTEE ON NATIONAL SECURITY, DEFENCE
AND VETERANS AFFAIRS
NOVEMBER 1, 2023**

Thank you for the invitation to appear before the committee.

Women's Shelters Canada (WSC) is a national non-profit organization representing 16 provincial and territorial shelter associations and the more than 600 violence against women (VAW) shelters and transition houses from across the country.

Bill C-21 is an important Bill for those of us concerned with GBV. Many of the measures contained within it have long been demanded by women's organizations. While it is not perfect, we support this bill and believe it should be implemented quickly. Bill C-21 contains many of the recommendations from the Mass Casualty Commission, which called upon the Government of Canada:

- To strengthen gun control measures,
- to improve protections for survivors of gender-based violence, and
- to ensure better tracking and reporting of assault weapons.

Violence against women is public health crisis. Firearms increase risk, and likelihood of fatality for women and children that are experiencing violence. Guns are used to terrorize, injure, and kill women and their children in urban as well as rural settlements. We know that the risks are higher in rural communities where there are more guns and more opposition to gun control and fewer supports for women living with violence.

From 2009 to 2020, 25% of female victims of firearm-related violent crime was victimized by a current or former intimate partner. Additionally, the presence of firearms in the home, made women more fearful for their safety, and less likely to seek help for the abuse they were facing.

Most women in Canada are killed with legal guns, and by legal gun owners.

The 2022 Renfrew County Inquest specifically addressed the additional risks with respect to femicide and suicide posed by gaps in the application of risk assessment and gun licencing laws and regulations, particular to the rural context. The amendments requiring the delivery of a firearm to a peace officer, and the revocation of an individual's licence if they have engaged in an act of domestic violence or stalking or become subject to a protection order respond to the concerns raised through the Inquest and the Mass Casualty Commission.

We previously were concerned about the lack of measures for the swift removal of firearms and licenses. It has been documented numerous times that women are at the highest levels of danger of lethality when they make it known to their abuser that they are leaving the situation. The addition of a 24-hour timeline, for revoking firearms and licenses is important for ensuring the safety of victims. While we appreciate this amendment, we also want to underscore that revocations need to be enforced and resourced to ensure that they are completed.

In our last submission on this bill, we raised the concern about the lack of definition of domestic and family violence within the Bill. Without a clear and holistic definition of violence, chief firearms officers may have considered more limited definitions that only address direct injury. The adoption of the definition of family violence recently adopted in the Divorce act within Bill C-21 ensures that a wide range of violence is considered, including coercive control.

Lastly, the bill previously authorized the issuance, in certain circumstances, of a conditional licence for the purposes of sustenance or employment. While the removal of this item is appreciated, we continue to remain concerned about the remaining exemption for police officers. Although there is limited research in Canada, research done in the United States suggests that officers are actually more likely to abuse their domestic partners than the general public. In Nova Scotia alone, as reported in 2020, 14 police officers from across the province have been charged with crimes connected to domestic violence since 2012.

In closing, I would like to stress the importance of the need to improve the processes associated with screening gun owners and removing firearms from people who are a risk to themselves or others. The federal government uses its

power to make decisions about who can have firearms licenses. Important measures like spousal notification and reference checks, as well as continuous eligibility, were introduced to help ensure this power was used to refuse applicants and remove licenses from people who, “in the opinion of the firearms officer” are a threat to themselves or any other person.

Multiple inquests and inquiries and incidents of domestic violence have shown that this is not being done. Greater resources, commitments and accountability measures are needed to ensure this responsibility is being exercised.

The need for greater resources, commitments and accountability measures goes far beyond this Bill. This is one of many reasons why WSC has been advocating for a National Action Plan on GBV for over a decade. Also important in our call for a National Action Plan is the need for consistency across and within jurisdictions in policies and legislation that address GBV against women. It will be important that this be an integral part of the implementation of this Bill.