Locked In
Left Out

Impacts of the Progressive Conservative budget cuts and policy initiatives on abused women and their children in Ontario.

Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAITH)
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Acknowledgements

Above all, OAITH would like to thank the women who wrote about their experiences addressing violence in their lives, and of its impact since the introduction of Progressive Conservative funding and service cuts. The lives of abused women and their children have become measurably more difficult and dangerous since these cuts have been implemented. We are extremely grateful, then, to these women who have had the courage to speak out about their experience in the face of these additional barriers to their human rights.

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More means more, and less means less

For almost 20 years, the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAITH) has worked to improve access to abused women's human and equality rights in Ontario. Our tenacious network of shelters and services supports and advocates for women who experience violence from intimate partners, and for their children who witness the abuse. OAITH has faced many challenges over the years. We have overcome some. Others confront us still.

We seemed to be moving forward, albeit very slowly--until the election of the Progressive Conservative government of Mike Harris in June of 1995. This government's actions have bolted shut the doors for women attempting to escape violence from within their homes.

Since coming to power in June 1995, the Ontario Progressive Conservative government has undermined the rights and freedoms of violence survivors and their children in all communities of the province. For many survivors, provincial government withdrawal of support for abused women is compounded by its abandonment of every marginalized and disenfranchised community still struggling for equality rights in Ontario. The Mike Harris government has worked to entrench social inequalities between the 'have's' and the 'have not's' through the erosion of the social safety net. With a mandate to become more "fiscally responsible" this government has taken what may well be termed the 'slash and burn' approach to social programs, an unfortunate but accurate description of Ontario's program delivery to violence survivors and their children.

Answering only to the concerns of financial interest groups, the Government of Ontario has shunned responsibility to the majority of citizens in the province. Refusing to consult with citizens or hear their concerns, it has dismissed opposition to its regressive policies as the self-serving complaints of "special interest groups." Ontario Cabinet Ministers, including the Minister Responsible for Women's Issues, have dismissed and openly insulted critics, social programs and individuals experiencing hardship as a result of budget slashing.

When critics provide proof of the suffering of people in Ontario, government leaders provide only scripted replies: social programs have bankrupt the provincial treasury, social services have been overspending for years, we can continue to provide all the services Ontario needs by doing "more for less."

Women in OAITH, women who work and live in abused women's shelters in Ontario know this from the bitter experience of our first year of the Mike Harris government. You don't get more for less. You get *less* for less. Less safety and service. Less support for children. Less justice. Less clothing. Less food. Less hope.
We in OAITH urge all who read this report to educate others and to organize for change.

Remember...

These women were murdered by their partners, or their partners/ ex-partners are awaiting trial for their murders, since June of 1995. May their names be the catalyst not only for our mourning, but for our action to end violence against all women.

♀ **Marcia Hylton**, 38, North York, mother of five. Stabbed to death in front of two of her children. Her five year old son was also stabbed in the attack while trying to protect his mother. Nathaniel Cyril Findlay jumped to his death from Marcia's balcony after the murder. (July 1995)

♀ **Kamlesh Sodhi**, 38, Brampton, mother of two. The body of Kamlesh was found by motorists lying by the side of a rural road. Her husband is charged in the murder. (July 1995)

♀ **Victoria Alty**, Mississauga. Victoria died of massive internal injuries after she was punched and kicked to death. Harold Rourie Alty was charged with second degree murder. (August 1995)

♀ **Carmine Jeannot**, 43, and **Josiane Jeannot**, 12. Gatineau. Joseph Jeannot, described by neighbours as a soft-spoken gentleman, shot his wife and daughter to death in their beds before fatally shooting himself. (June 1995)

♀ **Alayne Bryk**, 26, Hamilton. Shot to death by her estranged husband, who then shot himself. Family and friends said they thought the couple were "reconciling." (August 1995)

♀ **Maryanne Matesic**, 47, Hamilton. Maryanne had left her abusive husband, but had returned to the marital home, accompanied by her adult son, to collect her belongings. Her husband shot her to death. Her son grabbed the gun and shot his father. The son was charged with second degree murder. (October 1995)

♀ **Georgina Liu**, 22, Markham. Georgina was stalked and then beaten to death and dumped in a marshy area off Highway 401. She was studying to become an early childhood educator. Roderick Ballentino Brown was charged with first degree murder after attempting to shoot himself in front of police. (October 1995)

♀ **Janie Marie Maxwell**, 33, mother of one. Mississauga. Janie was beaten and kicked to death in an attack that went on for 20 minutes after an argument about a phone call she received from another man. Paul Anthony Beard was convicted and sentenced to seven years in prison. During sentencing, Judge John D. Smith described Beard as a man not known to be "a particularly violent man, but he has a problem with alcohol." (November 1995)

♀ **Donna Barr**, 43, mother of three. Perth. Donna and a male friend were shot to death by Donna's ex-husband, Kenneth H. Barr, who killed himself after the murders. Donna had been assaulted and threatened numerous times by Barr, but he received only a suspended sentence and an order to turn in his 20 guns. Neighbours described Kenneth Barr as "a very nice person and the best neighbour." (January 1996)

♀ **Stella McNicol**, 40, Scarborough. Stella was found dead in her home by police. Her boyfriend, Thomas Daniel Brenna was charged with second degree murder. (July 1996)

♀ **Bibi Hajra Alli**, 37, mother of two. Bibi died of head injuries from a blunt instrument. Divorce papers had been served on her husband just days before the murder. Bibi had been separated from her husband for about two months. Neighbours were shocked, saying: "They were very nice--a calm family." Mohamed Rafeek Alli was charged. (July 1996)

♀ **Paula Joy Hill**, 31, mother of one. Brantford. Stabbed to death in a motel room where she had checked in with her son. Her husband, Paul Frederick Hill, is charged with first degree murder. (April 1996)

♀ **Marsha Ottey,** 19, and **Tami Ottey,** 16. Toronto. Marsha and Tami were stabbed and slashed to death in the basement of their home. Marsha had broken up with her boyfriend eight or nine months before the murders. Her ex-boyfriend was described by acquaintances as "obsessive." After an extensive search, Rohan Alonzo Ranger, Marsha's ex-boyfriend, and Adrian Mathias Kinkead, were found and charged with two counts of first degree murder. (August 1995)

♀ **Juliet Reynolds**, 28, mother of two. Scarborough. Juliet was slashed and stabbed to death in front of her six-year-old daughter and baby son while waiting for an elevator in their apartment building. Adrian Daniel, her estranged husband, is charged with first degree murder. (May 1996)

♀ **Maria Sanchez**, 33, mother of three. North York. Maria was slashed and stabbed to death in her apartment by an assailant waiting there for her. Maria had told police she feared for her life two weeks before the murder. Her former boyfriend, Salvador Valera-Landrian, was out on bail on charges of assaulting her. He has been charged with first degree murder. (February 1996)

♀ **Shelley Morgan**, 35, mother of one. Aurora. Shelley was battered to death in her home. Common-law husband, Stewart Radford, was charged with second degree murder. (July 1996)

♀ **Marilyn Woodland**, 54, mother of one. Brampton. Marilyn was found stabbed and beaten to death in her home. Her husband, Keith Woodland, has been charged with murder. Family members described the couple as "very close." (September 1996)

♀ **Fran Piccolo**, 36, **Jason Piccolo**, 9, **Alisha Piccolo**, 7. Stoney Creek. Fran and her two children were stabbed to death in their home. Shane Allan Mulcahy, who had moved in with Fran and her children after she and her husband separated, has been charged with three counts of first degree murder. (September 1996)

♀ **Arlene May**, 39, mother of five. Collingwood. Arlene was shot after three of her children escaped from their home where they and their mother were being held. Randy Iles, Arlene's ex-boyfriend, who had been charged with assaulting Arlene more than once, but was out on bail under a restraining order, was charged with first degree murder. Arlene's murder will be the starting point of a "super inquest" into domestic murders of women in Ontario. (March 1996)

♀ **Isabelle Holland**, 50. Etobicoke. Isabelle was beaten to death after being stalked and assaulted on more than one occasion. Her ex-partner, separated from Isabelle for approximately two months, drove away in her car and was later found dead of apparent suicide. (March 1996)

♀ **Janice Lowery**. Barrie. Janice was found strangled to death in a country field near her home. Her husband has been charged. (May, 1996)

♀ **Carol Ann Leach**. Kilworthy. Carol was found stabbed to death hours after police attended a "disturbance." A police chase resulted in charging of her husband several hours later. He was out on bail following an assault on Carol Ann the week before her death. (March, 1996)

♀ **Jasmine Vanscoy**, 14. St. Catharines. Jamine was shot in her home with a gun stolen from a gun shop several years earlier. Jasmine had just had her picture taken in her new high school uniform. A 17-year-old youth has been charged with second degree murder. (September, 1996)

♀ **Stella Burdo**, 40. Toronto. Stella was stabbed to death in her Ontario Housing townhouse while a friend watched helplessly. Her sister wanted everyone to know that Stella had been trying to get out of the townhouse she was living in. "I want it to be said that Ontario Housing is not that much of help when someone is in a crisis," she said, according to a Toronto Star article of June 29, 1996. (June 1996)

♀ **Donna Allison Currier-Burns**, 32. Lansdowne. Mother of two. Police found Donna inside her home and had not determined the exact cause of death. Donna's common-law husband, Christopher Parmar was charged with second degree murder. (September, 1995)

♀ **Carol Butler**, 45. Croton. Carol was shot by her common-law husband, James Logan, with a gun returned to him by police after an earlier weapons charge against him, laid after a domestic call by police to their home, was withdrawn. Logan had also threatened to shoot Carol after a previous break-up. He committed suicide at the scene. Police described it as the "perfect example of domestic violence" but no one could explain why weapons charges were dropped. (June, 1996)

♀ **Jan Marshall**, 40. Alcona. Jan was found by police after a canoeing incident in which her husband told police their canoe capsized during a canoeing competition and only he was able to make it to shore. Winston Malcolm has been charged with first degree murder. (April 1996)

♀ **Patricia Abbott**, 40, mother of one. Fergus. Patricia was shot several times in the head at her home. Her estranged husband, Gordon Ray Abbott, has been charged with first degree murder. (October, 1996)

♀ **Gloria Jean Morden.** Gore Bay. Gloria Jean was shot to death by her ex-partner, who also killed his adoptive parents at the same time. (August, 1996.)

Cuts to the bone

Violence against women is a complex form of oppression. Every aspect of a woman's life is touched by it, controlled by the abuse she experiences. It touches every aspect of life for her and her children. Government cuts to women's shelters, while they highlight the impact of social program reductions on abused women, are only one part of a web of cuts to the supports women need to escape danger. To be free, survivors of violence--both women and child witnesses--literally need a safety *net* of programs and policies protecting their right to safety and equality.

The following list of cuts--all of which will jeopardize women's freedom from violence--will show clearly why the Government of Ontario, while professing a commitment to zero tolerance for violence, may be accused of abandoning the strategies that would achieve that goal.

Cuts to direct services for abused women and their children

The first blow to abused women after the swearing in of the Progressive Conservative government was the cut to services that directly work with survivors and their children--those services that, historically, have been the strongest advocates against violence. These services have supported countless numbers of survivors, often being credited with saving their lives. Women's grassroots services have educated the community, changed the policies and practices of systems, and provided the expertise needed to effectively pursue an end to violence against women. All of these services have been imperilled, where they haven't already been eliminated entirely.

"It's an attempt to run the government more like a business."

Mike Harris, Premier of Ontario. *Toronto Star,* April 5, 1996.

- **Emergency women's shelters:** On October 1, 1995, emergency shelters that provide front line crisis intervention to women experiencing violence received a 2.5% provincial funding cut; and in April 1996 another cut of 2.5%[1]. The cuts were part of a trimming for all "transfer agencies" (community programs receiving funding from the province) in the Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS). Shelters have been chronically underfunded since their inception almost 20 years ago. A 5% overall cut, therefore, has had dramatic consequences on services that shelters are able to provide. Furthermore, cuts to women's shelters must be examined in the context of MCSS requirements that services fundraise 20% of their costs for basic core services[2].

- **Second stage women's shelters:** On December 31, 1995, the Ministry of Community and Social Services eliminated all provincial funding for programs in second stage shelters for abused women and their children. The funding supported the majority of services to abused women and their children in second stages across Ontario. Services reduced or

Redefining core services for abused women

In October 1995, when funding for second stage shelter programs was eliminated, criticism from both women's services and the public was dramatic. Women hiding from abusers in second stages were so angry, they spoke openly to media and public meetings in spite of the risk to their safety.

In the Legislature, Opposition politicians criticized the cuts, suggesting programs were being destroyed. In response, Dianne Cunningham, Minister Responsible for Women's Issues, and David Tsubouchi, then Minister of Community and Social Services, repeatedly claimed that the Ontario government was continuing to provide the necessary "core services" in both first and second stage shelters.

The primary dispute focussed on Opposition claims that "core services" were being cut, and Government insistence that they were not. Both David Tsubouchi and Dianne Cunningham described "core services" in second stage shelters as limited to the housing subsidy for rental of the building units, along with funding for building management--like any other subsidized housing project. Opposition critics, and the women themselves, countered that "core services" in programs addressing violence against women were counselling, advocacy, child support and the other personal supports abused women need.

Dianne Cunningham defined her version of core services this way: "In today's announcement, we were referring to cuts in programs that did not affect the core necessary services for women who have been violated, who need shelters and second-stage housing. What we did take away were some counselling programs for women and their families that relate to psychological counselling, opportunities for finding new places to live, opportunities for discussing their concerns about child care, opportunities for returning to school, opportunities for getting a job, and all those programs exist in communities across Ontario..." (October 4, 1995)

Said David Tsubouchi: "The only services affected through the reduction with respect to the second-stage women's shelters were those of counselling...Our idea right now is to protect core services." (October 17, 1995)

In fact, the *only* definition of core services in shelters in the Violence Against Women Prevention Program in Ontario is found in MCSS Shelter Funding Program documents outlining the funding formula mechanism for first stage shelters for abused women: "Services included in the new formula are:

1) shelter and safety
2) crisis intervention, counselling and support to women and their children
3) administration
4) children's support worker
5) emergency transportation
6) crisis telephone services"

No separate definition of core services in second stages exists. Second stages shelters have always operated on the assumption that "core services" were defined essentially the same for both levels of shelter.

eliminated included counselling for women and children, advocacy, language interpretation, and other programs[3].

"I'm guessing there will be a few voices of protest denying the need for the measures that we are going to outline."

Mike Harris, *Toronto Star*, November 28, 1995.

Second stages provide temporary housing for three months to a year. They are used by women who have been unable to secure permanent housing, have multiple barriers to escaping abuse, or need additional support. Since women in second stage shelters have decided to separate permanently from abusive partners, they may be particularly vulnerable. Survivors in second stage shelters use the service during the first few months after leaving an abusive relationship, a time when women are often stalked, harassed, assaulted and murdered by former partners.

- **Crisis lines:** Cuts were made by the Harris government to provincial funding of 24-hour crisis intervention phone lines in Ontario, including The Assaulted Women's Helpline in Toronto and SOS Femmes, the only crisis phone line assisting Francophone women in distress[4]. These crisis intervention lines are front line services, and are often the first contact with assistance for women fleeing from violence.

"These cuts of the government have affected my family profoundly. I seem to be caught in a crack, as I hear so many others are. My abusive and controlling ex-husband has the ultimate control over us now."

Dorothy. A survivor.

- **Community counselling:** The 5% cut to all MCSS transfer agencies included cuts to those counselling programs *specifically* addressing violence. Largely delivered by family and children's service agencies in Ontario, these programs provide individual and group support for both women and child witnesses experiencing violence. Also eliminated was MCSS funding for "purchase of service" counselling paid to community agencies on the basis of counselling sessions rather than programs. Some of this funding had provided individual and group counselling for abused women and their children[5].

- **Child protection:** Children's Aid Societies had budget reductions as a result of provincial cuts. These services provide supports to children experiencing violence, including support to child survivors of incest[6].

- **Multi-service agencies:** Multi-service programs provide a variety of services to racially and culturally diverse communities of women, and celebrate the cultural diversity of women in Ontario[7]. Many of these services support abused women who experience barriers to accessing mainstream services, including shelters, as a result of racism and lack of language-specific services.

- **Culturally specific services:** First Nations and Aboriginal social service programs were also reduced[8]. Community counselling groups for specific racial and cultural communities[9] as well as services specifically for Francophone women also received severe cuts[10]. Many of these services gave direct counselling and advocacy support to abused women and their children on addressing issues of violence.

- **Community advocacy:** Services providing housing and legal advocacy were cut along with other frontline agencies funded by MCSS. Agencies such as housing help centres, free legal clinics and so on, have been used frequently by abused women attempting to find safe, affordable housing, or to explore their legal rights. Provincial cuts also affected provision of necessities such as food and clothing for abused women starting anew.

Cuts to other essential supports for abused women

Most critical among the supports survivors use to leave an abusive situation are those programs and supports women and children need to provide basic needs (such as food and shelter), address legal issues, become financially independent and ensure the health and safety of themselves and their children. All women leaving an abusive relationship, whether or not they use, or have access to direct shelter and counselling services, will find fewer supports as a result of funding cuts by the Government of Ontario.

"It is important that the public and all partners in the justice system understand the implications cuts to legal aid will have on the administration of justice in Ontario."

Susan Elliott, Head of the Law Society of Upper Canada, in "Changes to Ontario's Legal Aid Plan, a Guide for Legal Aid Lawyers."

Legal Aid: In October 1995, the Attorney General of Ontario cut the Ontario Legal Aid Plan, managed by the Law Society of Upper Canada, by $153 million over the next three years[11]. In response, the Law Society has made drastic changes to both the eligibility criteria for legal aid and to the fees Ontario lawyers may charge for providing legal services to clients receiving legal aid assistance[12]. The eligibility changes included making "spouse or child at risk" a priority for assistance, but the definition of "at risk" has still not been determined, other than to restrict it to physical abuse. Guidelines for assistance in family law matters, already underfunded by the Plan, cut the hours lawyers can bill for divorce, child custody and access, support, and property settlements dramatically, sometimes by half.

Other changes affecting abused women included the introduction of fees for applications to the Plan, a lower limit on certificates issued per year, restrictions on legal aid recipients changing lawyers, and restrictions on eligibility for immigration and landlord/ tenant matters. A program offering one free two-hour legal consultation for abused women, initiated in conjunction with the Ontario Women's Directorate, has also been limited.

Angry reaction to the changes from lawyers included refusing to proceed in court cases and refusing to accept legal aid clients. Abused women have been caught in the ensuing battle between the Law Society, the Ministry of the Attorney General, and lawyers in both criminal and civil areas of law.

"When you got no money, you got no money and you've got to make do with what you can do."

