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An Open Letter to Premier Dalton McGuinty and the Ontario Government

November 25, 2004

Dear Premier McGuinty:

On December 17th 1999 by [resolution 54/134](#), the General Assembly of the United Nations designated November 25 as the **International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women**. At that time, the UN invited governments, international organizations and non-governmental organizations to organize activities on that day to raise public awareness. Women's activists have marked November 25 as a day against violence since 1981. The date came from the brutal 1961 assassination of the three Mirabal sisters, political activists in the Dominican Republic, on orders of Dominican ruler Rafael Trujillo.

November is also designated "Wife Assault Prevention Month" by your government and on the government's behalf, Sandra Pupatello, Minister Responsible for Women's Issues, has reiterated your commitment to "make a difference as a government" to ending violence against women.

We support the commitment of all governments that take violence against women seriously and take meaningful steps to ensure all women's equality.

On this day, we have many concerns on our minds that spring from the experiences of women and children whose lives touch ours on a daily basis. There are so many needs, and those needs are increasing. Today, we have chosen to mention only a few and ask for your personal commitment to responding to them within the next year.

Social Assistance

For many women and children, poverty and violence are intermingled, one supporting the other. Regardless of their economic situation before they attempt to leave an abusive situation, many women will face extreme poverty when they escape as a result of cuts made to social assistance rates in 1995.

Your government has taken some steps to address attacks on the poor in Ontario, and we want to acknowledge these: the lifting of the lifetime ban on welfare for fraud; the raise of rates by 3% and the protection of education funds for children on welfare.

Still, however, women are forced to remain with or return to abusers because they cannot afford both food and housing. Over 90% of our members report that inadequate income support continues to be a deciding factor in whether or not women leave an abuser.

No woman should have to choose between violence and poverty.

Last April, your government received the final report of research entitled: *Walking on Eggshells: Abused Women's Experiences of Ontario's Welfare System*. In it, women speak of the similarities between experiences of violence and of being on welfare. The research shows that current rates and practices within Ontario Works further victimize women and children and make them more vulnerable to violence. Critical action to change this is needed now.

Housing

Women who leave abusive situations in Ontario often find there is no place to go. Because they are poor and because there has been little to no social housing built in Ontario for almost a decade, abused women remain trapped in violent homes.

According to the Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario (ACTO), Ontario is facing an affordable housing deficit of almost 80,000 units of new rental housing as a result of previous government housing policy. At the same time, there are an estimated 158,456 low-income households, representing more than 300,000 people, on social housing waiting lists across the province. Your government has promised to build 20,000 units, the amount that Ontario needs to meet the demand *each* year. The first year of your government has ended, and we are now waiting for action to honour this promise in the coming year.

Women's emergency shelters tell of the shocking impact of housing inadequacy in Ontario. Ninety percent of our member shelters report that most of the time, women must factor in lack of housing when they are deciding whether or not to stay with in a violent situation.

No woman should have to choose between a violent home and no home at all.

Ontario needs a substantial increase in low-income and subsidized housing now.

Domestic Violence Action Plan

A year ago, we were pleased to see you assign your Parliamentary Assistant, Laurel Broten, to consult on the needs of women and children who experience violence in their relationships. OAITH was part of that consultation and we were pleased that the Premier of Ontario was, in effect, taking personal responsibility for the Ontario Government's measures to address woman abuse.

One of the first steps taken toward a plan to address woman abuse has been the creation of a Ministerial Steering Committee on Domestic Violence to oversee a Domestic Violence Action Plan. This group was assembled to "elevate domestic violence as a priority and provide leadership in developing a coordinated approach that fully considers input from a broad range of groups". Although women's advocacy groups such as OAITH have provided this leadership since survivors first broke the silence about violence decades ago, no

representatives from women's independent community-based organizations have yet been invited to join this committee.

Inquests into the deaths of Arlene May and Gillian Hadley have concluded that to be effective governments must include women's advocates in process and implementation committees before any action is taken on issues of violence against women. On many occasions, your Party has promised to implement the inquest recommendations. Ongoing inclusion of women's advocates in implementing any action plan must be honoured.

We have the expertise and leadership you need to make effective changes. We need ongoing inclusion in the Ministerial Steering Committee on Domestic Violence now.

Make November a Month for Real Change

In November, we focus our work together on raising awareness of both the steps we have already taken and the road still before us on our quest for women's equality. Only concrete action to change the material conditions of women's lives will bring us to the end of our journey.

This month we ask your commitment and promise that these steps will be taken before we see another International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women:

1. Raise welfare rates to reflect the need as recommended in the inquest into the death of Gillian Hadley and the *Walking on Eggshells* research report. End all clawbacks of the Federal Child Tax Benefit and amend Ontario Works legislation to eliminate workfare.
2. Honour the promise to build "almost 20,000 new housing units for needy Ontario families."
3. Provide seats on the Ministerial Steering Committee on Domestic Violence for independent, community-based women's advocacy groups, including OAITH.

We look forward to your public commitment to these measures during November.

Sincerely,

The Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAITH)