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Providing counselling, advocacy and support for abused women

Brief to the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights
Submitted by: Jennifer Dunn, Executive Director
London Abused Women's Centre (Canada)
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Chair and Members
Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights

The London Abused Women's Centre (LAWC) is a feminist organization that supports and advocates for personal, social and political change directed at ending male violence against women and girls. LAWC is a non-residential agency that provides women and girls over the age of 12 who have been abused, assaulted or exploited with immediate access to long-term, trauma-informed counselling, advocacy and support.

During LAWC's last fiscal year, a total of 9,235 women and girls received service.

LAWC appeared as a witness in 2014 and spoke in favour of the of the Canadian Victims Bill of Rights. We appreciate Senator Boissieu for his work on the Victims Bill of Rights.

The Victims Bill of Rights is an excellent tool that could be helpful for victims as it outlines the rights of victims as they enter the justice system. However, the Victims Bill of Rights is only as good as its implementation.

It takes an enormous amount of courage for women who are abused, trafficked and/or tortured to report to police and follow through the justice system. The process is long and painful. The courts often use a cookie cutter approach to justice rather than recognizing that the experiences of each and every woman are different. Women's experiences need to be recognized as unique. Failure you do so fails women and can send them back to their abusers.

Women's experiences of abuse are traumatic and can affect their cognitive abilities. This may leave them unable to navigate their way through the justice system. Dates can change frequently often with little notice, and the language used can be confusing. The rights of victims may easily be forgotten and the rights of women to information about the progress of their cases are often ignored. Women are not always consulted through the many stages of the process. When abused and trafficked women don't know what's happening, they are at continued risk of further violence.

When testimonial aid isn't offered, women may have to testify face to face with their abusers. One look from their abuser may be enough for a woman to change her mind about testifying. When abusers are self-represented, it's even more difficult. Women have to testify without any protection. She is exposed and vulnerable.

In 2015, the Victims Bill of Rights passed. It was intended to better support victims and witnesses. However, in too many cases, women are never advised of their rights.

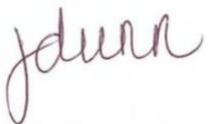
The truth is many women provided with service at LAWC have never been advised of their rights as a victim until they enter our office. Providing women with this information closer to the beginning of their journey through the justice system could help them make more informed choices.

The Victims Bill of Rights should continue to evolve. There is a need for ongoing reviews that should rely on the voices of women and girls with lived experiences, they are your experts.

The London Abused Women's Centre offers the following recommendations to the committee for the purpose of the study on the Canadian Victims Bill of Rights:

1. That a comprehensive evaluation tool for the Victims Bill of Rights be developed in collaboration with women who have been victimized by their partners, traffickers and/or sex purchasers, those with lived experience. The evaluation tool could be in the form of an online survey, in-agency round table, or other creative ideas proposed by women.
2. That the government ensure the Victims Bill of Rights is known by, referred to and referenced by Crown Attorneys and victim witness offices across the country. This means an effective training tool must be developed.
3. That a copy of the Victims Bill of Rights be provided to every victim who enters the criminal justice system, victim services and/or victim centred agencies.

The London Abused Women's Centre encourages the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights to proceed with its recommendations. The government has a duty to ensure all victims are supported.



Jennifer Dunn
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London Abused Women's Centre