David Tsubouchi, former Minister of Community and Social Services, *Toronto Star*, September 18, 1995.

- **Criminal and family courts:** The so-called "business plan" of the Ministry of the Attorney General of Ontario proposes elimination of 1,807 staff within the ministry and dramatic changes to the administration of justice in the province[13]. Reductions in the number of court officials and prosecutors has resulted in chief judges in Ontario predicting "chaos" for criminal court proceedings[14]. For abused women, who must testify as "victim witnesses" in assault trials, the chaos caused by cuts will only increase the pressures of a justice system chronically unresponsive to their needs.

- **Social Assistance:** On October 1, 1995, welfare recipients received a 21.6% cut to their monthly assistance cheque from the provincial government[15]. These cuts drove recipients **further** below the poverty line[16]. On a monthly basis, a sole support parent with one child currently receives a *maximum* of $511 for rent, and $446 for food, clothing, transportation, and other basic necessities[17].

"The best solution would be to be able to get subsidized day care. If you can't, maybe you have to look back at what we used to do 20 or 30 years ago when your mother had to get out. You maybe just get somebody else to babysit for them."

David Tsubouchi, former Minister of Community and Social Services, *Toronto Star*, September 18, 1995.

- **Housing:** Along with social assistance shelter allowances, housing subsidies to tenants whose rent exceeds social assistance guidelines were cut by 21.6%. In some cases, social assistance recipients were threatened with termination of benefits unless they moved into less expensive housing[18]. Funding for creating new co-operative housing has been frozen[19], and the government is strictly adhering to full market/rent geared to income ratios within co-op housing. The government announced its intention to sell off its current low-income housing, but has since wavered on that pledge. Ontario has also announced plans to eliminate rent control in Ontario, the only protection that renters have against uncontrolled market forces[20].

- **Child care:** Changes to child care delivery and subsidies for low income women in Ontario have reduced crucial support for women escaping violence. In August 1996, the government released the results of a child care "review" suggesting 15,000 new child care spaces could be created by a number of changes to child care delivery, including recommending lower wages for staff, subsidies for space in unlicensed, unregulated child care arrangements, increases in

child to staff ratios and decreases in government inspections[21].

But according to the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, subsidies for child care spaces have already been reduced by 9,000 in the first year of the Tory government rule[22], and most municipalities in Ontario are not accepting any new applicants for subsidized day care[23]. The Coalition is skeptical about claims that a significant increase in spaces will actually occur[24].

- **Language interpretation services:** Cuts were made to interpretation services for women whose first language is not English or French. The cultural interpreter service for multi-lingual access to social assistance was eliminated, cutting off this important option for abused women needing to seek financial assistance to leave abuse[25].

"I'm going to be using a driver until the winter time and then I'm going to hook up my two huskies and husky my way down here. You suggest what you would like me to do. You want me to take WheelTrans? That will solve the problem if the Minister of Transportation takes the bus to work in the morning?"

Al Palladini, Minister of Transportation, defending his use of a limousine and chauffeur. *Toronto Star*, August 10, 1995.

- **Services for people with disabilities:** Abused women with disabilities will encounter increased barriers to escaping danger or using what services remain for addressing violence. For example, funding for WheelTrans, public transit for persons with disabilities in Toronto, was reduced, and eligibility for use of the service restricted by a new definition of "disability." Persons that are approved to access this service must now pay a user fee when applying for registration. Doctors forms that confirmed eligibility for the pay-per-use service are no longer acceptable as "proof" that the service is needed.

  Current users are now required to attend an interview where their abilities are measured according to the "level of physical functional ability in the home, within the area immediately surrounding the home, and in the community at large, as well as permanency of disability[26]." An internal government document leaked from the Ministry of Community and Social Services in October 1996, further recommends charging user fees for training and rehabilitation to people with disabilities, tightening of eligibility for determining "disability" and limiting the right to appeal MCSS decisions by persons with disabilities[27].

- **Violence prevention education:** If our goal is to eliminate violence against women, public and professional education is a crucial step to that end. Public education promotes community support for abused women to live violence free lives. Funding for community efforts to end violence against women have now been drastically reduced.

Education Wife Assault, for example, the only service in Ontario providing province-wide education on violence against women, had its funding eliminated. This service operates a resource centre, and provides educational programs to schools and communities. It has managed to secure some funding for a period of time, but Education Wife Assault is now forced to adopt pay-per-use service delivery for previously free anti-violence education as a result of cutbacks[28].

The Ontario Women's Directorate provides grants for anti-violence initiatives and community projects across the province. These grants were crucial to providing an opportunity for groups to advance women's equality rights in Ontario. Over the next two years, the OWD will reduce the funding for administration of Violence Against Women Prevention programs and reduce grants by $2.7 million[29]. In 1997, the OWD plans on cutting funding to women's centres by 10%, and grants programs will also be reduced another $1.5 million[30]. Over two years, 52 full-time staff working at the OWD will be terminated as a result of cuts in the Directorate's budget[31].

Cuts that compound

Women's lives are not defined only by abuse they suffer at the hands of intimate partners. Nor can their experiences of violence be narrowly defined within their personal relationships. Destroying services in the following areas further prevent abused women and their children from gaining their freedom from all forms of violence against women.

"I'm sure there are some segments and special interests within the black community that will be turned off by anything we say or do--I think that's a given."

Bob Runciman, Solicitor General of Ontario, *Toronto Star,* July 7, 1995.

- **Anti-racism and anti-discrimination work:** Severe cuts and changes have been made to programs and policies that specifically work to end racism, create or ensure the rights of First Nations and Aboriginal Peoples, and assist persons with disabilities. This area includes anti-racism education, advocacy, and legal protection for disenfranchised communities[32].

- **Education and training:** Women have seen large increases in their tuition fees for post secondary education and cuts to training programs as a result of provincial budget reductions of 20%[33]. Further cuts and increases are expected in these areas. Women who are recipients of welfare are no longer able to attend school[34], thus Harris has taken steps to ensure that post secondary education is a prerogative only for those who are financially well off. For abused women leaving

violent situations, with hopes to rebuild and improve their lives and those of their children, cuts to education and training are a serious blow.

"I can't tell you how many millionaires started out with minimum wage jobs."

Mike Harris, Premier of Ontario, explaining how a single parent can get off welfare. *Toronto Star*, September 19, 1995.

- **Pay equity:** The Ontario Government has frozen funding to support pay equity implementation guidelines required of women's workplaces in the broader public sector[35]. Pay equity by "proxy comparator," the method used to bring equity to over 80,000 women working in poorly paid workplaces, such as women's shelters, has been eliminated. The current government favours a voluntary pay equity policy which requires women to launch--and win--a public complaint against their employer before equity is assured.

For many women, especially women fleeing violence or experiencing other forms of discrimination, this is an onerous and unfair expectation. Pursuing justice for these women may come at the cost of their safety, as well as their employment. A recently leaked document from the Ontario Ministry of Labour indicates the Ontario Government may be planning "extensive amendments" to pay equity legislation[36].

"Employment Equity covers the disabled, for example, but it's the wrong way to deal with the disabled. What we are saying to an employer is, 'Now here is a disabled person, only 50 per cent as good as an able-bodied worker and you must hire them and pay them as much as an able-bodied person'."

Mike Harris, *Toronto Star,* May 30, 1995.

- **Employment equity:** Also eliminated was the provincial employment equity legislation that ensured protection for women, People of Colour, First Nations and Aboriginal Peoples, and people with disabilities, in hiring and promotion practices. The Employment Equity Commission has been eliminated. As a result, it is now easier for employers to discriminate against marginalized women in the workplace[37]. To replace employment equity in Ontario, the provincial government has proposed an Equal Opportunity Plan which would again put the onus on victims of discrimination to challenge unfair practices in a public complaints process.

Cuts to advocacy, consultation and other essential programs

Professional and government education and consultation on woman abuse issues has been curtailed. In the past, equality seeking groups were able to consult with and advise professionals, community groups and government officials to create changes supporting abused women, and to promote women's human rights. Their expertise led to change in systems often guilty of "re-victimizing" abused women and their children. For example, pressure from women's advocates resulted in a priority status for abused women on waiting lists for government subsidized housing, to mandatory arrest of abusers and to development of protocols on 'domestic violence' in many police departments and hospitals.

"We think we can get this advice for free, and we think we can get it in a more broad base across Ontario rather than restricting the advice to a few people who happen to sit on a particular committee."

Dave Johnson, Chair of Management Board on eliminating advisory councils. *Toronto Star*, May 30, 1996.

- **Advocacy for women's equality rights:** On October 31, 1995, the day before the beginning of Wife Assault Prevention Month in Ontario, the Ministry of Community and Social Services eliminated 100% of its funding to the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAITH) and to other associations working on social program issues. Other advocacy groups for women, such as the Disabled Women's Network of Toronto, also lost all provincial funding.

- **Women's advisory work:** The Ontario Advisory Council on Women's Issues, the government's own appointed advisors on women's equality issues, was disbanded and its funding eliminated. It was replaced by "Community Talks" at the discretion of the Minister Responsible for Women's Issues[38]. It is still unclear how and when these "talks" occur. OAITH has not been informed of their schedule, although we have asked about it, nor has the Association been invited to attend.

- **Health care:** Reductions or closures within the health care system in Ontario place abused women and their children in grave danger. Violence against women and children is one of the primary causes of injury to women[39], requiring emergency care and often longer term health care[40].

- **Criminal injuries compensation:** Some abused women have relied on this compensation program to recover costs and damages from physical and psychological injuries caused by abuse. Cuts to the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board (CICB) have not yet affected financial awards for compensation, according to CICB officials[41]. The Attorney General of Ontario has expressed concern about the escalating cost of the program and favours a full review of the Board. In a meeting with women's anti-violence groups, including OAITH, on October 17, 1996, he expressed concern that some deserving applicants weren't getting just compensation because others were "getting it for bumps and bruises[42]." He favours rejecting claims for general damages and expressed some support for restricting compensation to criminal injuries such as those resulting from violence against women.

- **Intervention with abusers:** MCSS funding has been eliminated for male batterers programs in Ontario[43]. Some funding, however, still exists within the Ministry of the Solicitor General and Correctional Services.

- **Community coordination:** Community coordinating committees, which attempt to promote coordination of services and protocols addressing 'domestic violence' in communities across Ontario received a 100% cut in provincial funding support[44]. Ironically, Premier Mike Harris has strongly encouraged coordination of programs, arguing that it is less costly and more efficient. He and his Minister of Finance, Ernie Eves, have also been strong salesmen for 'community responsibility.'

The consequences--impacts of the cuts

In October, 1995, January, 1996, February, 1996 and again in August, 1996, OAITH conducted informal surveys of emergency shelters and second stage shelters across Ontario to document the effects of cuts. Both types of shelters are a primary link to abused women and are, therefore, the most knowledgeable about women's day-to-day experiences before and after funding cuts.

Results show the impact of cuts on both the services and individual women and children accessing them was significant. Although effects varied with the amount of provincial funding previously relied upon, all of our surveys described effects that cannot be ameliorated by seeking "innovative ideas," finding "efficiencies," or doing "more for less," in the rhetoric of Premier Mike Harris.

Initial impacts on emergency shelters for abused women

"We struggle every day to meet the needs of women with current minimal resources, with the threat of more cuts. We are struggling to do the best we can but our resources, personally and community-based are slowly diminishing at the same time that violence and abuse continues to escalate."

First stage emergency shelter director. September, 1996.

Emergency shelters provide a range of programs and services assisting women to live lives free from violence: 24-hour safe shelter with security, 24-hour crisis intervention by phone, individual and group counselling to women and child witnesses, and emergency transportation to shelter. Shelters also act as advocates for women and children accessing housing, legal, and other community systems when they are unresponsive to women's needs.

Community coordination efforts have most often been a shelter-driven initiative, and education, prevention, and consultation have been at the forefront of the work that emergency shelters provide. All of this work is considered by advocates to be "direct service" to individual women and children in local communities since without it, many abused women and their children would be forced to return to violent homes.

At the time of initial cuts to both first and second stage women's shelters, both Dianne Cunningham, Minister Responsible for Women's Issues, and David Tsubouchi, then Minister of Community and Social Services continually insisted that "core services" in women's shelters were a priority and that they were committed to preserving emergency shelter services in spite of cost-cutting by the province[45]. Our surveys of emergency shelters, however, show a significantly different picture.

First stage women's shelters **are** struggling in the aftermath of reduced funding. Programs that were integral to the support and assistance women and their children received at a shelter, are now being reduced to bare minimum. As a result, some programs are inaccessible when most needed. In other cases, programs have been eliminated altogether. Both abused women and the women that work in the shelters are taking the consequences for government actions.

Women's shelter use in Canada

- 85,259 women and children were admitted to all types of women's shelters in Canada in 1994/95 (356 facilities reporting).
- 79% of women in the shelters were admitted to escape abusive situations.
- 70% of the women admitted for reasons related to abuse were fleeing a physically abusive situation, 47% indicated threats, and 20% reported sexual abuse. In 64% of all abusive situations, the spouse/partner was cited as the abuser, and in 21%, the abuser was identified as an ex-spouse/ partner.
- Just under 25% of abused women using shelters required medical attention and 3% required hospitalization. The most recent incident of abuse was reported to the police by 33% of the women, and in 56% of these reported cases, charges were laid.
- The majority of women's shelters (75%) are transition homes for abused women and their children. Between 1993 and 1995, however, increasing numbers of women had to use homeless shelters and safe homes where stays are limited to a few nights.
- 75% of the abused women using the shelters were admitted with children. Almost half of the children were under five years of age. 30% of women admitted indicated that they were protecting their children from psychological abuse, 16% from physical abuse, 14% from threats, and 6% from sexual abuse.
- Services most often provided to shelter residents for the benefit of children were: individual counselling for children (75%) and parenting (73%). Other frequently offered services were group counselling for children (58%) and child care (babysitting) (53%).
- Culturally sensitive services for First Nations/ Aboriginal children were provided in 39% of women's shelters. 35% of shelters provided services for "ethnocultural and minority" children.
- Some also provided services to non-residents, such as individual (39%) and group counselling (31%) for children.
- On May 31, 1995, 266 women's shelters in Canada reported receiving 3,185 requests for various services from non-residents on that day.

Source: 1994-1995 Transition Homes Survey. Statistics Canada. December 1995.

After the first cuts to shelters were announced, shelters in many areas of Ontario reported a sharp drop in "occupancy rate," the calculation representing use of the beds shelters have available at any given time. As the cuts progressed and women began to once again attempt to leave abusers, more shelters began to report an increase in occupancy occurring when women already in the shelters are unable to move out as a result of difficulties accessing services and affordable housing.

"After the cuts in October, we were virtually empty during the months of November and December. We felt that women were frightened to try to imagine life away from the abusive situation--trying to survive with children on social assistance."

Shelter director. Southern Ontario. August 1996.

Some first stage emergency shelters have been forced to limit service to women and children actually living in the shelter, excluding those women previously supported within the community, where crisis intervention counselling is typically not otherwise available.

At a conservative estimate, there were a minimum of 33.5 full/part time shelter counselling and advocacy positions eliminated in OAITH member shelters in the first few months after cuts were implemented. To avoid layoffs, others cut back the number of hours staff work, and still others reluctantly asked staff to accept a cut in their already inadequate pay. In many first stage shelters, travelling expenses, job training and professional development were cut and/or eliminated, while staff now shoulder increasing responsibility.

Cuts have been made to repairs, maintenance, furnishings and equipment budgets, which will have a negative effect on the physical environment of shelters for abused women, and may have implications for maintaining standards requested by provincial licensing arrangements.

In addition to impacts outlined above, surveys conducted in October, 1995, and January, 1996, also noted a number of other impacts:

- Shortened hours for drop-in counselling for abused women in the community.
- Decrease or elimination of supports for abused women in other community services.
- Decrease in accompaniment and advocacy to help women access community supports.
- Decrease in interagency coordination work.
- Reduction of funding within shelters for maintaining crisis phone lines.
- Elimination of in-shelter child care supervision while mothers attend to their efforts to address violence issues. This has been

offered separately from child support counselling programs in some women's shelters in response to survivor needs.

- Elimination of nutrition programs and a decreased ability to operate in-house food supports for abused women and children living in communities without established food banks.

Impacts on second stage programs for abused women

Second stage shelters provide subsidized housing and support services to abused women for three months to a year after their six-week stay in emergency shelter. Before the cuts, counsellors in second stage women's shelters offered both individual and group counselling to women and their children, and provided advocacy within legal, housing, and other systems. These shelters also encouraged women to live independent lives by offering programs concerning parenting, help with budgeting, and other life skills. Second stages also operated as supportive communities and offered recreational programs for the children, or social events for the families staying there.

"Since the cuts have taken place, it feels as though we have been cut off from the rest of the world. With slashed budgets, we are no longer able to afford the time, effort or money required to communicate with other second stages, lobby the government or protest the cuts. Just like abused women, in isolation, we are redirecting our efforts to surviving."

Executive Director of a second stage shelter. South West Ontario. February 1996.

That was then. This is now. Second stage shelter has changed dramatically, existing in some cases only as a building housing subsidized rental units for women[46]. In at least one community, the second stage has closed and in others, there are no staff for assistance except in emergencies.

The absence of staff in second stage shelters has created security concerns. Because of the enhanced vulnerability some women face, the loss of staff and supports to them has prompted some abused women to describe themselves as 'sitting ducks' for further violence.

The February survey results

In February, 1996, after the implementation of the 100% cut to second stage programs on January 1, OAITH sent a survey to 24 second stage programs in Ontario asking how the programs had adjusted to the loss. Sixteen programs returned the survey. One survey was returned to sender because the second stage had closed. Statements below show the impact of the cuts. The chart entitled: "Second Stage Housing Program Survey Results" on page 21 outlines the programs offered before and after the cuts were implemented. It shows the dramatic loss of programs to women and children. It is probable that the total number of programs lost across Ontario is higher, since not all second stage shelters returned the survey.

Second Stage Housing Program Survey Results			
Program type	**# before cuts**	**# after cuts**	**Total lost**
Individual counselling for women	16	4	12
Group counselling for women	14	8	6
Individual counselling for children	12	3	9
Group counselling for children	11	2	9
Systems advocacy for women	14	8	6
Interpreter services for women whose first language is not English	8	4	4
Supports such as life skills, budgeting, parenting support, social supports and children's recreational programs	11	2	7 (2 others were reduced)

"They will still have counselling available from within their own community. There will be services available and it's up to the local communities to work very hard to make it work."

Dianne Cunningham, Minister Responsible for Women's Issues, *Hansard,* October 24, 1995.

100% of second stages who replied to our survey said there were no other services that could absorb their programs.

