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The Honourable Stephen Harper  
Prime Minister of Canada  
House of Commons  
Ottawa, Ontario

December 7, 2006

Dear Prime Minister Harper:

On behalf of the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAITH) I am once again writing to you with regard to the changes your government has made to the Court Challenges and Status of Women Programs.

We have been closely watching the discourse on the content of the changes and the impacts they will have on women's equality rights in Canada, both in the House of Commons and at the Commons Committee on the Status of Women. The continued defence of your elimination of the Court Challenges Program and the mandate and funding changes to the Women's Program are signals that your government does not understand the critical link between advocacy and equality, does not care, or deliberately intends to limit access to democratic processes for women and other equity seeking groups. We are deeply troubled by all of these possibilities.

Surely you must know that it is not enough to put women's human and equality rights on paper. They must be realized in the lived daily experience of women in all constituencies and social locations in the country. Your government has a responsibility to understand that this is not the current material reality for women in Canada and to actively, concretely remedy that situation. Canada made that commitment by enshrining equality rights in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. You personally made that commitment on January 18<sup>th</sup> of last year by promising to "take immediate and concrete measures, as recommended by the United Nations, to ensure that Canada fully upholds its commitments to women in Canada."

As a 75-member provincial association primarily of first stage emergency shelters for women and their children escaping violence, we are well aware of the inequities that women face. In Ontario alone, 242 women and 36 children have been murdered by intimate partners since 1995. This is just the tip of the iceberg of violence that is crushing women's lives in Ontario.

Women from Aboriginal communities all over this country are being targeted, brutalized, disappeared and murdered because they are Aboriginal and because they are women. Women of colour, women living with a disability, immigrant and refugee women, young and older women, women in rural and Northern communities, all face continuing sexist violence at work, at home, at school and in their neighbourhoods and in addition they must face discrimination and inequity as a result of their race, culture, language, age, ability or geographic location. Women's shelters work with women facing all of these forms of inequality on a daily basis.

The Honourable Beverley Oda, Minister Responsible for the Status of Women, has said that women in Canada are strong and already equal to men. As an organization of shelters confronting the brutality of men's violence against women and their children on a 24-hour, seven day a week basis, we can testify to the incredible strength and courage of women, but the assertion that they are equally valued is baseless. The claims of your government that the Court Challenges and Women's Programs are no longer needed are treacherous to women.

Yesterday, having acknowledged that the motive for the Montreal Massacre was "hatred of women," you said that in response your government was "making the streets safer for everyone: men, women and children". We disagree with your depiction of "safer streets" for women and children in Canada. Moreover, your statement displays a disturbing lack of understanding that most violence against women happens to them behind closed doors by men they know: a partner or boyfriend, an acquaintance or classmate, a close relative or co-worker, a caregiver. Mark Lépine was not alone in his hatred of women. He continues to have many 'brothers'.

It is clear from the ill-conceived decision to cut the Court Challenges Program and to slash staffing at the Status of Women Canada, as well as the elimination of advocacy and independent research in the mandate of the Women's Program, that the material conditions of women's lives and those of their children hold little interest for the "new government of Canada".

We would like to see you demonstrate leadership as Prime Minister in response to the growing concern of women across the country. You can reassure Canadian women that you wish, as you said yesterday, renewal of "national resolve to prevent and eliminate violence against women" by taking these immediate and concrete measures:

- ♀ Reinstatement of advocacy and independent research as eligible activities within the mandate of the Women's Program. Reinstatement of the goal of "equality" in the Status of Women mandate.
- ♀ Implementation of recommendations to increase Women's Program funding and provide core funding to women's groups, without cuts to Program infrastructure and internal policy research and equity-based analysis.
- ♀ Reversal of the decision to cut almost half of the Status of Women Program staff and to close Women's Program offices across Canada.
- ♀ Restoration of all funding to the Court Challenges Program.
- ♀ Restoration of funding announced by the last federal government for a national child care program.
- ♀ Adoption of proactive pay equity legislation.

We would appreciate your response to our concerns and our recommendations at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,



Eileen Morrow, Coordinator  
Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAITH)