

The Duty to Protect Abused Women

**Increasing the number of
spaces in safe houses**

**Brief submitted to the
House of Commons Standing Committee
on the Status of Women**



**REGROUPEMENT DES MAISONS
POUR FEMMES VICTIMES
DE VIOLENCE CONJUGALE**

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About the Regroupement

The Regroupement des maisons pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale is a broad network that has been firmly committed to fighting for women's right to physical and psychological integrity since 1979.

Through its mission of educating, raising awareness and taking action, the Regroupement

- helps to change laws and policies to improve protections for women and children affected by spousal violence;
- implements a variety of strategies to help members of the public, social workers and the government understand, identify and address spousal violence;
- designs, develops and distributes a number of training materials and publications;
- provides its members with a forum for discussion, continuing education and engagement;
- represents support and safe houses in dealings with public and government bodies.

There are 109 women's support and safe houses in Quebec, and 42 of them in 15 of Quebec's administrative regions are currently members of the Regroupement. Their specific mission is to work with and for abused women to make the violence stop.

According to their own statistics, member organizations sheltered nearly 2,700 women and more than 2,200 children in 2016-2017. And that does not include the women and children who received more than 14,000 services other than shelter (outside counselling, support, post-shelter follow-up, etc.). Member organizations responded to more than 46,000 service requests, mostly from women but also from loved ones, professionals and other facilities.

Introduction

The House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women undertook a study on the system of shelters and transition houses serving women and children affected by violence against women and intimate partner violence. It requested briefs and presentations on the following subjects:

- the current gap between the need for and available beds in shelters and transition houses;
- current federal programs and funding in support of shelters and transition houses; and
- possible solutions to address the gap between need and supply.

Deeply concerned about these subjects, the Regroupement decided to answer the Committee's call. In Quebec, shelters and transition houses are known as support and safe houses and second-stage houses. The Regroupement represents the first category, support and safe houses.

The shortage of spaces in support and safe houses is a critical problem, because, aside from the shortage of "beds," it reflects primarily a lack of access to the support services that abused women need. In this brief, we provide a description of the phenomenon.

First, we discuss the magnitude of the problem in Quebec, the needs of the women who ask our member organizations for help, and their reasons for doing so. Then we outline the services they find there. We also report on a recent study on the shortage of spaces in Quebec and offer potential solutions in connection with federal programs.

Magnitude of the problem

[Translation] “In 2015, police services in Quebec recorded a total of 19,046 person offences committed in a spousal context. Those offences made up about a third (30.2%) of all person crimes. (...) Most of the victims were women (78%). In kidnapping cases, 100% of the victims were women. Women were also preponderantly the victims of sexual assault (97.4%), forcible confinement (96.9%), intimidation (91.3%), level 3 assault (87.5%) and criminal harassment (86.3%).”¹

Yet spousal violence is much more prevalent. According to Statistics Canada, only 36% of women surveyed have reported being assaulted to police.² That figure reflects only one dimension of spousal violence (physical violence); women can experience other forms of spousal abuse: emotional, verbal, sexual, economic and spiritual.

“According to World Bank data, rape and domestic violence pose a greater risk to women between ages 15 and 44 than cancer, car accidents, war and malaria.”³ In addition, according to the United Nations, intimate partner violence is the most common form of abuse experienced by women.⁴

Who are the women requesting assistance?

[Translation] “There is no typical profile of a woman affected by spousal violence, any more than there is a ‘typical abuser.’ Regardless of culture, ethnic origin, social status, age or income, men use violence to dominate or control their wives, ex-wives or girlfriends. There is no way of telling in advance which men will use violence and which will not. (...) This type of power relationship is not confined to disadvantaged segments of the population or certain groups of people, as is commonly believed. It happens in every household income bracket. It is not associated in any way with alcohol, drugs, religious or cultural traditions, age and so on.”⁵

However, if you compare women who seek refuge in safe houses with women who ask for support through their outside counselling services,⁶ you will find that women who go to safe houses have fewer financial resources and are less likely to be in the labour force. As a result, they have fewer alternatives when they are trying to escape from an abusive husband.