The second stage survey also illustrated a number of other significant effects caused by the elimination of funds. As above, where numbers are given, we can expect them to be conservative based on the number of surveys returned:

- Of the 68% of surveys returned, the *average* cut to second stage housing was approximately 59% of the total programming budget. Program cuts were as high as 100% (where programs received only provincial funding) and as low as 0% (in programs not receiving any provincial funding).
- A total of 29 full-time and part-time jobs were lost in only the 16 housing programs reporting as a result of the cuts.
- Almost all of the respondents to the questionnaire stated that they would ***not*** be able to restore the shortfall through fundraising. The remainder were doubtful that this was a viable solution, but felt compelled to try.
- **100%** of the second stage housing operators that had previously received provincial funding had to eliminate or alter programs and supports for women and children. Of the programs they were able to save, the majority of respondents reported that services would be offered, but in limited form, with a reduced amount of time devoted to them.

- Second stage shelter counsellors were experiencing increased burn-out, stress, frustration and an increasing sense of hopelessness.

The August survey results

In August, 1996, OAITH conducted a survey of 54 of its members in all regions of Ontario. We received 38 responses, a return rate of 70.4%. Shelters were asked a number of questions updating information on the effects of the Ontario government cuts. More specifically, they were asked to focus on the impacts occurring since April 1996, when funding cuts were implemented for the 1996/1997 fiscal year and when cuts to Legal Aid were to be introduced. Shelters were also asked to report any changes to the municipal per diems--a program cost-shared 80%/20% by the Province of Ontario and local municipalities.

"...we intend to provide the programs that are necessary and the core programs that we promised during the campaign and for which we have a very strong mandate on behalf of the citizens of this province."

Dianne Cunningham, Minister Responsible for Women's Issues. *Hansard,* October 25, 1995.

Overall, shelters reported significant impacts from the cuts and described a variety of unwelcome strategies they had been forced to adopt to adjust to the crisis. Some programs were eliminated within the shelters. In other shelters staffing was reduced or salaries were cut. Most shelters reported that the so-called "restructuring" encouraged by the Ontario government was difficult and destructive to appropriately addressing violence against women.

Per Diems: Among our survey respondents, per diem rates ranged from $29.81 to $34.50. In some areas, however, rates were lower for children. Although at the time of the survey, most shelters reported that per diems were stable, some were anticipating a decrease for 1996/97. One local municipality refuses to pay per diems for "non-residents," [women seeking safety outside of the local community], and will no longer pay for residents after December 1996. Another shelter reports that MCSS will pay per diems only for women who qualify for social assistance. Women with *any* other source of income are ineligible for support for shelter stay. In the same shelter, personal needs supplements, paid directly to a woman for basic personal essentials, has been reduced to only $3.70 per day.

"OPP officers [in our community] have, on their own, taken on the role to monitor shelter expenses and policy for waste and mismanagement."

Shelter director in North East Ontario describing how the cuts have provided a weapon for some hostile police officers. July 1996.

Services or program losses: Shelters reported a variety of losses and reductions in service for women and their children. Individual shelters made different choices about what programs would have to be cut. The following list describes some of those losses:

- 11 shelters have reduced or eliminated prevention, education and outreach programs that serve women who cannot access the shelter itself

- counsellors cannot spend as much time with each woman
- food and supplies have decreased
- there is a decrease in the amount of bus and subway tickets supplied by the shelter for women who must attend court, school meetings, lawyers' appointments, etc. but who have no money for transportation
- crisis line budgets continue to be reduced
- support groups for women and children have ended in some shelters
- court support has declined
- lifeskill programs and children's counselling has been reduced

- youth services were cut in some areas
- culturally-specific services were lost in some shelters
- some shelters introduced user fees as a result of the cuts
- second stage shelters, which use a rent-geared-to-income formula to establish rent levels, experienced further funding losses as a result of cuts in social assistance

"Our shelter has very little funds available for materials and equipment and <u>no</u> funds available for outings with the children."

Shelter director in North West Ontario. August 1996.

Effects on children's programming: Seven shelters reported layoffs of counsellors working with child witnesses of violence, and others stated that they are using a split shift, or reduced hours for their child support worker. Resources to run children's programs are scarce: some shelters have little or no equipment and materials, or if purchases are made, they must be first approved by the MCSS program supervisor who oversees their funding contract. Outings have now been eliminated for children staying in many shelters, and the amount of supervised recreation time has decreased. One shelter has stopped in-house group counselling work with child witnesses and now must refer child witnesses to a community service without specific expertise in violence against women. These outside referrals have increased the shelter's transportation costs.

Effects on shelter staffing levels: Shelters for abused women are, like many social programs, labour intensive. That is, the majority of the budget goes to pay for the counsellors who provide the service. To accommodate severe budget cuts, social programs are forced to reduce staff, thereby reducing services or service quality. OAITH August survey results highlight a serious loss of service for abused women in Ontario.

- over 50% of shelters responding cut staff positions after the cuts in April 1996
- over 25% report cutting back to 1 counsellor on any shift; 3 shelters reported never having been able to double staff on a shift. For this group, the future of the shelter itself is in jeopardy

- over 25% of respondents reduced hours for each staff member
- in some shelters, sick staff are not replaced by relief workers
- there is less staff time to answer emergency crisis phone lines
- some shelters are relying more on volunteers
- one shelter reported it was forced to merge with another service, or lose funding
- in one shelter, staff see women outside of work hours in order to provide enough support to women in crisis

Impact on shelter workers: Impact on shelter workers in Ontario has been dramatic. Funding cuts have created an atmosphere of uncertainty and job insecurity. Workers faced with a cut in pay or reduced work hours accompanied by an increase in workload are experiencing high levels of stress, frustration, and burn-out in a field already familiar with the negative effects of working in a highly stressful, even dangerous, workplace. As a result, shelter workers are becoming ill more often, experiencing more absenteeism from stress, and talking more about leaving the field.

"[There is] lowered morale due to political, economic and other equality rights regression. Workers are angry and fatigued due to government and societal backlash to women's rights."

Shelter worker in North East Ontario shelter. August 1996.

Erosion of the level of support counsellors can give women has resulted not only in decreasing job satisfaction, but depression, anger, and traumatization. One worker asks, "Are workers the only ones who feel support and programs are deserved [by abused women]?" Shelter workers report that they feel "set up for failure" as a result of underfunding in programs and services. Shelter workers in many areas are now being required by MCSS to document their work in detail and to justify their existence to MCSS. Under such circumstances, it is difficult to remain positive for the women staying at the shelter.

Testimony from the front lines

"Of all the years I have worked in shelters for abused women and their children, this, by far, has been the worst. Former and current residents have had to contend with massive reductions to social assistance (21.6%), cutbacks to legal aid, reductions and even elimination of many other supports and services. To be faced with living in violent and abusive situations, or living in extreme poverty with few supports, is really not a choice.

We have received unprecedented numbers of crisis calls from women we have never met, as well as from women who lived with us years ago and are now having great difficulty making ends meet. We've heard from women returning to violent situations or having to consider giving up hard-won custody of their children to violent ex-partners because at least they will be fed. This is not the Ontario we see in glossy brochures.

Probably the most difficult part of the last year has been the feeling of absolute helplessness that women who use our services--along with the workers here--are feeling in the face of the massive destruction of supports. It has always been difficult for abused women to leave violent situations. They are often faced with on-going harassment, stalking, and even violence by their ex-partners,

a reduction of income, on-going legal battles for custody and access and division of property, and too often, families and communities that don't support them.

Now, however, abused women are preoccupied with trying to eke out enough to eat for themselves and their children, and finding a way to clothe their children. They talk of their children being afraid to come home and to tell them about needing money for school supplies or activities for fear they will make their mothers sad. They talk about not eating so their kids can eat.

They talk about being questioned, even interrogated by social assistance workers about whether they are *really* abused. And they talk about getting ill from stress and not being able to afford to eat nutritious food. They talk about not getting any of their assets out of their relationships because legal aid won't pay for lawyers, and they are forced to make 'settlements' with their abusers. Abusers know women will not be funded to fight for assets, so they have no motivation to settle fairly, and besides, this gives them another opportunity to humiliate and punish women.

There is no magic formula to being an effective women's advocate. Primarily, what we do is to help abused women to believe in themselves again, to find hope for the future, and assist them in navigating the various systems they encounter along the way. It is extremely difficult to do this today in Ontario.

What do women and children have to look forward to when they leave a violent relationship? Certain poverty--even if they had assets in the relationship, they likely won't see them again. Difficulty feeding and clothing their children and themselves due to social assistance cutbacks. (Even if they were working during the relationship they often have to leave their jobs for at least a period of time because their abusers know where to find them.) Very few funded hours with a lawyer to represent them for child custody and access. Few and seriously underfunded resources to assist them in re-establishing their lives free of violence. Facing these immense barriers, I wonder if I would leave. It is difficult to help someone feel hopeful about the future when there is little to be hopeful about.

All the while I hear federal and provincial governments, and politicians of every ilk paying lip service to violence against women. November is Wife Assault Prevention Month. So they'll all be grandstanding again, wearing white ribbons to supposedly symbolize their denouncing of violence against women. They denounce violence against women and yet participate, in convoluted ways, in its perpetuation. Canada, as one of the wealthiest nations in the world, should be leading the way in the prevention and elimination of violence against women and their children. It is not a question of whether Canada has the resources, we clearly do. Likewise, Ontario, as one of the wealthiest provinces in Canada, clearly has the resources to better fight violence against women and their children. What is lacking is the will.

As a frontline worker, I can no longer stay silent about the differences between what Canada says and what it does. Out here at the grassroots level, things look pretty bleak. Women are attempting, and committing, suicide. Children are being deprived of adequate nutrition that will affect their entire lives. Abusers are quite literally getting away with murder. And now, through the economic agenda Ontario and Canada is pursuing, rather than advancing the human rights of women, we are racing backward in time.

When OAITH first decided to prepare this report, there were numerous women living in our shelter that wanted to write statements on their own behalf for the report. Since then, however, many of them have found themselves unable to do so because just surviving every day has become their primary preoccupation.

I think if the politicians who make the decisions that have such devastating effects on abused women and their children were forced to sit in a room with survivors of violence and justify their actions, (with TV cameras running so they couldn't engage in their usual patronizing empty promises) I think things would be different. As they are driven around in their limousines and cater to wealthy people by giving them tax breaks, they don't have to look into the face of a woman and commiserate about the fact that she can't afford to get her child boots that fit; or into the face of a child who hasn't had enough to eat today."

Impacts on survivors of violence

For women attempting to escape violence, erosion of already inadequate supports has a devastating effect. The 'bottom line' is more than an exercise in fiscal 'efficiencies.' It is the blocking of escape routes abused women and women's advocates have struggled to open for over 20 years. We are moving back to a time when survivors had "no place to go." Violence will continue unchallenged, unless we take action to move forward again.

Survivors have often identified shelters, along with community-based programs specifically designed to address violence against them, as the most supportive intervention--and the most effective in meeting their needs. Shelters, in fact, were originally established by survivors and their advocates because no other service or system understood their issues.

Losses within shelter and community counselling supports, therefore, represent a decline of the most supportive strategy yet devised by women to address violence against them. But while the impact of cuts has been dramatic for services, it has been dangerous for survivors and their children. Along with the losses already outlined in essential crisis intervention and second stage counselling programs, abused women and their children have lost many critical supports they need, whether they use women's shelters or not, to escape violence.

The August OAITH survey--impacts on survivors

In our August, 1996, survey of OAITH members, we asked shelters to report the impact of the cuts on women's decisions about remaining with, or returning to abusive partners. The chart on page 28, entitled: "Impact of funding/ service cuts on women's decision to remain with/ return to a violent partner--reports from shelters," clearly shows that *a significant number of women in Ontario are now making decisions to remain in, or return to abusive situations based primarily on barriers created by budget and service cuts.* Moreover, more than half of shelters answering our survey say women are now forced to use the shelter more as a temporary respite from violence, rather than as an avenue of escape.

In our survey, we also asked shelters to report on changes to a number of community supports typically used by survivors to "get free." The most significant impacts on abused women came from cuts to social assistance, coupled with changes in accessibility of legal aid and legal representation. A number of other essential supports also presented significant barriers to women's escape, including changes and cuts in community counselling, housing support, child care, health care and language interpretation services.

Social assistance: The 21.6% cut in General Welfare Assistance and Family Benefits (GWA/FBA) to poor women and children has driven many survivors into abject poverty. *One hundred percent of shelters responding to our surveys reported that the cuts to social assistance had a severe impact on survivors.* Shelters continued to report that as women struggle to survive on GWA/FBA, they are being forced to make choices between food and rent or clothing and

Impact of funding/ service cuts on women's decision to remain with/ return to a violent partner Based on reports from shelters				
	Women deciding to remain with abusive partner		**Women deciding to return to abusive partner**	
Type of government cut affecting women's decision	***% of shelters where women cited cuts as deciding factor***	***% of women who decided to remain, where shelters gave estimates***	***% of shelters where women cited cuts as deciding factor***	***% of women who decided to return, where shelters gave estimates***
Reduced social assistance	66%	15%-30%	63%	5%-10%
No legal aid/ failure to find a lawyer accepting legal aid	58%	20%-35%	54%	30%
Reduced availability of affordable housing and/or housing subsidy	45%	10%-70%	54%	15%-40%
Reduction of child care subsidies/ spaces	40%	30%-50%	32%	no estimates reported
Reduction of language interpretation services (**Note**: many communities lacked this service *before* cuts.)	21%	5%-60%	15%	no estimates reported

Although informal, our survey shows clearly that government cuts to the services abused women need to escape violence is a significant factor in women's decisions about remaining with or returning to a violent situation. A frightening **50%** of shelters in our survey said that the shelter was now being used more often as a temporary escape than a new beginning for women and their children. Current dramatic cuts in services, therefore, are jeopardizing women's safety and right to, equality, freedom of movement and personal security.

prescription medication and so on. More women are coming to the shelter with large debts as a result of desperate struggles against poverty. Women who still have credit cards are using them to the limit to provide basic essentials for their children. Some women, even after struggling for years to win custody of their children, have returned children to abusive partners who have money to feed and shelter them.

"I think the worst came when my son reached his 13th. birthday this September--usually a time of great excitement at the entering of teens. But there was no joy in our home. I cried almost the entire day. I could not even afford a birthday card, let alone a gift...I will never forget the look on my son's face, nor will the pain of it ever go away."

Phyllis. A survivor.

Abused women, many of whom have been prevented by violence from receiving training or education, have been cut off welfare as a result of the Ontario government decision to deny assistance to students. Staying in school has become very difficult, often impossible, for survivors with children. This has been devastating to women who had planned to improve their future by recreating their lives.

Women are waiting longer before receiving their benefits after applying for GWA/FBA and many of the procedures now instituted in social assistance offices, such as home visits and checks on adults living in the same residence, demean women and make them feel blamed for leaving the violence. Shelters reported that women are having child and spousal support payments deducted from their GWA/FBA allowance, even though they are not actually receiving the court-ordered support payments from their ex-partner.

Welfare workers tell survivors to find part-time or casual work to supplement their assistance, but with a slight increase in income, they may no longer qualify for General Welfare or Family Benefits (GWA/FBA). Women who are receiving Unemployment Insurance from the federal government also struggle because they cannot obtain a drug card, moving allowance or other minor supports from the General Welfare system.

Elimination or reduction of these additional supports under GWA or FBA have also affected the supports to abused women starting over with nothing. Before cutbacks, women were eligible for community "start-up" funds to purchase beds and other very basic furniture and supplies. Shelters report these funds have decreased, or become inaccessible, depending on the discretion of the social assistance caseworker. Transportation costs, dental coverage, and repairs have all been eliminated or reduced for women. Shelters report that Ontario Drug Benefit user fees on prescriptions for GWA/FBA recipients mean that women unable to afford the user fees go without proper health care or use the personal needs supplement for other basic needs to pay for the increase in costs.

Legal aid: Since cuts to the Ontario Legal Aid Plan came into effect, many abused women have been denied legal aid or legal representation for family law matters in Ontario. *Again, 100% of shelters responding to us reported women having problems either with accessing legal aid itself, or with finding a lawyer who would*

accept a legal aid certificate. This, in spite of Legal Aid Plan eligibility guidelines designating "spouse or child at risk[47]," as a priority for assistance.

It would appear that in the absence of any clear definition of abuse, other than it *must* be physical, local Legal Aid Plan offices are using their discretion on deciding which abused women are "deserving." One shelter survey respondent reported: "Legal aid is only issued with physical abuse, AND police involvement AND if the woman is only requesting custody and support, AND is not a property owner (even jointly). Therefore, most women don't qualify." Other local Legal Aid offices have given similarly incorrect information; for example, that legal aid is available only if the father has actually threatened to abduct the children, or only if the abuser is *convicted* of assault. One woman was told, wrongly, that there is no legal aid for family law matters.

Some shelters find that lawyers who still take some legal aid cases will not take *family* law cases, arguing that restrictions in hours for family law legal aid certificates will not allow them to recover costs for time and expenses involved in representing abused women. Also as a result of Legal Aid Plan time restrictions for family law, shelters report that some women have been abandoned by lawyers in the middle of court cases because the maximum time allowed by Legal Aid expired. In such cases, women must either represent themselves or rely on appointed Duty Counsel who go unprepared into complex cases. Some judges have shown little tolerance for these circumstances, and women fear their lack of understanding may negatively influence cases.

"In September, I requested a change of solicitor because I felt that she didn't understand my issues or adequately represent me. My request [for a change of lawyer] was denied and no reasons were given. Eventually, I was granted an appeal [by Legal Aid] to change. Although my case is still in court, I have been informed that Legal Aid may not continue to fund my case."

Lori. A survivor.

Under a policy established a number of years ago by the Ontario Women's Directorate in partnership with the Ontario Legal Aid Plan, abused women accessing shelters were allowed a certificate for two hours of free consultation with a lawyer. Shelters have always used these certificates with the understanding they were for any survivor accessing services from the shelter, and virtually all survivors needing the certificate were, in fact, covered by the Plan.

Since cuts to the Legal Aid Plan were implemented, however, shelters have been told that the certificates are--*and always have been*--only for women actually *living* in the shelter facility. At this point, most shelters are reporting that only women *in* the shelter are able to access the two-hour certificate. Some note that lawyers are reducing the amount of time they will consult on the certificate to one hour or 30 minutes, although they are able to bill the Legal Aid Plan for the full amount of time.

To generate revenue for a cash-strapped legal aid fund, the Ontario Legal Aid Plan has introduced user fees. Women who qualify for social assistance are exempt from these fees, but there are many low income survivors outside the social assistance system who now must pay a $25 application fee to *apply* for a legal aid certificate. Women whose applications are rejected must pay user fees to appeal Legal Aid Plan decisions. All of this delays and hinders their chance to escape violence. Shelters report longer delays in processing applications and issuing certificates (one shelter reports the wait at a minimum of six weeks). In some areas, women are being asked to apply to legal aid before making an appointment under the two hour free consultation policy in order to establish that they are "deserving" of free assistance.

"It is becoming increasingly more difficult for women to even retain a lawyer as the tariff set out by Legal Aid really restricts hours of service on any issue. A woman in our program spoke with 25 firms before she found someone to take her on a [legal aid] certificate."

Second stage shelter worker. Southern Ontario. October 1996.

Even if women are able to secure a certificate and a lawyer, the reduced amounts of time that lawyers are paid for family law cases often means abused women must assist the lawyer with paperwork involved in the case. Some women have even been told that they must personally serve legal papers *on their abuser*, or pay for a private process server because the lawyer cannot afford the expense and court-based process service for family law has been eliminated. Clearly, such a practice puts abused women in *grave* danger and puts pressure on them to stop legal proceedings.

"[Mediation] is suggested as an alternative to legal aid--the 'quick fix' easy route to taking charge of your legal affairs'."

Shelter director in Eastern Ontario. August 1996.

Pressure to mediate: In spite of knowledge that mediation in family law is inappropriate--even dangerous--to abused women, local Legal Aid Plan offices are increasingly diverting survivors applying for legal aid into mediation, or presenting mediation as a "criteria" for receiving legal aid. The difficulty in finding family law lawyers who accept legal aid has added to pressure for mediation as women lose access to legal representation and court processes. Women are also being urged to mediate to avoid court backlogs and costs in a financially strapped system.

Shelters report that abused women have been given various arguments for mediation by local Legal Aid offices. For example, women are told it will "shorten the process," that it's "less confrontational" and that it's "easier" than civil court proceedings. In one area the shelter organized a meeting with the local Legal Aid Plan office in order to educate them on the dangers of mediation to abused women. As a result, within this area abuse survivors are currently not being pressured to use mediation.

Housing: Almost 66% of shelters responding to our survey reported that the Ministry of Housing subsidized housing policy on priority status for abused women has not changed. Many of the shelters noted, however, that there is an increased burden of proof placed on abused women to prove that they "really are abused" and that their

Family law mediation and abused women

- Mediation is a private process where women sit down with their ex-partner and a mediator and attempt to 'negotiate.' Abusers do *not* negotiate with the women they dominate.

- Mediation cannot protect women from abuse. Abusers *choose* when and how to use violence. Mediators have no special ability to change abusive behaviour.

- Mediation occurs 'behind closed doors,' where an abused woman is separated from her lawyer, women's advocate, or other supports. Isolation is one tactic abusers use to control and coerce abused women.

- Mediators will not or cannot stop the subtle verbal or behavioural 'cues' that are often used by abusers to control their victim., and even if they are observed by the mediator, there is no requirement that they be reported to a court.

- Mediation may delay obtaining protection and child custody orders that only a judge can write.

- Many mediators tend to disregard past behaviour of the abuser, and instead concentrate on future actions. Any promises made in mediation to stop the violence, or become a better parent, may be taken at face value, despite the fact that an abused woman has probably heard these hollow promises before.

- Mediators often share the biases of others in the community, and may not understand the discrimination that exists based on gender, race, culture, language, religion, immigration status, ability, income, education, or sexual orientation. Mediators tend to believe in their own neutrality and objectivity, and may assume they can create conditions within mediation that are fair and unbiased.

- Many mediators favour joint custody of children, which is inappropriate in cases where children have witnessed violence against their mothers.

- Mediation is about getting an agreement, not about protecting women's legal and equality rights. It is possible for abused women, under pressure from a mediation process, to agree to something which is not fair.

- A given mediator may not have any expertise in legal matters.

- Although many mediators insist they do not mediate family law disputes if there has been abuse in the relationship, women's shelter advocates report that many survivors have been pressured into mediation by Legal Aid Plan officials, judges, lawyers and others.

Source: Warning: Mediation can be dangerous to your rights. Mediation Monitoring Group. 1995.

safety is at risk. One shelter reported that a woman was not considered a priority because her abuser was not in the province and was, therefore, not considered a threat. Other new criteria reported for priority status included: a requirement by one office that women apply within three months of assault; loss of priority status for women who move into an area close to the abuser; and a requirement for co-signers to obtain public housing.

"The government is putting out that shelters are still open and this is true, but all supports have been cut or eliminated, making it impossible for us to provide referrals for women to get on with their lives. This means women are staying [at the shelter] much longer and, therefore, we are serving fewer women."

Shelter director. Metro Toronto. September 1996.

Shelters also reported that waiting lists were too long to be of any assistance and there were no units becoming available, perhaps as a result of resident reluctance to move in an insecure economy. Other women have been told that there is no longer any rent geared to income units available (RGI). Due to cutbacks in the funding of co-operative housing, market rent units are replacing the RGI housing in areas when these units become available. Since market rents are not affordable for low income women, most abused women in shelters can't consider them. The government's decision not to build new co-operative housing is problematic to abused women, since there are no new options for finding the safe, low income housing they need.

Access to other community services: Women experience the most severe impacts from cuts to shelter and community counselling, social assistance, legal aid and housing, but they also encounter additional barriers to leaving abuse as a result of other cuts and policy changes introduced by the Ontario government. For example:

- Most community services now have an enhanced "verification" process. Women must identify themselves as a "victim" and prove they've been assaulted. Often the woman is questioned and doubted, and women are expected to produce increasing amounts of documentation to qualify for service. This kind of treatment shames women and drives them back to abusers because response amounts to 'blaming the victim'.

- All services are more difficult to access. One shelter reports that MCSS moved its offices 45 km. away to an area where there is no bus service from the shelter community to the office. Workers are often difficult to contact and some women must incur long distance telephone charges to make contact--that is, if they are lucky enough to afford a phone.

- The school closest to one shelter closed, creating concern for safety of children who attend school while at the shelter.

- Waiting lists for community counselling are growing and shelters report an increasing number of counselling services requiring user fees for services.

Poverty

- In Ontario, there are about 200,000 sole support parents, mostly women, on social assistance roles.
- In 1991, single mothers with dependent children represented 6% of all Canadian families but made up 30% of all poor families.
- 60% of families headed by single women live below the Low Income Cut-Off, or 'poverty line' in Canada--the point at which a family spends more than 54.7% of total income on basic necessities. The average family spends 35% on essentials (food, shelter, clothing).
- Children make up about 42% of all social assistance recipients in Ontario, almost one-half million children in the province.
- Over 70% of welfare recipients in Ontario live in private rental accommodation where there are no rental subsidies.
- Since 1989, the number of poor children in Canada has increased 55%. Single-parent family poverty has increased 13%. Children in families needing social assistance increased 69% and children in families experiencing long-term unemployment has increased 54%.
- Over 70% of female lone-parent families result from marital separation or death of a spouse.
- A sole parent on social assistance with two children under age 12 will lose almost $3,000 per year after assistance is cut 21.6%, putting the family $9,063 below the poverty line.
- Women working outside the home earn 72 cents for every dollar earned by men. When part-time work is added the gap widens to 64 cents per dollar.
- The unemployment rate for World Majority women is 13.4%, and for First Nations/ Aboriginal women it is 17.7%, compared to 9.8% for other women.
- The unemployment rate rose among single parent women during the 1980s and 1990s, while it fell for married women.
- There are about 150,000 people on Family Benefits in the categories of "disabled" or "permanently unemployable." Women with disabilities are especially poor. In 1990, 54% of women with disabilities made less than $10,000 per year, compared with 43% of men with disabilities.

Sources: Campaign 2000 Child Poverty in Canada, 1995 Report Card, the Metro Campaign 2000 1995 Report Card, the Ontario Social Safety Network, "Welfare Rate Cuts: The Real Issues, *Toronto Star* and Statistics Canada.

- Women in some communities are unable to access belongings from their homes after fleeing abuse. A shelter worker notes: "When women leave their homes they might as well pull up a U-haul and empty the place and let their ex-partner fight to get it back, because otherwise, they'll never see it again."

- There is an increase in need for advocacy services for women within community systems, yet funding specifically for this work has been eliminated by MCSS.

"I don't relish the huge expenditure cuts. There will be some human costs. But if we don't take these actions, trust me, an awful lot more people are going to be hurt in the not too distant future."

Ernie Eves, Ontario Minister of Finance. *Toronto Star,* November 29, 1995.

"We still have to reduce another $3 billion. It won't be easy. But it can and will be done."

Mike Harris, Premier of Ontario. *Toronto Star*, October 18, 1996.

The "human cost"

For abused women, the emotional costs of the cutbacks are terrible: depression, despair, and hopelessness. Survivors live with the increased fear and stress that comes from the inability to act on positive change in their lives. Even if they successfully leave an abuser's control, they find other forces directing their destiny. Many remain powerless and afraid, with few options for building a new life. As a result of extreme emotional demands placed on abused women, overall personal health decreases and illness increases[48].

Clearly, women in violent relationships face a 'no-win' situation. With little support or assistance to return to a life free from violence, women are locked in with abusers who endanger the lives of themselves and their children. When they try to get away, they discover they cannot financially support themselves and their children. Lack of safe, affordable child care or child care subsidy, prevents many women from seeking what few jobs exist.

Women who are trapped with, or forced to return to an abuser will certainly be subjected to further abuse. Already, far too many women die because they lack options and support for escape. Shelters responding to our surveys have already noted increases in the number of women talking about suicide, in the level of fear of death from the abuser, and in the amount of time women need before they feel strong enough to try to escape permanently.

Poverty: Loss of direct services for financial assistance and the introduction of user fees for the remainder of programs and services, push women and children further below the poverty line.

The effects of poverty have been well documented, and include a vast array of physical and mental health related concerns. Poor women and children find that their social health deteriorates and their opportunities for independence and personal advancement diminish[49]. These effects will only be magnified for survivors of abuse as they

Effects of violence on children

- From 40% to 80% of children witness 'domestic violence.'
- In 52% of violent relationships in which children witness the violence, women feared for their lives, and in 61% of abusive relationships where there were child witnesses, the violence was serious enough to result in the woman being injured.
- When a woman is forced to flee her home, children suffer disruption of their home, routines, relationships with friends and, often, their schooling. They may be pre-occupied with fear that violence will re-occur, and are often aware of threats and attempts at contact, or stalking, by their fathers. At the same time, the children may be relieved to be in a safer place.
- Child witnesses of violence against their mothers experience similar emotional health and behavioural problems as children who are themselves directly abused.
- In a Canada-wide study of abused women, women reported that their partners had abused their children physically (26%), psychologically (48%), and sexually (7%).
- 25% of children who had lived in a shelter for assaulted women felt it was all right for a man to strike a woman if the house was messy. After group counselling, none of the children supported a man hitting a woman.
- Children of abused women show a number of common characteristics including:

  blaming themselves for the violence
  physical complaints, such as stomach-aches and headaches
  sleep disturbances (nightmares, insomnia)
  eating problems (over- or under-eating)
  rigid gender-role identification:
  girls -- withdrawn, passive, compliant and acting as 'mother's little helper'
  boys -- aggressive, bullying, and self-destructive behaviour.

- Studies indicate that the above child adjustment problems relate more to witnessing domestic violence than to the separation, divorce, or loss of parents.
- An estimated 30-40% of children who witness violence against their mother by a partner are also abused directly by the partner, whether or not he is their father.
- A pattern of physical and emotional abuse of mother by father, or other male partner, is common in families in which children are sexually abused by fathers.
- Children who witness violence are at risk for further violence, either as a perpetrator or a victim.

Sources: The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence. "Wife Abuse--the Impact on Children." Health Canada. 1996, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics. "Wife Assault: The Findings of a National Survey." Juristat, Vol. 14, No. 9. 1994, and Ontario Women's Directorate. "Wife Assault--the Impact on Children." October 1993.

"Miraculously, my sister-in-law sent me some money in the mail. The boys came home from school to find me cooking a big supper. They were so happy! One of them said, 'mom, we were just talking about how hungry we were and how great it would be if we came home to find you making mashed potatoes and gravy and meat!' I suddenly felt so sad and worthless."

Phyllis. A survivor.

"If you go back 30 or 40 years ago, where it seemed to be that mom was in the kitchen with a hot breakfast cooking as everyone woke up in the morning, that's not the normal situation today."

Mike Harris, Premier of Ontario, denying that cuts to welfare are linked to child hunger, and suggesting 'lifestyle changes' for working mothers were the contributing factor. *Toronto Star,* November 7, 1996.

struggle against the 'double jeopardy' of poverty and violence. For women confronting additional forms of violence, such as racism, ableism, homophobia and language discrimination, for example, the obstacles to living free of violence may look more insurmountable every day.

Frequently, violence survivors are forced to live in unsafe, sub-standard housing because they can afford nothing else. Children are often forced to leave friends in their old neighborhoods and change schools, often in the middle of a school year. After paying the majority of income for housing, survivors must somehow find the money to feed themselves and their children.

OAITH's August survey clearly shows that the cuts have made abused women poorer. On most days, women go without food so their children can eat. Food banks use has soared 49% since the cuts to social assistance. "The increase involves 375,000 people across Ontario, compared with 250,000 last year, and 172,000 or 46% are children"[50]. Many of them are women and children escaping violence.

Changes and cutbacks to family law legal aid have decreased poor women's access to justice. Where women do not qualify for legal aid assistance, they face court user fees for services normally provided by the province[51]. In many cases, women have had no choice but to represent themselves in custody and access decisions concerning their children[52]. It would not be unreasonable to expect that these changes will negatively affect the outcomes of custody and access decisions resulting in violent fathers having increasing access to children.

The impact of cuts on children

By far, the most devastating effect of the cuts for violence survivors is the impact on their children. Testimonies by women about the impact of government cuts--found later in this report--show how heartbreaking the effects of poverty, created by the cuts, can be on women and children's daily lives. When women speak about the future for their children, they see only lost hopes and tragic consequences.

When women are trapped in violent homes, their children are trapped with them. The effects of witnessing violence, coupled with the impacts of severe poverty, suggest a bleak, insecure future for children, not the bright future promised by Ontario's Minister of Finance. Often, children are used by abusive fathers to control and coerce women, at the expense of the children. Often, they are sexually and physically abused by those same men. Children living with an abuser learn the value of power and control over others--a value that has been devastating to themselves and their mothers. Often, they learn that they are worthless. To consign children to continuing violent experiences consigns them to a high risk of bringing the violence into their adult lives.

"Many women in our communities are feeling that this Harris government is abusing them."

Shelter worker, Central Ontario. September 1996.

Legal Aid Plan changes and cutbacks may play a critical part in entrenching the difficulty abused women have always had in protecting their children from abuse. Women who have sought to win custody from an abuser, may more and more lose custody to abusive fathers because they cannot afford legal representation, child assessments and so on. Children may, therefore, be more often forced to live with, or spend increasing amounts of time with, abusive fathers.

Cumulative effects

All of the cuts together create an environment that in effect, re-victimizes abused women and reinforces, or rewards, male violence. With little help, support or assistance, abused women are left to fend for themselves and their children. With the knowledge that the women they abuse have no-where to turn, abusers can and do increase their control and power over women with little or no consequences.

Violence survivors speak out

It is extremely difficult, even dangerous for women to speak out publicly about their experience with violence and the response of systems to their needs. In spite of the danger, however, a number of women have provided personal stories that illustrate the struggles of survivors, and the impact of Ontario government cutbacks on their ability to be free. The courage and determination of these women to be free and to protect their children makes a startling and tragic contrast with the actions of the Mike Harris government responsible for many of the barriers they face.

Leanne

I was very young when I started going steady with my ex-partner. I was 12, he was 14. All my friends thought it was so cool going out with a 14-year-old. He was popular, smart, cute, and all the girls wanted to go out with him. But he asked me to be his steady girl.

Back then, he was on the school football team, so I got to wear his football jacket, which was a big deal to me at the time...it seems like yesterday to me. After going out for a year, he moved in with my family. His parents were going through a divorce and he couldn't take the fighting anymore, so my parents talked it over and let him move in.

The abuse started just after we moved out of my family's home and he joined the army. We lived on the army base. So for many years, I put up with physical and emotional abuse. He would call me names like "stupid bitch," "ugly," "fat," "good for nothing," "loser," "dumpy." He would always falsely accuse me of sleeping around and say I was a "slut" and other insulting names. He would blacken my eyes, give me nosebleeds, and my lips would swell up. He has broken bones throughout my body.

I finally left him in June and was beaten badly and rushed to the hospital. I entered a shelter on July 4, 1996 and I hopped the bus with one suitcase on July 9, 1996. I stayed at an emergency shelter until July 17, 1996 when I moved into the second stage shelter where I now feel safe and secure to live.

I have my good and bad days like everyone else in the world has, but since I left, I feel more at ease. I still think about him and miss him, and I think of the memories we've built. But I don't miss the days of heartache I had not asked to be put through. I very much need to go back to school, but I can't because I'm always worried about my financial stability. I get General Welfare, I'm thankful, but you try and live for a month off the $195 that's left after my rent is paid. I can't even afford winter boots, or to go and get my high school diploma which costs $60 that I can't afford. I'm already struggling to find the money to go out and buy socks and underwear.

The government cuts are good for some things, but for people in my situation, Canada should be doing a hell of lot more than we're doing. I find it totally unfair and unreasonably difficult for people to get an education. The government is always preaching to young people to get education so we can run this country, but it all begins with the government helping young people on welfare, who want a life and to become important people of our country.

Phyllis C.

Last October, when the cuts were made to second stage women's shelters, Phyllis wrote to Premier Mike Harris and Dianne Cunningham, Minister Responsible for Women's Issues, expressing her fears for the future and asking for help. Here is her first letter with a follow-up letter a year later, explaining what has happened to Phyllis and her children in the year of cuts.

October 1995

Dear Mr. Harris,

Tonight I learned a very disturbing thing. Just another piece of news that makes my already trying existence even worse. You see, I learned that funding for a second stage housing unit that myself and my children reside in, has been cut...Do you want to know what my 10-year-old son said when I told him the funding had been cut? Do you care? He said, "but what did we do, mommy?" You know what we did, Mr. Harris? We SURVIVED! I want you to know Mr. Harris, that I understand that this province is in a terrible financial dilemma. I know that something has to be done. What I don't understand is, where is your social conscience? Two days ago, while casually flipping through my 12-year-old's composition book for school, I found a story directed at his teacher explaining about his flight from abuse. His last line in that story said "and we were finally free." His teacher wrote back that she hoped he would stay free. You cannot possibly know what that did to me inside. WE NEED THIS HOUSING!

It might seem pretty simple to cut welfare, cut funding to social programs, etc., but let me tell you, the ripple effect on our social fabric will start as just a little tear, then a rip and finally a hole. I have worked in Detroit, USA, where low taxes and stunted social programs have led to ghettoes, despair, violence and addiction. I know that there is a way to help this province and still maintain social programs.

When I summoned the courage three months ago to leave an abusive relationship, I knew it would be hard. Despite the fact that I am a Registered Nurse, I can't get a job. I can't physically do the work involved in nursing anymore. (Not that being able to would get me a job in nursing because, as you know, there aren't any.) I have no other skills that will get me a decent paying wage to raise my children. It was humiliating to apply for welfare, for I must admit, I was once one of those people who looked on welfare recipients as "freeloaders." Now, I'm on Mother's Allowance, work part-time, go to school during the day for a business diploma and take care of my children. I make sure they are clothed and fed, I keep them off the street and make them feel loved. All I'm asking for is help! I'm not a freeloader. I look forward to being off social assistance--it's not a great way to live, in fact, it's a poor way to live.

Mr. Harris, please stop and think about the effects all these cuts will have, but please, think really hard on what the effect of a cut to second stage housing will mean. My children, as I have told them, have done nothing wrong. Please help us stay free. A second stage shelter resident. (Simcoe)

October 1996

It has been one year since the start of the "cuts" by the Harris government. Back then, I expressed concern about just how difficult these cuts would make life for my children and I. Little did I know just how terrible it really would be! There have been many days of deep despair for us.

I think the worst came when my son reached his 13th. birthday this September--usually a time of great excitement at the entering of teens. But there was no joy in our home. I cried almost the entire day. I could not even afford a birthday card, let alone a gift. Ordinarily, we would have said, "okay, we can't afford it this week so we'll celebrate next week." That is a phrase we have come to know well. But not this time. I will never forget the look on my son's face, nor will the pain of it ever go away.

The effects of the cuts were immediate and they were hard. The second stage shelter, Quetzal Family Homes, where the children and I were residing, was left with no funding and thus lost almost all of its staff. The two remaining staff are putting a valiant effort into trying to keep the program going. The one counsellor dealt with several of my own crises, and for that I was blessed. The property manager frequently offered her ear and her shoulder to cry on. The two of them have learned to slip in and out of their own "job descriptions" with versatility, but one wonders just how long they can keep that up. My children, however, did not fare so well. The child worker's funding was gone, so there was no program left for them. They really needed that, but it was gone! The legal advocate--gone--and so court appearances were much more frightening and traumatizing.

By far, the worst has been the financial devastation. We live far below the poverty line. At first, there was a great deal of confusion at the Family Benefits office as to how much those of us who work were actually allowed to make. Even now, it is very difficult to budget if you work at all because of the confusion it makes on your cheque. But without work, my total cheque for myself and my children is $828.00 per month.

On occasions, I have had to visit the food bank and were it not for my children, my pride would have prevented me from doing this. It is extremely demeaning. I am unable to even look people who serve me in the eyes. I wonder what they are thinking of me. Now the food bank in Simcoe may close because the increase in demand, because of the cuts, cannot be provided for. I often lay in bed and worry about how I am going to feed my boys. A good day for me is when I have been able to give them a really good supper.

One day, near the end of the month (usually the hardest part of every month), I was down to hardly anything in the house. It had been pretty sparse for about two days and my boys knew that we had two more days until I got my pay cheque. Miraculously, my sister-in-law sent me some money in the mail. The boys came home from school to find me cooking a big supper. They were so happy! One of them said, "mom, we were just talking about how hungry we were and how great it would be if we came home to find you making mashed potatoes and gravy and meat! I suddenly felt so sad and worthless. It is sad to think that children have to measure their happiness by whether they are able to have a bountiful supper.

Last year the snow fell early. My one son's boots fit him, but the other's did not. I went all over town trying to find boots I could afford before his class went out to recess. I couldn't. I remember walking down the street crying at my despair and shame as I went to meet my son in front of the school. People stared at me, but basically I was oblivious to it because all I could

think of was my failure. I was still crying when I reached the school. My ten-year-old son tried to console me by saying, "It's okay mom, I'm okay like this." That made it worse as he stood there in the wet snow in running shoes that had holes in them.

When we left Quetzal to move to another town, I was able to obtain geared to income housing promptly because I was a survivor of domestic violence. But there was a steep $730.00 hydro deposit required, plus moving expenses, hookup fees, etc. There were no appliances, and needless to say, on a tight budget, no money to buy appliances. We lived for six weeks with a cooler as our refrigerator. Finally, I was able to buy someone's old beer fridge. Soon, I hope to be able to buy a stove. Often I handwash our clothes because the Laundromat is too expensive. We may be poor, but I'm not going to let my kids be dirty.

None of this is exaggeration. In fact, it has been so bad so often, that occasionally I find myself second guessing my decision to leave my abusive marriage. But reality is, I believe, to go back would be deadly. So gone are most of my hopes and dreams, not just for me, but for my children as well. Before, I envisioned university for my children, but I've come to believe that may be a pipe dream.

Most other cuts have also affected me.

My sons both require life saving medication at school. The school needed permission forms signed by the doctor. I filled out the forms entirely except for the doctor's signature, took the forms to an appointment that had been previously scheduled for the boys anyway and was charged $15.00 per signature despite the fact that I had been the one who filled out the forms, and the doctor was getting paid by OHIP for the appointment. This doctor knew I had little income, but her excuse was, "it's because of the cutbacks." Thirty dollars in total. And I could have used that money to feed us for at least three days.

Cutbacks in education mean all supplies have to be purchased by the parent. Buying pencils and papers may not seem like much to Harris, but when every 'loonie' is carefully guarded for the struggle to put food on the table, any extra expense is difficult.

So quick to impose cutbacks, and so slow to fix a system that doesn't work and that has failed me--the Family Support Plan. I obtained a court order for $950.00 per month on January 22, 1996. This court order would have gotten me off Family Benefits, and because my ex-husband gets pensions, should have worked for me. Family support notified his employer *August* 7, 1996--nearly seven months after the court order and over $6,000 in arrears--that they had to make deductions.

This is my life, my children's. If I would have had the support, I would have been off benefits and would have had a greater income. I have been waiting for three weeks now for the parental support worker in the Family Benefits office in the area where I am living to call me back, to arrange an appointment to see if something can be done to straighten out this mess. But I'm told that she is the only one serving this very large county.

To add yet another sickening twist to all of this, even before my ex-husband had paid a penny of this court order, I was served papers that he was taking it back into court to get it reduced. The day I received those papers, I slammed my fists over and over and over again at a punching bag--my frustration so great. I was told I couldn't get legal aid. I stood at the legal aid office terrified and crying. A local agency interceded and legal aid granted me a certificate. The results of my

ex-husband's attempts to get support reduced look poor on him, but I have learned now not to expect what should be right and just!

Since my move, I have been unable to continue my counselling. The local women's shelter does not offer, because of cutbacks, individual long-term counselling. There is some geared to income counselling, but let's face it, if I can't buy a used stove to cook on, I can't afford a dime for counselling.

My story is not an exaggeration, it is not a made up reaction to the cuts--it is my reality, and it is the reality of so many women I know. Each of us flowing deeper into despair and hopelessness. I use to tell my children, "it will get better, you'll see, we're over the worst," and they would look at me, nod and seem to agree. Now, they just look at me. They don't disappoint me by saying, "no, it won't, mom," but I see it in their eyes. But frankly, I know I don't say it with any conviction anymore, because I really don't think it will.

I try. I work part-time. I take what hours they can give me. I struggle to keep my kids safe and I volunteer four days a week at the local nursing home. I don't drink, smoke, gamble or do anything wasteful. I don't deserve this, and neither do my kids.

I wish to this day that someone would stop this madness and help us, but I know it won't happen.

Lori T.

My name is Lori and I'm 35 years old. I have three children, two boys ages five and a half and three, and a newborn daughter. 1996 has been a dreadful year for me. In March, I was emotionally and physically assaulted by my ex-partner. I was 12 weeks pregnant at the time. Shortly afterwards, we were separated and I didn't realize how difficult it would be to deal with all the necessary systems. It became increasingly more difficult coping due to major budget cutbacks by the Ontario government.

To be brief, I'll mention a couple of examples. After separating, I called Social Services for financial assistance (from Family Benefits). Shelter and basic allowances were determined based on my expenses. I was told to report all support payments received. In August, there was a court order sent to the Family Support Plan. It was here that I experienced delays and problems with both the Family Support Plan and Family Benefits.

My caseworker from Family Benefits was unavailable from late summer on, and although I made many phone calls and trips to the office, I was not allowed to see anyone, nor was I given any information about my case. I was in my last month of pregnancy and I had my two other children to care for, and I had no money. I had to borrow money from my family and my credit card to survive.

At the same time, an order was made to the Family Support Plan by the courts to garnish my ex-partner's pay cheques. I sent all the necessary forms to activate my file but still had not received any payments, even though I knew the money had been taken off his pay cheque. I called the Support office number to get information. I received busy signals all day, every day, and at the end of the day, I got a recording that said to try again tomorrow. I decided to go to the office, at which point I discovered the doors were locked and a notice on the door stated the office was permanently closed. The notice said to write to the new office address in another city. After writing to them, I discovered that the address given to me was incorrect.

While sorting through this mess, I was also going through the legal process. I was issued a legal aid certificate pending the sale of my property. When the property sold, $10,000 went directly to Legal Aid and I received $3,000. I was informed by Family Benefits that this amount was considered income, yet my ex-partner received $18,000 (from the sale of our property) and my lawyer informed me that his portion was considered capital. My support payments were, and still are, in major arrears.

In September, I requested a change of solicitor because I felt that she didn't understand my issues or adequately represent me. My request was denied and no reasons were given. Eventually, I was granted an appeal (by Legal Aid) to change. Although my case is still in court, I have been informed that Legal Aid may not continue to fund my case if it goes to court.

I feel that every service that I have come in contact with has been unfair. Everything I've tried to do to help maintain a safe and comfortable life for my family has been extremely difficult, while at the same time, the systems have been favourable to my ex-partner. For me, the doors were closed and the level of services I required were inefficient. My life has become a constant struggle. Through my ex-partner's lies and distortions of my story, he continues to benefit and I get no justice.

Pat W.

There should be more shelters, more education and stricter laws on domestic abuse. Education on what exactly abuse of a domestic nature entails. Education of what shelters offer. People who reach shelters are usually at the lowest point of their lives.

I feel with the cutbacks to Social Services it's probably decreasing our deficit, but in the long run, it is going to cost society severely. People will find other, illegal ways to supplement their income.

It is putting more pressure on families who are already struggling to make ends meet. The food banks are what is available, greater than what the supply allows. Crime rates will increase. Desperate times call for desperate measures.

Somewhere, somewhere, there should be a happy medium.

Dorothy

These cuts of the government have affected my family profoundly. I seem to be caught in a crack as I hear so many others are. My abusive and controlling ex-husband has the ultimate control over us now because:

We no longer qualify for social services as his support is supposed to be over what I would get from the government, but I am not getting this support. But even though I am not getting it, I am not eligible for assistance because it's court ordered through the Family Support Plan.

I have called repeatedly-- all they say is it will be coming. WHEN! I have no food--you try looking after four children with no food!

Also, my oldest has now moved in with her dad--who was also abusive--because things are much more financially secure there. She is only thirteen! He not only abused me, but he sexually abused her 'til she was 2 years old. What am I supposed to do about this?

She wants security, and as her mother, I can't even give it to her. She has exchanged things for her innocence, what is left of it. Is she becoming a hooker of sorts, exchanging innocence for security, money and things?

I can't sleep at night. I worry so much. My back is against the wall!

To Mr. Harris,

You want me to go to my family--they say: you should have stayed with him, at least he only beat you and the kids. They feel I have been the one in the wrong always.

I am trying my best to get an education so I don't ever have to ask anyone for help ever again! I am going to college--again OSAP is lowered because of the child support I am supposed to receive, but don't. I will get ahead, but you best watch out, because I am going to help other women so they don't have to go through what I have. This is worth me not eating, and all the other sacrifices I will make to do this. But just remember, Not Him nor You nor anyone will Break Me! You cannot take my spirit away!

Dorothy

P.S. Christmas will be very small at my house this year but I know it won't affect you or my ex-husband at all. So please think of me Christmas Morning!

Carole M.

In 1980, I was working for Metropolitan Life as a mail clerk. I was also doing volunteer work for the John Howard Society. On weekends I would volunteer to drive women to Kingston to visit

their partners in jail. Little did I know that some day, I would become one of those women!

One Saturday, there was a Family Gathering Day at Collins Bay Penitentiary, so as usual, I volunteered to drive. But on that day, I met my ex-partner. We talked for hours and I fell in love.

I was living with my parents at that time and I was working full time at Metropolitan Life. Every week, I would receive at least three to four letters from my ex-partner asking me to visit him. After four months of letters, I finally decided to visit him. Two months later, I quit my job and moved to Kingston. I lived at the YWCA and my weeks consisted of visiting him four times a week.

Six months later, he was out on a day pass and two months later, I found myself pregnant. He begged me not to get an abortion, so I didn't. In April of 1982, my daughter was born. When she was four weeks old, we both went to visit my ex-partner--I was going to surprise him with a visit.

When I got there, I found my ex with another woman, so I told him it was over, and that he was to stay away from me and my child, to which he said, "I have a family now, you'll never take that away from me." He then yelled across the room that I'd be better off six feet under.

Seven months went by and my ex-partner escaped from Kingston. He showed up at my front door. He wanted me to move to Barrie, Ontario, because he was being released after 10 years on parole! I told him I would only do that if he wouldn't interfere with my life. He promised. So I believed him and I moved to Barrie, Ontario. My daughter was nine months old.

My ex-partner visited my daughter every two weeks for two months, but after a while, he moved himself into my apartment. From that day on, the abuse grew stronger.

Every Friday, he would go to the bar with his brother. When he got home, he would start accusing me of sleeping around. Then he would rape me, then beat me. After every beating, he would tell me, "If you ever try and leave, I'll kill you. Or you'll leave without [my daughter]."

One weekend, I was sleeping when he got home. He came home with another woman and came upstairs to wake me up. "Carole," he said, "I have someone downstairs for you." I said, "Who?" He said, "You'll see." When I was walking down the stairs, he said, "We're going to have a threesome tonight." I lost it, and the girl just sat there. He went into the kitchen and grabbed a knife. He made me undress and he and the girl raped me. She left. Then he grabbed me by the hair and banged my head on the walls all over the house.

I was going insane. I told him I was leaving and I was taking my daughter. He said, "F**k you. You're not going anywhere with her. In fact, you're going to steal for me so I can make money, because you won't let me collect the welfare cheque."

When I met my ex, I weighed 145 pounds. After that horrible night, I weighed 105 pounds and I was brainwashed. For a year, I stole VCRs, video machines, TVS, and anything I could nab.

But one morning, I woke up, grabbed my daughter and ran downstairs. He was waiting. He pulled her from my hands and gave her to his brother. His brother left with her. Then he beat me and beat me, over and over, that night. Then he left.

When I could walk, I got up and walked four blocks to the police station. They took my statement and went looking for my ex and his brother. When they found them, they believed *him*. I was in shock. My ex-partner told the police that I went out with a biker and got myself beat up and then wanted to come back home. The police told me that he was keeping my daughter, and if I wanted her back, I should take it to court. I had nowhere to live, so I went to the only friend I had.

The court gave interim custody to my ex-partner. Then I was tried for theft over $1000 for stealing the things he ordered me to steal. I was sent to jail for six months, but served only 30 days. At the final custody hearing, my ex was given custody. I was told this was because I had been in jail, but my ex had been in jail for 15 years for manslaughter! When I pointed this out to the judge, I was told that my ex was now out of prison and was doing OK. I guess assaulting me, threatening me and our child, and forcing our child to witness violence are considered "doing okay." After court, my ex told me that if I stayed in town he would kill me, so I left town and moved to Calgary.

I was in Calgary two months, then I met my husband. We moved to Claresholm and I got pregnant. I lived in a $300,000 house and I didn't do without anything, but my husband was an alcoholic. Within a year, we lost our home and my husband drank our bank account dry. One night, he realized what he had done, but he took his anger out on me. He took his dad's rifle and put it to my head and he told me it was all my fault and that I should die!

I ran out of the house and went to the police. When the police got to the house, he had passed out with the rifle on the sofa. The police arrested him and I drove to Calgary to a women's shelter. My son was born and I was afraid of living on welfare, so I went back to him.

My husband was sober for a year and I got pregnant again. Then he started to drink again, but this time he would disappear for weeks at a time and leave us with no food.

One night, he came home with two other guys that had just robbed a bank and a drug store. They were all high on Prozac, etc. When they left, my husband broke a bottle of beer on the counter and pointed it to my throat. He made me write a letter saying that I owned a private company and that he had worked for me for five years. He took it to a car lot and came home with a new car. Two months later, I left him and went to a women's shelter in Red Deer, Alberta. This time I was gone for good. A month later, the police came to the shelter and charged me with falsifying documents and fraud.

I went two years awaiting trial because my husband had left the province and left me holding the blame. The court day came and the director of the shelter testified on my behalf. I stood trial alone and won! The judge said that I was acquitted because I suffered from Battered Wife Syndrome. I was on cloud nine.

I felt really strong after my court day, so I decided to find my daughter. I called my ex-partner and he told me that the Children's Aid Society had taken her. I phoned the CAS. Two long years of fighting for custody and I won by removing her out of Crown wardship and into my custody.

My daughter lived with me in Calgary for one year. As hard as I had fought to get her back, it was not to last. You see, my daughter had endured years of physical, emotional and sexual abuse at the hands of her father. As a result, she had been diagnosed with Multiple Personality Disorder, and at times, she would become violent. So even though it was one of the hardest things I ever had to do, I had to return my daughter to Crown wardship. As a result, I had a nervous breakdown, so I met with the Children's Aid Society and voluntarily placed my boys in their care until I was better.

I fought with the Children's Aid Society for a full year to get my boys back. One of the reasons they opposed me was because at one point, I was living in a shelter.

After I recovered from my nervous breakdown, I drove from Calgary to a small town outside Ottawa. I stayed in shelters along the way because my ex-partner was very angry with me for returning our daughter to child welfare, and was threatening me. I also had no where else to turn. Little did I know that I was going to suffer more abuse from my own government. After the first cuts from the Mike Harris government, I could no longer survive on Family Benefits. Family Benefits cut $300 off my cheque, so I was getting $800 per month and my rent was $650. I had gas bills, food bills, and light bills to pay. So I did exactly what Mike Harris wanted. I got a full time job. Even though I was working full time, it remained difficult to make ends meet. Because I didn't make that much money, I qualified for the Family Benefits top-up, which helped.

In May, I was laid off work, so I applied for Unemployment Insurance Benefits. I called my FBA worker to make sure she would help me until my UI benefits came through, because there is a waiting period. She told me that at the end of June, I would receive my full cheque. The end of June came and we were starving. No cheque came. (I found out later that as soon as Family Benefits found out I applied for UI, they cut me off. However, they put $2.50 in my account to keep my file open and, therefore, [General] Welfare could not help me because my FBA file was still open.) That month, I lived on a total of $400, supporting myself and my two children. I was a nervous wreck. My nightmares got worse instead of better.

To make matters worse, my ex-partner found me and threatened to kill me again. He would call me at all hours of the night, yelling at me. So one night, I decided to move into Ottawa and start again. When I got to Ottawa, Social Services sent me to a homeless shelter because all the shelters for abused women were full. While we were there, both my boys and I were threatened with violence. We lived there three weeks. The fourth week, we moved into Harmony House. For the past two months, my life has been safer, but I am still suffering more abuse because Social Services refuses to help me simply because I was working for $8 per hour and ended up on Unemployment Insurance. I'm forced to fight for rights as a single mother because I cannot live on $767 a month with no drug card. I don't even qualify for the Start-up Allowance from Social Services.

My ex-husband owes me $59,000 in back child support. Mike Harris says he can put stronger agencies to collect our money. Maybe not. He has already taken food and clothing from our families.

The system is designed to keep the POOR, POOR!

As a single mom, I'm terrified when the next cutbacks happen because women and children will suffer a lot of mental and financial abuse from our own government.

I want off of social services!
I want a good paying job!
I want what I'm entitled to!
I want to be able to feed and clothe my boys!
I want the abuse to STOP!

After all, all these rights are in my Constitution. It's my right as a Canadian!

I will continue to stand my ground and fight the system because I'm not alone and I refuse to let Mike Harris abuse any more women and children. Our children belong with us, NOT IN MIKE HARRIS' HANDS, AND NOT WITH CHILD WELFARE.

Yes, I'm frustrated and angry. I did not vote for this government. I DON'T WANT IT!

Anne B.

I have two boys, age 8 and 15. The Ontario government cuts have affected every area of our life in a detrimental way.

My boys cannot go on any of the school trips, which cost between $30.00 and $40.00 dollars, and so they are left out of that part of the curriculum. Poor children are getting a poorer quality

of education than the average child. They are entitled to participate in school events that take place in a public school during curriculum time, but cannot, due to extra costs.

Since my children can no longer participate in extra-curricular activities either, such as hockey, they end up running the streets. When they could play hockey, they were well-adjusted and had good self-esteem.

Because I am a single parent, my boys greatly profited from positive role modelling by the hockey coach. The impact of the withdrawal from all activities from which they could benefit from positive male role modelling has been devastating and my 15-year-old is now in trouble with the law. He has been picked up for shoplifting such things as razors and the like--because I was unable to provide them when needed.

Transportation is also a serious problem. We live four kilometres from the school (a one hour walk) and my son must walk because I can't get a bus pass. This forces him to hitch-hike. Nor can we get winter clothes, which is a double blow.

Our food is no longer nutritional and the bulk of our diet is made up of starches.

There is no regular allowance, and our once-a-month family outing has had to stop.

Mike Harris should be embarrassed. One sure thing is that my boys are. The government of Ontario is cutting its own throat because these kids who are forced to live in a subsistent way will be running the streets and inevitably turn to crime.

Clearly, many abused women who have families will have to return to the ghastly situation from which they fled because they just can't make it economically without their partner.

Poverty

POVERTY,
Such a dangerous thing,
The ruins of families and dreams
it will bring
The hopes of a child
Stunted from growth,
Having to constantly hear
The word, "No."

POVERTY,
Such a dangerous thing,
Sub-standard living conditions
it brings
To live in the midst
of the filth and the shame,
Searching in anger
For someone to blame.

POVERTY,
Such a dangerous thing,
Hunger and longing
it surely will bring,
When a mind is not nourished
A mind cannot learn,
Do we dare to hope
For success in return?

POVERTY,
Such a dangerous thing,
Crime and destruction
it surely will bring
When a young mind
cannot hope to succeed,
Poverty turns the want into greed.

By Anne B.

Joanne J.

Life has become much more difficult since cuts have been made by the Mike Harris government in Ontario.

My Mother's Allowance cheque [Family Benefits Allowance] has been cut, but the cost of everything has increased. Because I cannot get subsidized day care, I cannot look for a job. I would have to pay a babysitter and I can't afford it.

Because Kindergarten has been eliminated, my children will not be socialized as they should be, and I'll have to stay at home longer before looking for a job.

Things are getting even worse than was anticipated because goods and services of all kinds are going up in price. Cost of medication is going up and user fees are now tacked on. I had to pay $8.00 more this month for our regular medication.

I can't afford to buy clothes for my kids. My son had to stop playing hockey and baseball because I can't afford the clothes, etc.

We were evicted because I couldn't afford the rent. We had to leave our toys, our furniture and the cat behind because we couldn't afford storage or to pay someone to look after my cat while we stay at the YWCA.

My son's behaviour has changed. He has become aggressive because of the anxiety of not having enough money for his sports and doing things with other children that cost money, like going to the carnival. I couldn't even buy him an ice cream today, and that was very hard.

I believe we will have a lot more homeless people and, therefore, more crime, which will require intervention. This will cost the government (and therefore cost the people) more in the long run.

Thank you for listening to one small voice.

To Mike Harris

I would like to say a few words
on the Harris cutbacks
Let's get our priorities
back on track.

I really don't think kids eating bologna
sandwiches every day is fair
But maybe if you lived a while
In our worn shoes you'd care.

My family is my life; they
don't deserve to suffer
Things aren't getting any better
They are only getting tougher.

When it comes down to
a choice of food or a
roof over our heads,
I have to choose that they are
on a comfortable bed.

I will not give up on my kids
that I cherish
Thanks to you
Michael Harris.

By Joanne J.

Anonymous

Due to last year's cutbacks, my four children and I have been living in shelters since April, 1996. Due to the high cost of babysitters, it is not possible to work. High cost of housing makes it hard to find safe, suitable housing. If shelters are forced to closed, where do we go?

Témoignages des femmes francophone

Septembre 1996

A l'été 1996, trois ex-résidentes francophones de la Maison d'amitié * et bénéficiaires des programmes sociaux ont partagé sur leurs difficultés et leurs frustrations suite aux coupures annoncées par le Gouvernement Harris en octobre 1995. Ces témoignages seront joints à ceux de d'autres femmes de l'Ontario et du Canada dans le but de dénoncer l'ensemble des récentes politiques fédérales et provinciales sur la situation des femmes canadiennes.

Le tout fera partie d'un mémoire que préparent conjointement deux organismes ontariens, soit la Table féministe francophone de concertation provinciale de l'Ontario et l'Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses. Il sera présenté à la Rapporteuse officielle des Nations Unies, en ce qui concerne la violence faite aux femmes.

Le présent document, contenant le texte intégral des témoignages de trois(3) ex-résidentes de la Maison d'amitié, se veut un outil de sensibilisation. Son but est de faire connaître la réalité à laquelle font face les femmes bénéficiaires des programmes sociaux afin de contrer l'image négative et néfaste que véhicule le Gouvernement Harris par rapport aux pauvres, et surtout, par rapport aux femmes pauvres de cette province.

En terminant la Maison d'amitié veut remercier chaleureusement les femmes qui ont osé, encore une fois, 'rompre le silence' afin de dénoncer, par ces témoignages, la violence à laquelle elle et leurs enfants font face. Nous reconnaissons leur courage et détermination et les appuyons dans leurs démarches.

Liette Perron, Coordonnatrice,
Maison d'amitié

* La Maison d'amitié est une maison d'hébergement francophone pour les femmes victimes de violence et leurs enfants. Elle se situe à Ottawa.

Témoignage 1

" Le pire pour moi quand je suis sortie de la Maison d'hébergement en octobre 1995, c'est que le chèque de prestations sociales avait été coupé. Ceci était quelques mois après l'élection de Mike Harris. Je ne savais pas quoi faire. Cela a mis beaucoup de temps pour que je puisse m'installer correctement. Cela m'inquiétait beaucoup. Les coupures budgétaires sont graves. Par exemple, la possibilité de se faire soigner les dents sans frais quand on est sur l'assistance sociale n'existe plus. Il faut que cela soit une urgence. J'ai du attendre longtemps pour me faire soigner, jusqu'à ce que cela s'infecte.

A cause du manque d'argent, beaucoup de femmes doivent rester avec leur conjoint ou leur partenaire même si celui-ci les bat. Elles n'ont pas le choix si elles veulent être nourries et logées. C'est très dur pour mon enfant. L'hiver dernier, comme je ne pouvais pas lui payer des bottes, sa maîtresse lui en a acheté, moi je ne pouvais pas faire la dépense. Pour ses lunches, je ne peux pas lui payer ses boîtes de jus, donc il va boire à la fontaine. Il n'aime pas faire cela devant les autres enfants.

C'est très dur de faire garder les enfants. Quand j'ai décidé de retourner à l'école, c'était impossible de les faire garder. J'ai appelé des garderies, c'était en décembre 95, celles-ci attendaient ce que le gouvernement de Mike Harris allait décider. Les garderies ne voulaient même pas prendre les noms sur une liste d'attente étant sûres d'être coupées prochainement. Je ne comprends pas, Harris ne veut pas que l'on soit sur le bien-être, **mais quand on fait les démarches pour travailler ou étudier, il y a pleins d'obstacles avec la garde d'enfants...**

La politique de Mike Harris est globale. Il n'y a aucune priorité. C'est la même politique pour tout le monde que vous ayez des enfants ou non.

Je me sens attaquée personnellement. Le message que Mike Harris envoie, concernant les assistés sociaux et que beaucoup répètent est 'Vous n'avez aucune raison d'être sur le bien-être, boire de la bière' ou 'leur maison est sale'.

C'est dur car si une femme actuellement est victime de violence et qu'elle n'a pas de ressources, quelles sont ses options : être sur le bien-être, aller avec un autre gars qui lui non plus ne sera peut-être pas correct ou aller dans la rue. Ma famille ne peut pas m'aider, ma mère a un tout petit logement, mes enfants et moi, on est de trop pour habiter là. Personne d'autre ne peut m'aider.

Quand je me suis séparé de mon mari, je n'avais pas de support alors que je suis capable d'étudier et travailler. Mon mari doit m'envoyer des chèques par l'intermédiaire d'un département qui se charge de transférer l'argent, mais il y des mois où je n'ai rien reçu.

Pour Mike Harris, les enfants et les femmes ne comptent pas du tout. C'est de la rapace ! On peut tous crever de faim, cela n'a aucune importance. Je ne veux pas être sur le bien-être. J'ai 28 ans et tout cela me révolte. Qu'est-ce qui reste à certaines femmes pour gagner de l'argent : un gars, la prostitution ou être danseuse dans un bar de streap tease. Pour survivre comme Harris dit, on peut toujours manger des cans de thon. Harris est vraiment insultant.

J'ai laissé mon mari et suis vite aller dans une maison d'hébergement où j'ai pu être nourrie, logée, être plus en sécurité. Quand j'en suis sortie, mon chèque était coupé à cause de la nouvelle politique. Ma vie a encore changé brusquement. Les trois premiers mois ma mère a acheté la commande, alors qu'elle-même n'a pas de grandes ressources. On a vraiment besoin des maisons d'hébergement, comment on peut imagine que le gouvernement de l'Ontario ne pense pas à la sécurité des femmes. Je pense beaucoup aux femmes qui veulent trouver un service, un refuge... mais cela doit être dur avec les coupures et les longues listes d'attente. C'est l'horreur. Où peuvent aller les femmes divorcées avec leurs enfants ? La liste pour les subventions pour les logements est très longue à cause des coupures. Il y a un grand manque au niveau de la construction d'unités de logement. Comment Harris suppose qu'on puisse vivre avec un chèque aussi bas quand on connaît le prix que représente un appartement avec deux chambres ? Harris ne pense qu'au hommes d'affaires et c'est tout.

C'est dur quand tu te fais humilier pour avoir à demander de l'argent. Si tu ne reçois pas ton argent, c'est long d'attendre plusieurs semaines pour encaisser ton chèque. Comme solution tu dois être sur le bien-être, mais eux ne vont pas te croire que tu n'as pas reçu ton argent. Tout ça c'est humiliant. Il y a des personnes qui ont abusé du système avant, mais Harris doit savoir que c'est loin d'être tout le monde qui a agi comme ça. Alors c'est facile de faire la même politique pour tout le monde après. On n'est pas que de la rapace ! Mon ex-mari braillait, c'est tentant de retourner quand tu sais qu'il a de l'argent, que tu peux avoir de la nourriture, puis après cela recommence la violence et le reste. Cela marche par cycle. Je savais...

C'est dur côté santé, pour mes dents, il a fallu que j'attende que cela s'infecte. Il nous traite comme du bétail !

Emotionnellement c'est dur. Depuis qu'il est arrivé au pouvoir les gens voient différemment les assistés sociaux. Ce n'est pas notre faute si la dette est aussi élevée. Le monde est ignorant ou abuse de nous s'il pense que 'est de notre faute. J'ai rencontré des femmes et elles doivent travailler en étant payées sous la table. Il faut prendre des risques pour avoir de l'argent et survivre. C'est demander de l'argent pas dans les meilleures conditions, surtout quand la famille ne peut pas aider et qu'il y a des enfants. C'est dur de passer par-là. Il n'y a pas beaucoup de solutions pour nous autres, les femmes.

Les journaux parlent, chaque semaine, des femmes qui ne peuvent pas nourrir leurs enfants ou bien pire, chaque semaine on peut lire qu'un mari a tué sa femme, chaque semaine. C'est vraiment horrible ! Les gens ne se rendent pas compte de ce que c'est. Je me sens insécurisée. La permission est donnée aux hommes de nous battre, de nous abuser. Le message transmis par la politique de Harris dit que ta femme ne vaut rien et que toutes manières elle voudra rester ave toi, quand même, n'ayant pas d'autres ressources. Actuellement je vais à l'école, mais une fois finie et si j'ai un travail je ne veux pas rester en Ontario. Je planifie d'aller hors du Canada. Je ne veux pas dépenser un cent pour le gouvernement d'Harris. Je me sens insécure, je n'ai aucune confiance aux hommes politiques.

Comment le public ne comprend pas que les femmes aient besoin de maisons d'hébergement alors que le conjoint les bat ? Les gens ne lisent pas les journaux. C'est sérieux quand une femme quitte son mari. Souvent elle n'a pas de job, pas d'argent, pas de contact avec le dehors si le mari a tout fait pour l'isoler. Les gens, cela ne les touche pas. Ils vont réagir quand l'un de leurs proches va être concerné.

Le Workfare, c'est humiliant, aussi, comme politique.

Je me sens impuissante face à tout cela. Toute notre vie est touchée de tous les côtés. La marche des femmes 'Reprenons la nuit' au mois de septembre n'a attitré les journalistes et pourtant, on était beaucoup de femmes. Mais pour les gens dans la rue, c'est encore ces "maudites femmes". A cause de Mike Harris, on n'est pas pris au sérieux, je me sens impuissante et en plus, cela donne du pouvoir aux hommes contre nous. C'est injuste ! "

Témoignage 2

" Quand Mike Harris est arrivé au pouvoir, j'ai trouvé très dommageable la discrimination faite aux personnes sans ressources, aux bénéficiaires de l'aide sociale, les traitant de bons à rien, de parasites pour la société. La pression était forte au lendemain des élections et l'est encore sur les assistés sociaux pour les victimiser.

J'ai trois enfants, je suis séparée et je viens de sortir de cette situation en tant qu'assistée sociale. Ainsi, en entendant toute cette campagne lancée contre les bénéficiaires de l'aide sociale, je revivais le sentiment de ne servir à rien du tout, d'être bonne à rien, de n'avoir aucune estime pour moi-même. Cela m'a beaucoup dérangée et cela me dérange fortement l'image que l'on colle à ces personnes-là, qu'on insiste sur le fait qu'il n'y a aucune raison d'être sans ressources, sans travail... Harris, en tant que dirigeant, a transmis ce message. Les femmes sont très perdantes. Aussi je sais que si aujourd'hui, j'étais encore dans la situation dans laquelle je me trouvais avant que Mike Harris arrive au pouvoir, je serais dans une situation angoissante avec des coupures touchant le financement des programmes d'habitations à loyer modique et les listes

d'attentes sont énormes pour pouvoir bénéficier d'un logement moins coûteux. Au niveau légal, on a droit à tant d'heures, autre obstacle.

L'argent que je reçois du provincial ne couvre pas les frais concernant les besoins de mes enfants. L'aide du fédéral est plus conséquente. Je me sens insécurisée et critique le manque d'esprit communautaire et le manque d'esprit pratique dont témoigne le gouvernement de Mike Harris au sujet des coupures entreprises dans les écoles. Par exemple, le transport scolaire où j'habite a été coupé, ainsi, mon enfant doit se rendre à l'école à pied et je crains pour sa sécurité.

Au niveau des soins dentaires, je trouve déprimante la qualité des services. Il y a beaucoup de monde et il faut attendre des mois pour avoir un rendez-vous.

Dernièrement, je devais me rendre au Family Benefit Allowance et j'étais consternée de voir qu'à l'entrée il y avait un policier armé, regardant les gens avec beaucoup d'hostilité. Cela me mettait mal à l'aise. Cela envoie comme message qu'on ne peut pas avoir confiance aux bénéficiaires de l'aide sociale. La pression est partout et c'est une pression que nous victimise.

Je suis très inquiète au sujet de la question des logements. Je suis impliquée dans une association chargée d'empêcher Mike Harris de remettre Public Housing entre les mains du secteur privé. J'ai peur que le contrôle sur les loyers n'existe plus non plus. Toute cette politique victimise les gens avec peu de ressources.

La politique du gouvernement de l'Ontario affecte les femmes. J'ai entendu dire par une femme qu'une de ses connaissances a été harcelée par son mari. Celui-ci l'a menacée en lui demandant de trouver ses cartouches pour son fusil. Celle-ci étant paniquée a quitté son foyer sur le conseil d'une tierce personne. Après s'être adresse à l'aide juridique, elle est allée voir une avocate qui lui a dit qu'il ne fallait pas dramatiser la situation, qu'il n'y a pas lieu de s'inquiéter, qu'il n'est pas urgent de demander la garde des enfants et de ne pas s'en faire avec les cartouches.

Autre information que j'ai entendue est que de plus en plus des agences comme Bell Canada et l'hydro perçoivent moins d'argent d'une catégorie de la classe sociale en raison de manque de ressources et d'autres dépenses prioritaires (nourriture,...).

J'ai peur des nouvelles mesures politiques que peut prendre Mike Harris. A Toronto, on impose aux assistés sociaux de se laisser prendre leurs empreintes digitales pour que ces derniers puissent ramasser leur chèque.

