

November 13, 2018

To:

Standing Committee on the Status of Women
FEWO@parl.gc.ca

From:

Manon Monastesse, Executive Director
Fédération des maisons d'hébergement pour femmes

Re: Recommendation for the Study on the System of Shelters and Transition Houses Serving Women and Children Affected by Violence Against Women and Intimate Partner Violence

Distinguished members of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women,

We are currently following the Committee's *Study on the System of Shelters and Transition Houses Serving Women and Children Affected by Violence Against Women and Intimate Partner Violence* focussing on:

- the current gap between the number of beds required and the number of beds offered in shelters and transition houses;
- existing federal programs and funding for shelters and transition houses; and
- possible solutions to fill the gap between supply and demand.

I am writing you on behalf of the *Fédération des maisons d'hébergement pour femmes*. We are a provincial association in Quebec that includes 36 shelters in 10 administrative regions of Quebec with a total shelter capacity of 458 licensed places. The total occupancy rate for our first-stage members is 96.53%. We serve primarily women and/or their children who are fleeing intimate partner and family violence, homeless, victims of human trafficking, forced marriage, sexual exploitation/assault, honour-based violence and so on. Last year, we accommodated 2,799 women and 1,636 children and had to turn away 9,717 women because of a lack of available space at the time of the call (based on data for 34 shelters). Our submission is attached.

It is an undeniable fact that safe houses do not receive equitable funding from one province or territory to another. In our case, we have not had an increase in funding since 2003, other than variable indexing below system costs, which represents a shortfall of 20% in current dollars. The work that we do is essential; the lives of women and children are literally at stake.

We offer more than a simple SAFE shelter from violence, a very important aspect in itself. As you know, one woman is killed by her partner or former partner every six days in Canada. In addition to ensuring the safety of women and children, we also offer outreach and post-shelter support programs, as well as community coaching, awareness and training, to name a few.

Our main recommendations are as follows:

- Since violence against women persists at a pandemic level, shelters and transition houses for abused women and their children must be recognized as an essential front-line service.
- Shelters and transition houses are currently seriously underfunded. We recommend a significant, sustainable increase in core funding based on community needs rather than population-based logic in order to consolidate the existing network. This funding should enable the development of services, that is, increase the number of available beds and safe houses as well as cover operations and services.
- We support the appeal of Women's Shelters Canada in favour of a National Action Plan; the Government of Canada should develop a National Action Plan aligned with the United Nations' recommendations on the right to adequate housing. This National Action Plan, like the National Housing Strategy, should involve the federal government as well as the provincial and territorial governments. In 2018, every woman should have equitable access to safety services to free her from a violent situation wherever she lives in Canada.

We invite the Committee members to visit the safe house(s) in their riding and contact us if you have any questions or would like further information on the work of the Federation or our member shelters.

Sincerely,

[original signed]

Manon Monastesse, MA (Social Work)
Executive Director, FMHF

FÉDÉRATION DES MAISONS
D'HÉBERGEMENT
POUR FEMMES

PROVIDING BETTER SUPPORT FOR WOMEN'S SHELTERS REQUIRES DEVELOPMENT AND FUNDING

"Violence against women is perhaps the most shameful human rights violation. It knows no boundaries of geography, culture or wealth. As long as it continues, we cannot claim to be making real progress towards equality, development, and peace."

Kofi Annan, former United Nations Secretary-General

**SUBMISSION OF THE FÉDÉRATION DES MAISONS D'HÉBERGEMENT POUR FEMMES (FMHF) TO THE STANDING HOUSE OF COMMONS
COMMITTEE ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN (FEWO)**

Attention: Committee Clerk

FEWO@parl.gc.ca

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 16, 2018

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1. The Fédération des maisons d'hébergement pour femmes (FMHF)

The Fédération des maisons d'hébergement pour femmes (FMHF) has been supporting and representing women's shelters as a group for the purposes of promoting and defending the rights of abused women and their children since 1987. The FMHF strives to inform and train its member shelters. It is also associated with several research groups and projects. It participates in various provincial, national and international consultations on the realities of women and children. It is part of several joint efforts to promote the vision and expertise of its members and defend women's rights.

The FMHF is actively involved and recognized in its community. A key voice at various levels, it has been particularly involved with:

- the provincial government: Chief Coroner's intimate partner violence death review committee, MSSS expert committee on intrafamilial homicide (2010-2012), MSSS working committee on children exposed to intimate partner violence (2015-2018)
- the federal government: including the Minister's Advisory Council on the Strategy to Prevent and Address Gender-Based Violence

It is also:

- Founding member and co-chair of Women's Shelters Canada (ShelterSafe), a national network of over 500 women's shelters
- Founding member of the Global Network of Women Shelters, represented on five continents,
- Member of the Table des regroupements provinciaux d'organismes communautaires et bénévoles (TRPBCB)
- Member of the Coalition québécoise contre la traite des personnes (CQCTP)
- Member of the Comité de suivi multi organismes sur les violences basées sur l'honneur.

A list of all of our publications can be found at: <http://fede.qc.ca/outils-publications>

1.1 Perspectives on intervention

The FMHF works from an intersectional feminism perspective recognizing the continuum of violence against women. Its analysis definitely falls within the terms of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women¹ and the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women² ratified by Canada over twenty years ago. The Canadian³ and Quebec⁴ charters of rights and freedoms also guarantee human dignity and freedom as well as the right to protection against violence. It is time that these principles become reality. In the meantime, many women are denied fundamental rights in their everyday lives.

1.1.1 Equality and violence

Canada and Quebec are long-time pioneers of equality between women and men. Yet there has been a cumulative delay. Equality for all women will not be a reality until gender-based violence comes to an end. There is no room for sexist violence in a truly egalitarian society.

¹ www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/

² <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/violenceagainstwomen.aspx>

³ <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/Const/page-15.html#h-39>

⁴ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/violenceagainstwomen.aspx>

However, only when women are no longer verbally, physically, psychologically, economically, sexually, spiritually, socially or otherwise abused will we be able to claim that we live in a truly egalitarian society. The objectives of the FMHF and its members are therefore necessarily inextricably linked to the end of violence and the realization of de facto equality for all women.

We still have a long way to go. Patriarchy, racism, ableism, ageism, colonialism are systems of oppression that work simultaneously in women's lives, giving rise to violence and maintaining female subordination and male domination.

1.1.2 Continuum of violence against women and survival strategies

Women using shelter services have evidently been subject to multiple forms of violence. They are victims of intimate partner and family violence, sexual exploitation and assault, human trafficking, forced labour, honour-based violence and so on. These multiple forms of violence are often pushed to the street, in situations of hidden homelessness or residential instability.

These are female immigrants, who speak neither English nor French, indigenous women, seniors, disabled persons dealing with a mental health issue, substance abuse or homelessness. Forty-five nationalities are represented in the FMHF's rapport d'activités 2017-2018. The complexity of their situations is obvious. A woman has often experienced several forms of violence. The consequences are significant for herself and her children and involve all spheres of life, public as well as private.

The use of legal or illegal psychoactive substances, homelessness and diagnosed or undiagnosed mental health issues are to be understood as survival strategies used by women to deal with various forms of violence. These women should therefore receive responses appropriate for their situation and not be penalized for behaviour deemed unacceptable by a society that cannot measure the violence to which they have been subjected.

Homeless women in FMHF shelters all have patterns dominated by violence. They have experienced incest, sexual assault, family violence, intimate partner violence, sexual exploitation, assault in a public space and so on.

It is the view of the FMHF and its member shelters that homeless women must be accepted in women's shelters as are women who indicate intimate partner violence as the main reason for their request for shelter. Being able to offer equitable services to these women is also essential.

2. Women's shelters provide a full range of services...

The mission of shelters is, first, to provide a safe living environment for women. In addition to physical safety considerations, women should have somewhere that they can express themselves and validate the reality of the violence they have experienced.

Of the approximately one hundred shelters in Quebec, the 36 FMHF member shelters located in 10 regions of the province support close to 5,000 women and their 2,000 children each year. The occupancy rate is close to, and even exceeds, 100% each year. Most of the abused women in the shelters need this interval in their lives, tailored to their reality.

FMHF member shelters respond to more than 50,000 calls through 24/7 crisis lines and provide outreach services to nearly 60,000 women and children. They suggest individual and group intervention, youth intervention, physical support in various processes (immigration, francization, physical and psychological health care, schooling, socio-judicial processes, VCI, social and occupational reintegration, and so on) as well as several instances of informal intervention. They conduct approximately 7,000 community training and awareness activities. More than 5,000 women knock on their doors for assistance each year. Women are often turned away because of a lack of resources or available space.

2.1 ...That cannot meet the demand

FMHF shelters alone must turn down 6,000 – 10,000 requests each year for lack of availability at the time of the call.

This is unacceptable in such emergency situations involving an imminent threat. If these women do not find a place in a shelter when they have the opportunity, they will be back in the hands of a violent partner, pushed to the street and homelessness, or in the hospital with a serious injury.

Women's shelters are not only essential in ensuring physical safety, they help build a foundation for a life without violence. They provide more than a Band-aid solution; over the short, medium, and long term, they free women from an environment of violence that has often existed for years.

Hence the importance of outreach services as well as individual, group and youth intervention offered by the shelter. Shelters must often also respond to a diverse range of situations involving social assistance, immigration, education, francization, health care, legal proceedings, and so on.

The complexity of women's situations, reduction of public services and increase in requests for shelter and services is such that, despite their good will and all of their creativity, shelters are no longer able to meet women's needs.

3. Community go-it-alone policy versus the broken social safety net

In the early 2000's, Quebec developed a community go-it-alone policy recognizing community work as the foundation for a social link and the social fabric of the province.

This policy standardized funding of the overall mission for women's shelters. The shelters are therefore able to assess their particular needs and tailor their responses along with their community. Although they are bound to ensure certain services, they are free to develop others that would enable them to meet with and provide services to populations abandoned by the official system. They evidently developed much more than what was requested, attempting to meet escalating needs.