The main reason for going to a safe house is physical abuse for 34% of the residents and emotional

¹ Ministère de la Sécurité publique (2017), *Statistiques 2015 sur les infractions contre la personne commises dans un contexte conjugal*, accessed on October 26, 2018: <https://www.securitepublique.gouv.qc.ca/police/publications-et-statistiques/statistiques/violence-conjugale/2015.html> [French only].

² Statistics Canada (2016), *Family violence in Canada: A statistical profile*, 2014, Juristat, accessed on May 10, 2018: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2016001/article/14303-eng.pdf>.

³ United Nations, *Violence Against Women: The Situation*, accessed on October 26, 2018: <http://www.un.org/en/women/endviolence/situation.shtml>.

⁴ UN Women, accessed on October 26, 2018: <http://interactive.unwomen.org/multimedia/infographic/violenceagainstwomen/en/index.html#intimate>.

⁵ Regroupement des maisons pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale (2018), *La violence conjugale c'est quoi au juste?*, Montréal (revised version forthcoming), p. 6 [French only].

⁶ 2016-2017 statistics, Regroupement des maisons pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale.

abuse for 37%.⁷ Statistics Canada's survey on shelters for abused women also indicates that these are the two main reasons women seek shelter. Women's desire to protect their children from abuse also figures prominently among their motivations:

"Emotional abuse (reported by 66% of women residents) and physical abuse (50%) were the most common reasons women sought shelter. This finding held true for most provinces and territories (Table 3).

Many women in shelters on the snapshot date also cited financial abuse (38%), threats (36%), harassment (27%), sexual abuse (21%), and other abuse (12%) among their reasons for seeking shelter. Further, on that snapshot date, 67 women (2%) indicated human trafficking as a reason for seeking refuge.

Protecting children from abuse or witnessing abuse was also a common reason women sought shelter: 26% of women identified wanting to protect their children from witnessing abuse, 18% of women identified wanting to protect their children from psychological abuse, and 10% of women identified wanting to protect their children from physical abuse as among their reasons for seeking shelter."⁸

Why do women affected by violence need services?

It is not easy for women to escape from spousal abuse.

[Translation] "When the woman becomes aware of the impasse, she is often physically and emotionally exhausted. She is ashamed and believes that she was not up to the task. She tells herself that she is the one responsible for the marriage's failure and the family's disintegration. Violence leaves such a negative self-image and puts such a heavy weight on her shoulders that making the leap to get out of the situation takes a number of attempts.

(...)

"Can you imagine the fear and anxiety that a woman who has been abused by her husband for weeks, months or years lives with? To stop a woman from leaving, her abusive husband makes promises, and he makes threats. He threatens to hit her, if he has not already done so, or to hit her harder. He talks about breaking one of her limbs. He threatens to kill himself or sometimes even to kill her and the children. As soon as the woman decides to make the break, the threats intensify, the violence escalates, and the blackmail becomes more persistent."⁹

[Translation] "Post-separation violence is an increasingly well-recognized phenomenon. Violence does not stop at the time of marriage break-up. For some women, it continues and, in many cases, escalates. The abuser does not take rejection equably. He wants to preserve his power and control at all costs. Break-up is the most dangerous time for women. According to Canadian data, separated women are five times more likely to be killed."^{10, 11}

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Statistics Canada (2015), *Shelters for Abused Women in Canada*, 2014, accessed online on October 26, 2018: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2015001/article/14207-eng.htm#a3>.

⁹ Regroupement des maisons pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale (2018), *op cit.*, pp. 44-45 [French only].

¹⁰ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-224-x/2010000/aftertoc-aprestdm2-eng.htm>.

¹¹ Regroupement des maisons pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale (2018), *op. cit.*, p. 33 [French only].

Studies have also shown that spousal violence has serious effects on the physical and mental health of women and also their children.¹²

When women request shelter in a safe house, it is not just a safe emergency refuge they are seeking for themselves and their children, but also respite so that they can assess their situation, catch their breath and obtain the information and support they need to take steps to protect themselves and then separate themselves from the husband who is threatening their physical and mental health or even their lives.

Support and safe houses are more than just shelter

Services provided in support and safe houses

Support and safe houses for women affected by spousal violence are much more than just temporary accommodations. They are first and foremost services for women and children fleeing violence. Since the lives of many such women are in jeopardy or could be if the husband found them, support and safe houses have security systems to prevent intrusion. Caseworkers are available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. They are ready to answer the phone at any time of the day when women call to talk about their situation or ask for shelter. Their role is to welcome and reassure the women and children, help them understand what they are going through, and assist them in initiating a process to reduce the effects of violence on their health. They are able to assess the risks to the women's safety and help them make arrangements to stay safe.