Un autre point que je veux ajouter c'est qu'il y a des organisations de femmes qui n'agissent pas sur le plan national ou provincial. Elles sont peut-être bloquées par les différentes politiques au niveau provincial. Aussi je trouve qu'une association comme CCA (Comité canadien d'action) ne réagit pas assez pour toutes les femmes. Il y a eu un gros meeting aux Nations Unies pour parler de la défense des droits des femmes à travers le monde. Je ne suis peut-être pas au courant, mais on entend peu de choses réalisées au niveau provincial par cette association. Le gouvernement provincial a sa politique qui n'est pas du tout en accord avec le gouvernement fédéral et me semble-t-il bloque l'initiative de certains groupes, dont ceux qui veulent défendre les droits des minorités.

L'engagement des femmes doit se faire plus agressif pour contrer la politique de Mike Harris qui est loin de reconnaître le travail fourni par les femmes.

Les risques sont grands. J'étais soulagée lorsque le fédéral est intervenu pour interdire l'instauration de cliniques privées dans la province de l'Alberta. Au niveau national, les risques sont grands et tout demeure fragile et insécurisant. Les gouvernements provinciaux ne suivent pas certains standards politiques. Aussi les femmes sont perdantes.

Je suis aussi choquée de l'introduction du 'Workfare' qui empêche de choisir un métier librement et d'aider les gens à construire un véritable avenir. On impose aux gens de ramasser les vidanges, de remplir des trous de terre... Cela me fait mal la tournure que les choses prennent.

C'est comme pour les femmes qui veulent sortir d'une situation conjugale difficile. La femme ayant souvent moins de ressources que son mari aura toutes les difficultés à payer l'aide juridique. Aussi son mari a plus d'argent, il sera plus en mesure de suivre les démarches jusqu'au bout et d'obtenir la garde de ses enfants. Dans ces situations, les femmes ont la corde au cou. Si elle aime ses enfants, cela ne compte pas c'est son conjoint qui gagnera car il a du pouvoir par son argent gagné. L'angoisse est grande pour les femmes. Il n'y a pas d'issue car le risque est grand de perdre ses enfants.

Les femmes se retrouvent avec la corde au cou, ayant peur de perdre leurs enfants, elles tiennent à rester à la maison au prix de subir encore de la violence conjugale.

Après ma séparation, j'étais très stressée au niveau financier. La question du logis y était pour beaucoup. J'ai très peur car Mike Harris mène sa politique comme il l'entend. Il n'y a pas de limites dans la manière de gérer la province, de faire des coupures. Ce n'est pas sécurisant du tout.

Je veux ajouter aussi quelque chose qui m'a beaucoup scandalisée. L'autre jour, je suis allée à la Place d'Orléans, dans le magasin 'Rock Junction', car je voulais acheter des tee-shirts pour mon fils. Tout en cherchant, j'ai vu qu'ils vendaient un tee-shirt sur lequel il y avait le visage de Charles Manson.

Charles Manson est l'homme qui a sollicité d'autres femmes pour tuer une femme enceinte aux Etats-Unis. Bref, cela devient un tee-shirt symbolique, manson devient une vedette. J'étais en colère et je suis allée parler au gérant qui m'a avoué que cela ne le choquait pas du tout. Je lui ai répondu que ne se pouvais pas tolérer de voir cela. Il m'a demandé si je faisais partie d'un groupe de femmes, très ironiquement. Ensuite il m'a dit que lui, il vend ce qu'on lui donne et c'est tout.

Je suis choquée de voir à quel point tout contribue à promouvoir la violence comment on tolère que les femmes soient violentées. Comme l'autre jour, je regardais à la chaîne anglaise de Radio Canada, une critique de cinéma qui vantait le film "Independance Day" comme l'un des meilleurs films. On nous dit alors que la société aime ça les films violents. Les médias sont hypocrites et envoient des messages dangereux pour les femmes et les enfants. Tout contribue à faire continuer la violence.

Et il y aurait encore beaucoup de choses à dire Et le pire c'est qu'on laisse entrer n'importe quoi de l'étranger comme des films porno ou très violents."

Témoignage 3

Depuis que Mike Harris est au pouvoir, beaucoup de choses ont changé. Mon mari m'abusait et le niait. La question était de savoir qui allait avoir la garde des enfants. Mon avocat avait la preuve que mon mari était coupable dans toute cette histoire. Il était très violent avec moi. Ensuite, j'ai dû aller suivre un traitement de trois mois et donc, mes trois enfants sont restés chez mon ex-conjoint et celui-ci en a obtenu la garde. Ceci s'est passé après que Mike Harris sera au pouvoir. Comme l'aide juridique était difficile à obtenir à case des coupures, j'ai perdu. Pendant tout ce temps-là mon ex-mari a trouvé des témoins pour me critiquer, dire que j'étais une mauvaise mère, que je buvais... Comme l'aide légale était difficile à obtenir à cause des coupures, je n'ai pu pas avoir la garde de mes enfants. Mon ex-mari m'a sali.

Je sais qu'il tape sur mes enfants. Mais, il n'y a rien à faire pour que je puisse les récupérer sauf si les enfants sont vraiment en danger de mort. C'est la seule condition où on peut intervenir. Rien ne peut me permettre de les avoir à nouveau car les services d'aide légale ont été coupés. Cela me coûterait trop cher d'aller contre mon mari qui, je sais, abuse de mes enfants. L'Aide à l'enfance n'agit pas en ma faveur, car mon ex-mari leur a raconté des histoires à mon sujet, il a payé des témoins, donc j'ai perdu la garde de mes enfants et à cause de tout cela on a une mauvaise image de moi.

On donne le message que c'est correct d'être violent !

Je veux ravoir mes enfants. Mon mari est alcoolique et mes enfants ne sont pas en sécurité. En plus, il n'est pas responsable au niveau argent. Mes enfants, que je vois, chaque fin de semaine, sont dans du linge serré, sont dans des carrosses trop petits pour leur taille. C'est une forme d'abus. Moi, avec toutes les coupures, je ne peux pas tout payer. Je sais que mes enfants sont plus sécurisés avec moi. Ils sont plus agressifs avec le mari. Il est abusif verbalement, physiquement... Il n'y a pas moyen de les récupérer, pour moi. Mon mari m'a menacé. L'aide juridique ne peut plus m'aider. J'ai peur car le monde va devenir plus violent, alors il faudra plus de prisons, d'autres psychiatres.

Je suis allée chez le docteur et il m'a dit que le poids de mes enfants était en dessous de la normale. Leur père ne les nourrit pas assez. J'ai communiqué avec l'Aide à l'enfance. Eux aussi ont subi de grandes coupures alors ils ferment les yeux ne pouvant rien faire. Les enfants vont souffrir. Il y a aussi des changements chez les travailleuses sociales, elles ont moins de support, et si elles ne veulent pas perdre leur travail, il faut qu'elles suivent la politique telle qu'elle est avec Mike Harris.

Moi, j'ai eu du soutien dans la maison d'hébergement où j'étais. O me renvoyait l'image que j'étais une bonne mère.

E qui a été horrible 'est que mon petit enfant a été sodomisé alors qu'il était chez son père. Je l'ai emmené à l'hôpital. L'Aide à l'enfance n'a pas pu enquêter, à cause du dossier monté par mon mari que me salit et aussi à cause des coupures. Ma peur c'est que cela se reproduise. Rien n'est fait pour protéger mes enfants. C'est évident, mon mari a le contrôle de tout. Il me provoque en disant qu'Harris est bien. Il est content.

Depuis que Mike Harris est au pouvoir, j'ai été hospitalisée trois fois et c'est lié au stress que j'ai vécu tous ces derniers mois. Je trouve qu'au niveau médical, la qualité des soins est moins bonne. Je sens que les gens, les docteurs, les infirmières sont stressées.

La maison d'hébergement où j'étais faisait tout pour qu'on ait des changements mentalement et que notre santé soit meilleure. On sortait, cela nous montrait qu'il y avait de la vie à l'extérieur, on était moins isolée. Je sais maintenant que les services sont coupés.

Je veux ajouter aussi que les gens sont stressés deux semaines avant de recevoir leur chèque, avant c'était vers la fin du mois. C'est dur de faire un budget avec le petit montant qu'on reçoit. J'achète beaucoup moins de fruits et de légumes, le lait aussi, cela devient cher. Quand mes enfants viennent, je ne peux pas leur donner des produits frais, c'est trop coûteux. Physiquement, cela va coûter cher à nos enfants.

J'ai pensé au suicide, j'ai essayé et je me suis retrouvée à l'hôpital, car quelqu'un est intervenu à temps. Cela était le choc sur le coup.

Je pense à mes enfants qui sont victimes de violence.

Je suis découragée. J'ai peur pour la santé de mes enfants. C'est sérieux.

Mon mari a le chèque. Il ne me donne pas la carte de médicament des enfants. L'autre jour, mon garçon avait une infection à l'oeil, il fallait que je paie deux dollars pour la prescription. "Ce n'est que deux dollars !" m'a dit la pharmacienne. Cela m'a insulté, car je suis dans une situation financière difficile et deux dollars, c'est beaucoup, on peut acheter du pain avec cela ou du lait.

La violence a augmenté depuis que Mike Harris est au pouvoir. Il y a plus de parents qui doivent abandonner leur enfant à l'Aide à l'enfance. Cette dernière doit trouver des parents qui peuvent s'en occuper, mais les parents eux veulent plus un bébé qu'un enfant qui a déjà huit ans. En plus, cela coûte quelque chose de confier les enfants à d'autres parents, il ferait mieux de donner l'argent directement aux vrais parents.

Avant, j'amenais mes enfants au musée, au parc, mais maintenant, je n'ai pas assez d'argent, même pas de quoi payer une collation. Maintenant, on fait une sortie qu'une ou deux fois par mois. Cela est dur pour une mère de priver son enfant. Je dois tout calculer pour ne pas dépenser de trois, pas de fruits, etc... Je suis découragée.

J'ai aussi un fils qui a dix sept ans, et il souffre de me voir dans cette situation et c'est dur pour lui. Je ne peux pas lui donner de l'argent s'il veut faire une petite sortie. Il est triste de me voir comme ça et me dit être prêt à tout pour que j'en sorte financièrement et lui aussi, comme vendre de la drogue... Mais je ne veux surtout pas.

Ma qualité de vie change, comme pour l'alimentation. Je mange plus gras car c'est moins cher, et cela remplit, mais cela n'est pas nutritif. J'achète juste de la viande moins grasse pour mes enfants.

Avant on avait la possibilité pour nos enfants d'avoir du linge pour retourner à l'école. Maintenant, ils ont coupé ce service.

Je vois des femmes qui retournent vivre avec leur mari juste pour être nourrie, même si elles sont taper dessus. Je connais une femme qui vient juste de commencer les drogues, j'ai peur qu'elle se suicide, tellement sa situation s'est aggravée dernièrement. J'ai peur qu'elle se suicide.

J'aimerais retourner à l'école, mais on m'a dit que je ne pourrais pas avoir d'aide financière car je suis enceinte. C'est très dur, j'ai assez hâte que Mike Harris parte et j'ai surtout peur que mes enfants subissent encore de la violence chez leur père, c'est vraiment ma peur."

A final plea

As I sit here in this shelter and listen to all of the cuts to my safety, to my rights, to affordable shelter, and re-education so I can get on with my life and live safe and free, I truly wonder how many of you who make these decisions have lived in complete terror? Afraid to go outside. Afraid to leave this situation at home because of the struggle emotionally and financially, but afraid to stay. You who make these decisions have managed to make me feel worthless and undeserving of so much that others take for granted. I can't keep getting up and then be knocked back down.

I ask only this. The right to:

Live without fear.
To make a mistake.
To be happy and fulfilled.

And the right to have my voice heard. PLEASE!

Too Afraid to Sign.

Government of Ontario initiatives on abused women's issues

Since coming to power, the Mike Harris government would no doubt argue that it has undertaken a number of changes and initiatives that demonstrate its commitment to abused women in Ontario. Those initiatives, however, when seen in the light of deteriorating women's services and supports, do not shine so brightly.

"What we did take away were some counselling programs for women and their families that relate to psychological counselling, opportunities for finding a new place to live, opportunities for discussing their concerns about child care, opportunities for returning to school, opportunities for getting a job, and all of those programs exist in communities across Ontario by other agencies."

Dianne Cunningham, Minister Responsible for Women's Issues, defending the cuts to second stage shelters. *Hansard*. October 4, 1995.

The Victims' Bill of Rights: In the Common Sense Revolution, the Progressive Conservative Party commitment to Ontarians, was the pledge to introduce a Victims' Bill of Rights for victims of crime in Ontario[53]. The "bill of rights" had been around for a number of years as part of a PC Party private member's bill. It was, therefore, not a hastily drawn document. In November 1995, the Attorney General of Ontario finally tabled the bill in the Legislature--with significant alteration[54]. The most helpful principle of the previous bill, assuring victims they would receive "social services, health care and medical treatment, counselling and legal assistance responsive to their needs," had been deleted and replaced by a statement giving them "access to *information*" about "services and remedies *available*[55]." (Italics ours.)

Among other provisions, the new bill made provision for a Victims' Assistance Fund to be set up from court surcharge fines and donations. The Fund is to be used specifically for "victims' services". Other provisions include the direction that victims *should*, if they so request, be interviewed by a police officer of the same gender. Furthermore, they *should* receive information about the status of application for release, release from custody, unescorted pass, or escape of their assailant from incarceration, *if* they so request. Persons under 18 were provided the right to testify on videotape and behind a screen with the aid of a support person[56].

Women's advocates, especially shelters, were shocked that provision of services and legal counselling to abused women was deleted from the Bill. Clearly, government commitment didn't extend to the services most survivors actually use in the community. It was not prepared to introduce any legislation that might counter the prime directive to cut spending.

Advocates also didn't fail to note that the specific context of male violence against women, and in particular the specific context of victimization for women abused by their partners, was noticeably absent from the language and content of the bill.

"Many members of the public are not aware of the victim crisis assistance and referral service. We call it VCARS. It is one of those programs that go along without making any waves, doing excellent work for people across this province without attracting any attention.

Bob Runciman, Solicitor General of Ontario, announcing increased funding for police-based volunteer programs supporting victims of crime. *Hansard*, June 10, 1996.

$10 million for Victim Assistance/Victim Services: Following on the introduction of the Victims' Bill of Rights, the Attorney General and the Solicitor General of Ontario jointly announced the allocation of $10 million *over two years* to provide increased services for victims[57]. Among other things, the allocation provided for an automated telephone "Victim Notification System" to keep victims informed of release dates for incarcerated offenders and upcoming trial information. (Some women's advocates have already dubbed the automated technology: "1-800-he's-in-your-driveway.")

The fund also doubled--from 13 to 26 sites in Ontario--the Victim/ Witness Assistance Program, a court-based program providing information and support to crime victims that operates out of Crown Attorney offices. Also increased--from 4 to 20--were the Victims' Crisis and Referral Service (VCARS), programs that operate out of police departments, sending volunteers to assist police responding to victims of crime or tragic circumstances.

The announcement also designated June 11, the day the Victims' Bill of Rights was proclaimed into law, as the "Annual Day of Commemoration for Victims of Crime[58]."

Only $500,000 of the $10 million was provided for a "Community Victims' Initiatives Program," to provide one-time grants of up to $50,000 for community groups who assist victims of crime. The focus for 1996 was violence against women. Criteria for funding was based largely on the current government's goals of management "efficiency," use of automated technology to replace service and amalgamation with businesses or other private groups to reduce budgets.

After taking $9 million from abused women's services, the government introduced these measures to serve all "victims of crime." The generic, gender neutral focus was highlighted in the decision to provide the vast majority of the fund to court and police services for "victims." The decision to fund only court and police based services was made in spite of requests by OAITH to the Minister of Community and Social Services, the Minister Responsible for Women's Issues and the Attorney General of Ontario, in separate meetings, *and* to the Finance and Economic Affairs Committee, to allocate the Victims' Assistance Fund to either restoration of the cuts to shelters and community-based supports for abused women, or to provision of *independent* legal/court advocates in shelters and community programs across Ontario.

No funding was designated for community programs providing ongoing frontline service to abused women and their children in *women's* services[59].

"Sooner or later, neither the judiciary nor any other public institution can do more with less but must confront the reality that still fewer resources must mean fewer services. Resources that are declining relative to the volume of work facing the judiciary must ultimately put pressure on the quality of justice."

Chief Justice Antonio Lamer of the Supreme Court of Canada, expressing concern about cuts to all courts across Canada. *Toronto Star*, July 25, 1996.

Spousal assault courts: In response to high profile newspaper reports of chronic flaws in Toronto court response to 'domestic violence,' the Attorney General announced the opening of two "spousal assault courts" in the Metropolitan Toronto area[60]. The specialized courts would provide prosecutors and other personnel trained to work with women assaulted by partners. The courts would also provide a diversionary program of counselling for abusers convicted of "spousal assault." The courts were modelled after an experiment with "domestic violence" courts in the Province of Manitoba, where results showed that abused women felt they had more say in the court process. As a result of negotiation with women regarding sentences, more offenders were diverted to "treatment" or placed on probation rather than incarcerated. Lengths of jail sentences were not significantly different than those of other criminal courts[61].

Super inquest: As a result of deaths of women by partners in Ontario, the Ontario Coroner's Office announced the establishment of a "super inquest" into the death of Arlene May, a woman murdered in central Ontario by her partner, who was out on bail following a previous assault[62]. The inquest, still in its investigatory phase, will be used to examine a range of issues affecting the response by public systems to cases of 'domestic violence.' Women's groups are expected to ask for involvement in the inquest and will be evaluating and monitoring recommendations coming out of the process.

$11 million *capital* funding for shelter buildings: In April 1996, after cutting $9 million from direct services to abused women and their children[63], the Ministry of Community and Social Services announced allocation of $11 million in capital grants to nine shelters in Ontario[64]. Most of the grants were commitments made, or negotiated, by the previous Government of Ontario under the New Democratic Party. The grants were made to provide much-needed renovations and repairs or to replace buildings that were in serious disrepair.

Review of Violence Against Women Prevention Program: Provincial services and other initiatives specifically addressing violence against women are part of the Violence Against Women Prevention Program (VAWP). Although no consultation whatsoever occurred before cuts were made to abused women's services--including to second stage program funding--the Minister Responsible for Women's Issues, who oversees the work of the Ontario Women's Directorate, initiated a "review" of the VAWP in July 1996[65] in which Government ministries as well as some women's advocate organizations were interviewed. The review was presented as a follow-up to a previous three-year examination of the Program undertaken by the NDP government through a wide-ranging community consultation. The terms of the current review, however, didn't focus only on recommendations found in the November 1994 report of the NDP review to the Treasury Board[66].

"We have a very open communication process in the province of Ontario for women and have no complaints..."

Dianne Cunningham, Minister Responsible for Women's Issues. *Hansard*, June 5, 1996.

"I just think it's a total waste of time and I don't think the taxpayers should be spending money on irrelevant situations where you have no proof except one person and the few women..."

