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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

BILL C-31 WILL RE-VICTIMIZE WOMEN REFUGEES AND THEIR CHILDREN

Bill C-31, the Protecting Canada's Immigration System Act, will result in the arbitrary detention, intimidation, failure to protect, and ultimate re-victimization of highly vulnerable people who seek asylum in Canada, especially the most vulnerable among them, women and children.

If the changes proposed under Bill C-31 are passed into law, a significant number of women will never have their own risk of persecution or hardship assessed, prior to being deported from Canada.

The Barbra Schlifer Clinic, METRAC, and LEAF, three organizations dedicated to women's equality and to ending violence against women, presented their concerns about the Bill in a written Submission to the Commons Committee on Bill C-31, which concluded hearings this week.

Among other concerns, they say that designating certain countries as 'safe', will result in women being deported back to violent situations. "These provisions fail to recognize that women may experience systemic discrimination and unchecked gender-based violence in countries that are otherwise considered safe," says Barbra Schlifer Clinic Executive Director, Amanda Dale. "We regularly work with women who have been abused, without state protection, in the home countries they fled, such places as Portugal, St. Vincent and Mexico, to name but a few. Under Bill C-31, they would likely be forced to return to that violence."

The Bill will also likely lead to deportation of abused refugee women, before their circumstances are fully considered. "It's a clear reversal of Canada's previous leadership on helping women who face 'gender persecution' around the world. If the Bill becomes law, if a woman's refugee claim is tied to her abusive partner, she may not have been able to explain her full story. If she leaves him, she will not have the opportunity to re-open the file and have her personal case considered," says Dale.

Refugees over the age of 15 who arrive in Canada in an "irregular" manner, defined under the Bill, will face immediate imprisonment. The government recently reduced the period of detention from twelve to a possible six months, with very limited opportunity for review. But the potential hardship to abused women and children is still unconscionable. "The effect of such a measure on women fleeing violence, rape, incest and torture is potentially devastating, an additional trauma from a country which prides itself on humanitarianism," says Tamar Witelson, METRAC's Legal Director. Separation of young children from their imprisoned families could cause significant, lasting traumatic effects.

Joanna Birenbaum, LEAF's Director of Litigation, says, "in addition to conflicting with International covenants, the Bill appears to breach the equality and life, liberty and security of the person rights under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms."

Birenbaum further notes that “our concerns about this Bill may be starting to get through. Bill C-31 should be further amended to address the other serious concerns raised in our Submission. We encourage the government to consult with agencies who work with refugees and for women’s equality and safety from violence, to ensure its legislation and policies recognize and protect the safety of women and children.”

The Barbra Schlifer Clinic, METRAC and LEAF Submission can be downloaded at:

http://schliferclinic.com/vars/advocacy/Submission_to_Parliamentary_Committee_re_Bill_C-31_FINAL_2012_04_25.pdf; or

<http://leaf.ca/2012/05/leaf-barbra-schlifer-commemorative-clinic-and-metrac-oppose-bill-c-31-amendments-to-the-immigration-and-refugee-protection-act-which-put-refugee-women-at-risk/>

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