The caseworkers also tell the women what steps they can take: file a complaint, start separation or divorce proceedings, or report the situation to child protection services, as applicable. They refer the women to services that can help them: health services, social assistance, social housing, immigration, crime victim compensation, schools, etc.

Because of the security challenges, because the women are not always familiar with the resources, or because their self-esteem has been crushed by the abuse, it is often necessary to support them in taking these steps and help them exercise their rights. The various caseworkers they meet are not always aware of the effects of violence and may think that the women are confused and unable to clearly express what they are experiencing and what they need. The women's caseworkers at the support and safe houses can help them explain their situation.

The youth caseworkers help the women strengthen the mother-child bond so that they can help their children overcome the consequences of violence. In addition, through various activities, they get the children to express their feelings and work on their perceptions of violence and the family's situation with the appropriate tools for their age. They help the children understand the impact that the violence has had on them and to diminish its repercussions.

Post-shelter follow-up

Spousal violence has short-, medium- and long-term effects on women and children. In addition, the violence often continues after separation. The process for a complaint to be heard or for visiting rights to be decided is time-consuming and can take months or even years. Husbands use every available opportunity, including custody or visiting rights discussions, to continue harassing their ex-partners. Consequently, the women need support after they leave the facility and even after the legal proceedings are over.

¹² Lachapelle, H., Forest, L. (2000), *La violence conjugale, Développer l'expertise infirmière*, Presse de l'Université du Québec, Québec, pp. 42-45 [French only].

Safe houses provide post-shelter follow-up services to clients who want them. Women who are interested in such services can return to the safe house to speak with a caseworker and can obtain support in taking some of the actions required (such as going to court).

Women who face greater safety or reintegration challenges can be sent to second-stage houses, where they exist. They can stay in a safe apartment and obtain the caseworker support they need for periods of several months.

Outside counselling services

Many women who want to leave their husbands or have already done so or who are wondering about the difficulties they are having in their marriage are interested in getting some assistance without necessarily using the accommodation services. They are looking for a service where they can meet with a caseworker for outside counselling. Consequently, support and safe houses have developed that type of service. However, such services are not sufficiently accessible. When support and safe houses do not have the resources they need to provide the basic shelter services, they have to ask caseworkers to reduce their outside counselling and spend more time with residents.

The shortage of spaces in Quebec and the need to improve services

The Regroupement and the Fédération des maisons d'hébergement pour femmes, which together represent 77 support and safe houses, have warned Quebec's Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux (MSSS) about the shortage of spaces, which is forcing their members to turn away thousands of women requesting shelter each year. For the purposes of the 2018 discussions with the MSSS, data were collected from all support and safe houses in Quebec in 2018. The support and safe houses were asked to provide data on their annual occupancy rates¹³ for the last five completed years, monthly occupancy rates, the number of refusals due to lack of space or other factors, the number of outside services provided, and the reasons for longer stays. Of the 109 support and safe houses in Quebec, 101 provided data. Most of them completed the entire questionnaire.

For all of the facilities that responded, the total number of refusals was 23,568 in 2016-2017, and the average was 18,880 refusals a year over five years. If we exclude three facilities in Montréal that serve homeless women and reported a total of 17,941 refusals, we get a total of 6,077 refusals for Quebec as a whole in 2016-2017 and an annual average of 5,240 refusals for the last five years. Of course, the same woman may be refused by more than one facility, and other women may get a space after one or more refusals. That is why the study looked not only at the number of refusals but also at the occupancy rates for each region. If a region has both high occupancy rates and a high number of refusals, it indicates that there are not enough spaces to meet the needs of women in the region.

This study shows that large metropolitan areas and areas surrounding the major population centres are affected most by the space shortage. The Outaouais, Lanaudière, Laval, Montréal and Québec regions have the highest refusal rates relative to the number of spaces they have (in 2016-2017, they turned away between 5 and 17 times more women than the number of spaces they have).

