

Why gun control is really a gender issue

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Mavis Moore was 4 years old the first time she faced the barrel of a long gun. A neighbour pointed his .22 at the girl and her mother when they stopped by to pick up a newspaper in their small Saskatchewan town.

Sixty-eight years later, Moore remembers dropping one blue angora mitten in the snow as the man stood above them on his steps.

“You can’t imagine what it’s like, this adult man having a gun on you and threatening to kill you and your mother,” she says.

Moore’s mother picked up her child — and the mitten — and left. She never said anything to anyone, fearing the violence would escalate. It was the first time Moore was at risk from a man pointing a gun, but not the last.

Decades later, a fellow hunter aimed his cocked rifle at her in the northern Saskatchewan bush. He told her he mistook her 5-foot-4 frame, draped in red, for a moose.

Guns are a constant in the lives of rural Canadian women — one reason many of them as are as committed to gun control and the gun registry as their urban sisters. As the third-reading vote on a Tory backbencher’s private bill that would kill the registry draws near, members of a coalition of rural and urban women, shelter advocates and victims of violent crime are telling their stories. They want to counter the misinformation and political manoeuvring they contend obscure the real issue: safety.

Moore, who grew up in Crown Butte, Sask., says she is incensed at Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s characterization of the debate. On Tuesday, Harper played the rural/urban card again, citing the Liberals’ claim that those opposing the gun registry are supported by U.S. gun lobbyists.

“Now this, friends, is typical of the arrogant, intellectual contempt in which the Liberal party holds so many people, especially in rural Canada,” Harper told supporters in Edwards, Ont..

As a rural gun owner, Moore didn’t like the sounds of that.

“That makes me so mad,” she said in an interview from Saskatoon, where she still owns three licensed and registered long guns. “It’s not a matter of rural versus urban. It’s a public safety issue. How many women and children in rural Canada are threatened in their own homes with a gun? More than we want to know, I think.”

In fact, the urban/rural chasm, according to a Harris/Decima research poll released on Sept. 8, has narrowed to a small crack. The same percentage of urban and rural men (48 per cent) believe it’s a bad idea to abolish the registry, and there is only a five-percentage-point difference between urban and rural respondents who support abolishing the registry (37 per cent to 42 per cent).

The percentages were also close between those who thought it was a good idea to abolish the registry: 45 per cent of rural men versus 43 per cent of urban men.

According to the poll, 49 per cent of urban women believe it is a bad idea to abolish the registry, compared to 47 per cent of rural women. Just 30 per cent of urban women believe it's a good idea to abolish the registry, compared to 40 per cent of rural women.

Overall, 48 per cent of those surveyed believe it's a bad idea to abolish the registry, with 38 per cent supporting its abolition. (Harris/Decima interviewed just over 1000 Canadians. A sample of this size has a margin of error of 3.1 per cent, 19 times out of 20.)

The Conservatives are likely casting the issue as urban versus rural because they are playing to easily identifiable rural ridings that carry their base support, says Henry Jacek, a political science professor at Hamilton's McMaster University.

Driving a wedge between urban and rural is easier than exploiting the gender split on the issue, he says. "It's harder to say, 'This is a female constituency versus a male constituency.' "

Psychologist Peter Jaffe, who travelled the country listening to testimony as part of the Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women and Children from 1991 to 1993, agrees that the issue is not an urban/rural divide.

"It's spin," says Jaffe, academic director of the Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children at the University of Western Ontario.

"Certainly, in rural and isolated parts of Canada, you're more likely to find long guns. But you still find the same level of concern (there) around domestic violence, suicide and gun safety. The government has really approached this in a very divisive way to split Canadians rural versus urban, but that's simply not the case," Jaffe says.

Framing the debate divisively does not lead to meaningful discussion or problem-solving, he adds. The issue is not being for or against guns, Jaffe says: registering guns should be no different than registering cars.

If the average Canadian read the evaluation of the Canadian Firearms Program, which runs the registry, the debate would end, he says.

The evaluation of the registry reports that 81 per cent of police officers trained to use it believe it protects public safety. Officers can consult the registry before responding to a domestic violence call to ascertain whether there are guns on site.

In addition, more than 1,500 Canadians were refused licences for their guns from 2006-2009, on the basis of background checks triggered when they went to register the weapons. The majority of the refused licences — 39 per cent — were denied because of a deemed risk to others. The program revoked another 6,093 licences in the same period as a result of continuous screening, court orders and complaints to its public safety line.

"I think we've probably prevented some major events," says Dr. Barbara Kane, a psychiatrist in Prince George, B.C. The RCMP has called Kane asking whether she is concerned about certain individuals applying to register a gun. She believes such a call prevented tragedy after a millworker was fired.

"He could easily have gone into one of the mills and done something bad," she says. "But we were able to get his guns away from him."

Unfortunately, it's hard to document prevention.

"It's invisible," she says. "That's one of the problems the registry has."

It's also difficult to quantify the involvement of long guns in the threats and intimidation woven through domestic abuse, says staff at shelters for battered women and children. But women report the guns as an ever-present risk.

What *is* documented is that 69 per cent of suicides, homicides and accidental deaths in Canada involved long guns in 2004, a drop from 72 per cent of firearm deaths in 2001.

"Rural and farm women who experience violence in the home describe a cycle of intimidation with guns . . . which makes it really difficult for women even to report what's going on," says Jo-Ann Brooke, director of the Women's Sexual Assault Centre of Renfrew County in Pembroke, Ont.

Clients have told Brooks they support the gun registry because it takes the responsibility for reporting the presence of weapons out of their hands, and alerts police to the guns if they are called to a domestic violence incident.

The \$4-million annual price tag for running the registry is worth it, Brooke believes.

"Yes, we recognize the financial cost of the registry — but we feel addressing violence against women is a financial incentive that's worth taking," she says.

Priscilla de Villiers, whose daughter Nina was murdered by a man using a rifle, also wants to remind Canadians what will be lost if the gun registry is abolished.

"The genesis of this whole thing came out of the multiple deaths of young girls," she says. "What's at stake is not a piece of paper or a requirement that people have. What is at stake are lives."