The quantity and quality of health and social services in Quebec have dwindled considerably under austerity measures over the past five years. Funding for women's shelters has been indexed at an average of a mere 1% over the past three years. This financial reality has evidently resulted in service cuts, exhausted staff and teams having to constantly be renewed because of a lack of stability. With such a framework these shelters have been unable to ensure equitable services tailored for those women who would have had the greatest need.

Although these community services are very complementary, however, they are not intended to replace the constantly crumbling social security. The State must also assume its role as protector, which it is doing less and less, with social assistance, employment insurance, hospital services or home care, legal proceedings and the immigration process.

In addition, the lack of social housing or free, professional interpreting services, delays in social assistance for low-rental housing, VCI, the justice system, lack of health network support, and so on, are all factors that weigh heavy on the abilities of shelters to support women.

3.1 Responding to the complex situations of women

Despite constant efforts to meet all of the needs, the work of shelters is limited by the glaring lack of funding, which leads to heartbreaking cuts and limited service offerings. Combined with the State's withdrawal of its commitment, thousands of women are turned away only to suffer more violence.

For example, when a shelter already accommodates three immigrant women speaking a language other than French or English, it will turn down the fourth request. Intervention would require an interpreter which means additional costs and time which the shelter does not have.

Unstable women are also particularly vulnerable; they are liable to lose custody of their children or even be deported under the *Immigration Act* before being protected by the Charters and Quebec's domestic violence policy.

Similarly, Canadian mothers sometimes lose custody of their children to violent partners for failing to provide a stable home even though their reason for staying in a women's shelter was to escape intimate partner violence and protect their children.

Women with disabilities will find little if any place in women's shelters because no adaptations have been made for persons with reduced mobility. Similarly, women coping with another form of physical or intellectual disability might not be able to take advantage of resources adapted to their needs.

Seniors might not be able to have more than one bath per week if there is no LCSS service.

Several shelters also often receive women who have just been discharged from psychiatric emergency services on Friday evenings, as if the caregiving teams are preparing for the weekend and trying to free up places in the hospital.

There are also more and more examples showing that shelters have been making do with the many and varied shortages in our different systems even without funding. However, they are no longer able to do so equitably, and abused women are the ones paying for the lack of political will.

We note a blatant shortage of:

- recurrent funding for the overall mission based on the number of places for existing shelters, having lost 20% of their budget in the last 15 years due to a lack of indexing;
- new places (several hundred in Quebec, or at least one additional shelter per region);
- free, professional interpreting services;⁵ and
- universal accessibility, since very few shelters have had adaptations for seniors or women with reduced mobility due to a lack of funding.

4. Joint cooperation of federal and provincial governments and agencies

- Absence of recurrent funding for Women's Shelters Canada and little for the GNWS, even though these are important agencies.
- Funding by project impedes the proper operation of organizations and obliges them to neglect their basic mission to focus on fundraising and reporting.
- Difficulty in tracing federal fund transfers to the provinces: What kind of oversight is there? What kind of assurance is there that the sums are actually sent to the organizations for which they were intended?

⁵ <http://fedec.gc.ca/publications/sous-financement-maisons-dhebergement-pour-women-facteur-aggravant-marginalisation>

4.1 Anticipated federal support

- A national action plan on violence against women, based on the model proposed by Women's Shelters Canada.
- A role as leader proposing national structural advances, beyond a strategy uniquely under federal jurisdiction.
- Shelters and transition houses are currently seriously underfunded. We recommend a significant, sustainable increase in core funding, based on community needs and not just population-based logic in order to consolidate the existing network. This funding should also enable the development of services, that is, increase the number of beds and women's shelters. It must also necessarily include significant funding for operations and dispensing of services.
- Infrastructure funding: no loans to be repaid by NPOs without resources or profit opportunity.
- Linkage with the provinces: if infrastructures are funded, services are also required. How can the provinces and the federal government be encouraged to agree?
- In the new housing strategy, 25% of the housing is dedicated to women. What assurance is there that these sums are really dedicated to housing for women?
- Compliance with international conventions by Canada and the provinces, particularly CEDAW and the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993) which stipulates that the countries are henceforth (as of 1993...) required to take all necessary measures to end violence against women.
- Compliance with the clear definition including the systemic nature of the continuum of violence against women.
- Compliance with the charter and priority of victim protection, before removing immigrant women without status, for example.

5. Conclusion: women's shelters at the heart of the solution

In conclusion, fighting violence against women in Canada is a battle with great expectations and immense needs which requires the participation of all stakeholders. We are counting on the federal government's leadership to foster individual and collective involvement.

We are especially counting on the political will of your openly feminist government to respect its international and national commitments to put an end to violence against women which is a denial of their fundamental rights.

Women's shelters are at the heart of the safety, dignity and empowerment of abused women and children.

When can we expect shelter recognition, funding and the development of the nationwide network equivalent to their undeniable contribution?