In three regions, the refusal problem involves only a few facilities:

- Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean: Two facilities in Saguenay
- Laurentides: The facility in Saint-Jérôme
- Montérégie: The facilities in Longueuil and Saint-Hubert are most affected

¹³ The support and safe houses give each family the exclusive use of one bedroom so that the family can have a modicum of privacy. That means that if a mother and her two children are assigned to a room with four beds, the bed occupancy rate will be 75%. If all rooms are occupied, even if there are still free beds, the facility will have to refuse shelter requests. This suggests that with an annual occupancy rate of 80%, all of the rooms were occupied most of the time.

In six other regions, some of them more remote, the number of refusals is small, but some facilities have very high occupancy rates; in other words, they take in more people than the number of spaces for which they receive funding. This also reflects a shortage of spaces. The regions concerned are as follows:

- Mauricie: Occupancy rates are generally high in Trois-Rivières, but the facility in Shawinigan regularly takes in twice as many people as the number of funded spaces.
- Estrie: Four facilities have high rates, but the ones in Weedon and Martinville are constantly over capacity.
- Abitibi-Témiscamingue: Three out of five facilities (Rouyn-Noranda, Val-d'Or and Ville-Marie) have rates of 90% to 100%.
- Côte-Nord: The facility in Baie-Comeau generally has an occupancy rate of more than 100%.
- Gaspésie-Îles-de-la-Madeleine: Several facilities have occupancy rates approaching or exceeding 100%.
- Central Quebec: The facilities in Drummondville and Victoriaville have high occupancy rates.

In a Canada-wide survey conducted by Hébergement femmes Canada, 53 support and safe houses in Quebec reported accepting shelter requests even when they were at capacity. Twenty-four of them said they did so every few months, and 12, every month.¹⁴ However, sheltering more women and children than they have capacity for has consequences. With their limited budgets, the facilities are unable to add more staff, even when they are over capacity. The increased caseloads can result in staff burn-out. Also, women and children sometimes have to sleep in makeshift beds. Those families do not have the privacy or quality of services to which they are entitled.

The survey demonstrates that the space shortage in Quebec safe houses is a real problem. This picture is not a surprise. In a comparison of the number of spaces relative to the adult female population in Quebec and the other three most populous provinces, Quebec ranks last.

Province	Number of safe-house spaces ¹⁵	Number of women aged 15-64 (2017) ¹⁶	Women/spaces ratio
British Columbia	1,677	1,623,973	968
Alberta	1,437	1,444,754	1,005
Ontario	4,271	4,824,641	1,130
Quebec	1,926	2,730,468	1,418
Canada	12,058	12,266,476	1,017

To have the same ratio as Ontario, Quebec would have to add 490 spaces.

Recommendations

The provision of social services is a provincial responsibility. However, the federal government can play a central role in solving the space shortage problem in support and safe houses for women affected by spousal violence and help provide safety for those women and their children.

Considering that the United Nations asked all countries to develop a national action plan to combat violence against women by 2015 and that Canada still does not have such a plan;

¹⁴ Hébergement femmes Canada, (2018), *Résultats du sondage pancanadien* (forthcoming).

¹⁵ Statistics Canada (2015), *op. cit.*, Table 1.

¹⁶ Statistics Canada. [Table 17-10-0005-01, Population estimates on July 1st, by age and sex](https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1710000501), accessed on October 25, 2018: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1710000501>.

Considering that Canada and the provinces and territories share responsibility for combating violence against women and should therefore be coordinating their efforts;

Considering that all Canadian women should be able to exercise equally their right to life, liberty and security of the person, as recognized in section 7 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and section 1 of Quebec's *Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms*;

1. The Regroupement recommends that Canada develop a national action plan to combat violence against women and coordinate its efforts with the provinces and territories. To that end, we recommend that it follow the model action plan proposed by feminist organizations and unions in conjunction with Hébergement femmes Canada.

Considering the need to make services accessible to all women attempting to escape abuse by their husbands;

Considering that the safety of many such women is in jeopardy and that they urgently need access to safe shelter;

Considering that the service provided by safe houses is much more than just shelter;

Considering that after staying in a support centre or safe house, some women need to move to a safe location and receive psychosocial support to deal with safety and reintegration challenges;

2. The Regroupement recommends that the federal government ensure that the funding available under the National Housing Strategy will enable the provinces and territories to increase the number of spaces in support and safe houses and second-stage houses.

Considering that it is not sufficient to provide funding for infrastructure (buildings) and that the services provided by safe houses require long-term funding;

Considering that the provinces and territories, which are responsible for funding these social services, are not investing the money needed to adequately fund these additional services or even the existing services;

Considering that creating an investment program to increase the number of spaces will be ineffective and pointless if operating funding is not guaranteed;

3. The Regroupement recommends that the federal government include additional funds in its transfers to the provinces and territories to cover the operating costs of support and safe houses and second-stage houses.

Conclusion

This brief has demonstrated both the importance of providing services to women affected by spousal violence and the shortage of resources observed in Quebec. Because of continuing discrimination, too many Canadian women are at risk of being abused. The violence against them is limiting their choices and their ability to realize their full potential. It is a vicious circle that must be broken.

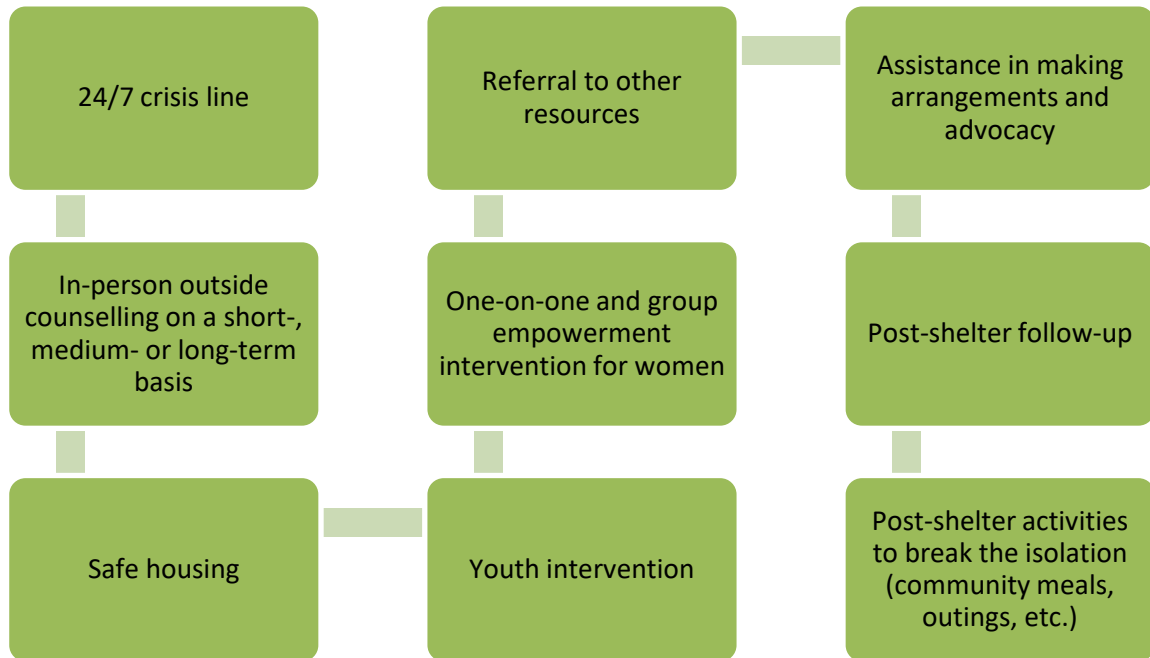
In addition to the huge impact that such violence has on the victims (loss of life, physical and mental health problems, absenteeism, difficulty at school, etc.), it results in economic costs that we cannot

ignore. One study estimated those costs at \$7.4 billion.¹⁷ That is far more than it would cost to increase the number of spaces in safe houses.

A society that claims to be egalitarian should make every effort to ensure that no woman is subjected to control and abuse by her husband and that no child suffers the consequences of that abuse. The federal government should provide the resources to ensure that all women can exercise their rights, including, first and foremost, their right to security. Providing abused women with services in safe locations is part of its duty to protect the most vulnerable members of society.

¹⁷ Zhang, T. et al. (2009), *An Estimation of the Economic Impact of Spousal Violence in Canada, 2009*, accessed on August 11, 2018: https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/cj-jp/fv-vf/rr12_7/rr12_7.pdf.

Support and safe houses, more than emergency shelters!



**First and foremost,
services with or without housing,
to escape from spousal violence**