Dianne Cunningham, Minister Responsible for Women's Issues, rejecting calls for an inquiry into allegations from women's services that she threatened to cut their funding if they opposed government policies. She was drowned out by Opposition interjections. *Hansard*, November 1, 1995.

In actual fact, the review 'terms of reference,' or description, underwent an 'identity crisis' of sorts. A May 1996 version, obtained by OAITH in a leaked document, directed reviewers to take into "full account the government's commitment to community safety *and* mandate of constraint" (italics ours) and specifically directed them not to base any of their recommendations on "fiscal expansion"[67]. The proposal's rhetoric about "business partnerships," "tangible deliverables," and "community safety", as opposed to "violence against women," spoke more of intent to shift responsibility for violence against women prevention away from government, and to support service amalgamations. (The approach was in startling contrast to the previous government review which specifically indicated that, in view of a commitment to ending violence against women and developing appropriate women's services, budget reduction was *not* a goal of the review.)

The May version of the review outline also asked reviewers to examine questions of effectiveness in current approaches addressing violence against women, and asked what key program elements are needed to address violence, issues that had been studied countless times, both inside and outside government. After the May review document was released to media, a new document was developed softening references to fiscal considerations and removing questions about effectiveness and key programs[68]. Still, reviewers sought input on a number of questions covered during the extensive three-year NDP review, including the role of the Ontario Women's Directorate, what services women need, issues of accountability and questions about the funding mechanism for the VAWP.

Some advocates have speculated the review might have been designed to find different answers to oft-asked and answered questions in the VAWP area, answers that would provide the illusion of consultation and a basis for dismissing the recommendations from the NDP review. Failure to consult in any way before drastically cutting critical programs for abused women has not contributed to a relationship of mutual trust and respect between women's programs and the Government of Ontario.

Women's groups currently await the release of the results of the review, which was to be completed in a short three month period.

Who Does What Panel: The Who Does What Panel was appointed to examine roles and responsibilities for delivering services between provincial and municipal governments in Ontario and recommending drastic changes in services delivery to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. In its second report to the Minister, it has recommended that abused women's shelters become a responsibility solely of the Province. Under this plan, the per diem funding delivered to shelters at the municipal level would disappear and the 20% of it cost-shared by the municipality would be absorbed by the

province[69]. The shift would be part of an enormous exchange of revenues and responsibilities for social programs between provincial and municipal governments.

Per diem funding for shelters, which depends on actual occupancy of shelter beds, has always been problematic. A period of low occupancy (for example, if the shelter were to experience a quarantine for chicken pox) could seriously jeopardize financial stability. Moreover, municipal discretion on whether and how much per diem to pay has created discrepancies in services across the province. Changing the funding mechanism, therefore, is a step forward. Women's shelters, will realize benefits for abused women and their children, however, only when funding support is *adequate* as well as stable.

Assumption of responsibility for public funding of abused women's shelters in no way means that the Province will increase funding, but only that it will directly deliver funding as well as maintaining its already established role of determining standards and monitoring of programs delivered in Ontario.

"Rationalization of VAW programs [is a problem]. It appears that plans are to close some shelters-- to utilize shelters only in the urban areas. In the North, there are vast distances from one township to another. Abused women will have to travel hours to reach a shelter, not to mention the other problems associated with having to leave all support systems of one's own community."

Shelter worker. North Eastern Ontario. August 1996.

Shelter occupancy rates review: As a consequence of recommendations from the provincial auditor in the year before the new government took office, the Ministry of Community and Social Services began a survey of women's shelters based on discovering which shelters had low occupancy rates on a regular basis. While we have been given assurances from MCSS personnel that occupancy rate analysis is not a prelude to cuts in shelter services, advocates remain concerned. Occupancy calculations, ie. calculations of the percentage of beds in a shelter that are occupied in a year, are a poor indicator of the needs of abused women, including the need for the shelter beds themselves.

Particularly in rural areas, where distance between communities is long, inadequate funding for outreach programs and lack of transportation to shelters lead to consistently lower occupancy rates, if averaged over a year. Yet there are times when even rural shelters are filled to capacity. Furthermore, if occupancy were to be used as justification for closing a service, distances would only lengthen and problems of transportation and outreach increase. Moreover, rural shelters with medium to low occupancy rates often serve the same number of women as shelters in large urban settings where women unable to find affordable permanent housing, may stay in shelter longer, driving occupancy rates up.

Redefinition of "direct service": The Ministry of Community and Social Services, in an attempt to develop a "standard measure" for reporting service delivered in MCSS funded agencies, has developed a definition of "direct service" to abused women which may be problematic for community-based programs and women's shelters. The definition describes "direct" as: "The hours spent actually interacting with the individual, whether in a group or

individually; face to face or on the phone. It does not include work done 'on behalf of' clients, such as telephone calls, advocacy, etc., nor the administrative support to the service.[70]"

Advocates for abused women have already expressed concerns about the definition because the nature of anti-violence work often involves considerable time for advocacy, interagency referral and other services "on behalf of" women. MCSS has given assurances that the definition "in no way" limits the value or delivery of services on behalf of women. Shelters will expect assurances to be honoured.

Given the Ontario government's restrictions on funding of advocacy for a number of equality seeking groups, its redefinition of "core services" in second stage shelters, its intention to redefine "disability" and "hardship," and its increasing restrictions on eligibility for government funded services, it might be wise for advocates to remain sceptical until all services abused women need are *guaranteed* protection from funding cuts.

"We no longer quality for social services as [my husband's] support is supposed to be over what I would get from the government, but I am not getting this support. But even though I am not getting it, I am not eligible for assistance because it's [child support] court ordered through the Family Support Plan. I have called repeatedly--all they say is it will be coming. WHEN! I have no food--you try looking after four children with no food!

Dorothy. A survivor.

Family Support Plan: In July and August, 1996, the Attorney General of Ontario announced plans to radically overhaul the Family Support Plan, the program that manages the delivery of court-ordered child support payments from non-custodial parents[71]/[72]. The Plan is one of a number of attempts to make non-custodial parents--mostly men who refuse to obey court orders--pay their child support.

In an attempt to do "more for less," the Progressive Conservative government has closed regional offices of the Family Support Plan, terminating 290 Family Support Plan staff, in favour of a centralized automated phone technology which is supposed to address all problems. Ever since the new system was announced, parents--both custodial and non-custodial--have been hung up by the technology. Payments previously transferred without difficulty are now delayed and women and children have been forced to borrow money, or otherwise scrape by, while trying to get through on the phone line.

The Attorney General insists the problem with increasing delays was the result of a computer error and that it has been solved. Abused women, however, differ in their opinion. Let's hope the automated phone line for "victims notification" has a higher success rate. For many women whose partners will not pay support, of course, the high-tech phone system will be problematic. They can't afford a phone.

Some of the more positive aspects of changes to the Plan, such as the refusal to issue licences and permits for failure to pay child support, have been overshadowed by the continuing inability of women to reach the Plan phone line or to receive the payments due to them on time, even when their ex-partners pay.

Another Plan 'reform' feature which concerns abused women's advocates is a plan to pilot a project making referral to mediation mandatory in cases where parties wish to change support orders. In spite of the usual assurances that cases of "coercion" will be screened out, advocates know that abused women will end up in mediation as a result of the proposed process.

"I called the Support [Plan] office number to get information. I received busy signals all day, every day, and at the end of the day, I got a recording that said to try again tomorrow. I decided to go to the office, at which point I discovered the doors were locked and a notice on the door stated the office was permanently closed. The notice said to write to the new office address in another city. After writing to them, I discovered that the address given to me was incorrect."

Lori. A survivor.

'Spouse in the house' rule: In one of its most regressive moves, the Ontario government has reworked the "spouse-in-the-house" rule for determining eligibility for sole-support parents on social assistance. Sole-support parents receiving Family Benefits or General Welfare, 95% of whom are women, have always been deemed ineligible for assistance if they are living with someone who is *legally* responsible for supporting them, either through a court order, parental responsibility or qualification as a "common-law" relationship of three or more years in duration. This rule is problematic enough for an abused woman whose partner refuses to support her, but also refuses to leave her house. It has also jeopardized abused women on assistance whose ex-partners return by force to their homes. The new and improved "spouse-in-the-house" rule only makes abused women's situation worse.

Under a new definition, *any* person of the opposite sex who lives with a woman on assistance is deemed to be a "spouse," even if the person is *not* legally responsible for support of the woman or her children. It is up to women to prove that the person is not a "spouse" by answering a series of personal questions about her relationship with the person, excluding questions about "sexual factors[73]."

Women who cannot prove that the person is not a "spouse" can have food and shelter assistance terminated. For example, it is possible for a woman to be cut off assistance because she shares a TV or furniture, or household chores with the person residing in her home. Also included in the changes to the rule is the discretion to withhold assistance where there is a "reasonable prospect of reconciliation" between a woman and a person of the opposite sex with whom she may have had a relationship with *in the past*.

Clearly, for women escaping violence, these changes create serious jeopardy, because women may lose their financial support and housing. If they cannot provide for their children, women may have to return to abusers or give up their children to abusive fathers. Women who have escaped violence may be driven back to it if they are expected to reconcile or lose benefits. The "spouse-in-the-house" rule also applies to women who receive disability benefits and puts abused women with disabilities in severe jeopardy.

Since the majority of sole-support parents on assistance are women, the 'spouse-in-the-house' rule disproportionately discriminates against women. A group of sole-support women has put a case

"My ex-partner visited my daughter every two weeks for two months, but after a while, he moved himself into my apartment. From that day on, the abuse got worse."

Carole. A survivor.

against the rule before the courts based on the Charter of Rights and Freedoms of Canada. They are still awaiting a decision.

Workfare: Forced work for welfare, introduced during the summer of 1996, will have a dramatic effect on abused women and their children. As sole support women with children are added to workfare placements, they will be forced to labour for their right to food and shelter not unlike the ways in which they were forced to labour for the benefit of abusive partners before their escape. Workfare evaluations show that forced work is unlikely to lead to the upgrading or escape from poverty that abused women will need to be free[74].

Analysing Government of Ontario policy and its impact on work with abused women

Taken together, the initiatives of the Mike Harris government have shown either a significant lack of understanding of, and sensitivity to, women's concerns, or a deliberate gender bias in the development of policy and practice. Either way, the impact on women is the same. Women's human and equality rights are eroded.

Policy and initiatives affecting abused women and their children have embraced a genderless analysis of criminal violence against women while ignoring the political and social causes of sexist violence. Instead, we see violence defined as a "law and order" issue or a "therapeutic" mental health problem for both women and men. Furthering this regressive approach is the current emphasis on personal and local responsibility for providing women's equality services and the drive to release government from collective responsibility for social programs.

"It seems almost unprecedented. We haven't seen this kind of split with the previous NDP government or the Liberal government before that. And the split has grown in recent months."

Jane Armstrong, vice-president of Environics, about polls showing only 28% of women, compared to 45% of men support the Mike Harris Tories. *Toronto Star*, April 27, 1996.

Focus on generic services: A number of Ontario government initiatives demonstrate the absence of a gender analysis, the feminist perspective that has historically framed action to ensure and protect women's equality rights in Ontario. Furthermore, analysis of violence against women initiatives to this point demonstrates that where gender is a factor, it is only to ensure that there is "gender neutrality," or gender sameness, rather than a recognition of the relative imbalance still existing between men and women on the basis of access to justice, economic opportunity and security, and so on. The emphasis is on what is the *same*, not on what is *fair*.

Equally regressive is the absence of analysis of compounding imbalances within communities based on race, economic class, language, sexuality, ability, age and so on. Lack of access to needed services for a whole range of women's communities has long been a problem in Ontario. The generic approach of the Mike Harris government ensures that the problem will continue unabated.

The reduction in independent, woman-centred services, such as shelters and community-based supports, racially and culturally specific social services, counselling for gay and lesbian youth, Aboriginal social service supports and specific supports for women with disabilities all highlight a rejection of specific experiences of violence, as well as of equality rights work generally. The elimination of all government support for advocacy groups, repeal of mandatory equality rights legislation such as the Employment and Pay Equity legislation, and elimination of funding for anti-racism work are all evidence of the right-wing swing against the equality rights for all women and disenfranchised communities.

In the wake of the erosion of support for women's services, the announcement of funding to so-called "victims' services," in "law and order" systems is a significant shift away from recognition of the

social and political roots of violence against women. It focusses on violence against women as a crime-based problem, rather than as an experience of oppression that affects every aspect of survivors' lives. Any benefits of the Crown and police-based Victim/Witness Assistance Program or the VCARS programs to abused women are welcome. The narrow approach of the Ontario government within a law and order agenda, however, will not serve the interests of most abused women who either don't trust, or won't use, the 'justice' system, nor will it address their needs in other aspects of their lives.

The development of a standard measure of direct service based on personal contact, and not on work "on behalf of" women, regardless of how it is eventually used, indicates a continuing focus on women's anti-violence work as primarily "therapy" based rather than advocacy/ education based.

"We will also be promoting individual self-reliance and ensuring that the government supplements, rather than displaces traditional supports--such as the church and the community."

David Tsubouchi, former Minister of Community and Social Services, giving his address to the Committee on Estimates. February 6, 1996.

"Government cannot do it all. Persons have to accept responsibility for their family members and themselves if they want to have self-esteem and be successful."

Dianne Cunningham, Minister Responsible for Women's Issues, responding to Opposition on cuts to second stage shelter services. *Hansard*, October 4, 1995.

Focus on personal responsibility: Social program cuts in Ontario are based on an ideology of "personal" or "individual" responsibility for what has historically been a collective community responsibility in Canada. The most obvious example is the drastic cut in social assistance and legal aid assistance to low income people. As more and more women are deemed ineligible for assistance, the Government of Ontario is, in effect, implementing the practice of a value system based on individual "survival of the fittest" or the most privileged. As these cuts predominantly disadvantage women, women are driven further into second-class status.

For services supporting abused women and their children, the personal responsibility agenda figures largely in increased expectations for local community fundraising and volunteerism, in addition to user fees. Both are aspects of increasing privatization of social programs. Many shelters facing severe cuts have already increased the time they spend on private fundraising. When abused women's shelters already encounter user fees for counselling on issues of violence against women, it is evidence of an unhealthy shift to privatization and personal responsibility in our work to end sexist violence.

Continuing erosion of public funding, along with corresponding privatization and user fees, will ensure devolution of responsibility for women's equality rights from the collective, social responsibility women fought for, to a regressive 'victim based' personal responsibility. In addition to the obvious exclusion of low income abused women that will ensue, women's advocates will recognize a drift towards increased "victim blaming" response. A focus on personal responsibility for abused women--a focus on "coping" with the world, rather than changing it--is completely counter to all progress women have made against any form of violence against them.

"...we will introduce alternative dispute resolution measures such as early screening and mediation of disputes, as well as extend judge-driven case management."

Business Plan. Ministry of the Attorney General. May 1996.

"...the mediator must be satisfied that abuse has not made either party incapable of mediating, that women and children will not be harmed in the process, that any power imbalance can be managed..."

Backgrounder on Family Support Plan enforcement pilot project to make referral to mediation mandatory for changing support orders. August 1996.

Lack of access to justice: Cuts to Legal Aid assistance and diversion of family law disputes to private mediation--especially when referral to it becomes mandatory--raise grave concerns for women's access to justice rights.

Clearly, lack of means to pay for legal representation and other legal costs seriously disadvantages abused women when they seek child custody and access, support and property division. That they should lose the right to fair treatment before the law is appalling in light of their experiences as survivors of violence.

Already, shelters are reporting that women are being urged in increasing numbers to accept mediation as a diversion from court, and this has been particularly the case if the woman relies on legal aid for funding a lawyer[75]. The popularity of mediation in family law has grown in recent years and women's advocates have been grappling with the implications of mediation for abused women for some time now. The Government of Ontario has intensified that struggle with cuts to courts, constraints on legal aid funding and an avid and public support for increasing mediation diversion in the legal process. This kind of 'private justice' flies in the face of women's struggles to bring injustice into open scrutiny. This is especially true for abused women who have seen far too much 'private justice' in their lives.

In the criminal justice system, women may fare no better. While the Attorney General is installing special 'spousal assault courts' in Metropolitan Toronto, he continues to send mixed messages about changing the "threshold," or standard for laying charges and proceeding to trial. In a May 23, 1996, article in the *Toronto Star* newspaper, Attorney General Charles Harnick is quoted as saying that "changing the charge screening standard" is something worth looking at. In a meeting with several women's groups, including OAITH, on October 17, 1996, he assured advocates that rumours about changing charge screening were false, but indicated that the government couldn't keep paying the high costs of trials. Because assaults against women have always been poorly prosecuted, a change from the present standard of "reasonable likelihood of conviction" to the rumoured "substantial likelihood of conviction," would screen many cases of violence against women out of criminal courts.

In the face of increasing court backlogs coupled with severe cuts to 'justice' ministries, advocates for women worry that a hardened standard will lead to both increasing failure to charge and increasing withdrawal of charges. Scepticism about both family and criminal court diversion programs and a higher charge screening threshold arises from concern that changes are not made to support abused women, but to support a government fiscal program of cuts.

Amalgamation/ consolidation: Chronic underfunding of shelters, compounded by current funding cuts, has forced some shelter services to amalgamate with others specifically on a financial

"The issue of financial cost pales in comparison to the moral demand for action in this area. However, even from a strictly financial standpoint, it is arguable that providing more shelters can save criminal justice costs in the long run."

The Common Sense Revolution pre-election promise to increase funding for women's shelters. January 1994.

"...we do not have the money to be able to add any new core funding for additional shelters, and that's a reality for us."

Dianne Cunningham, Minister Responsible for Women's Issues. *Hansard*. October 5, 1995.

"I think it's reasonable that politicians who campaign in a direction or on a platform for things that are within their control, that they ought to resign or go back to the people if they in fact are going to change their minds."

Mike Harris, Premier of Ontario. *Toronto Star*, May 2, 1996.

basis. Rather than eliminate "duplication of services," which is not a significant problem in women's shelters, amalgamation may well negatively effect abused women, increasing their difficulties in obtaining appropriate services in or close to their communities. Workers often lose their jobs when programs amalgamate and sometimes, particularly in rural areas, communities lose the only women's anti-violence intervention available as distances between services widen[76]. Amalgamation and consolidation of programs, however, is a central principle of the Mike Harris government approach to programs, including amalgamation of entire municipalities.

Jeopardy of service quality: Where there are fewer counsellors and advocates to assist women and more barriers to leaving abusive relationships, service quality is often impossible to maintain at levels delivered before the cuts. Shelter workers have had to increase their responsibilities, while attempting to maintain previous levels of response, walking a fine line between service provision and mere service operation[77]. As noted above, other community groups that could have assisted women have also been reduced or eliminated, and one-on-one assistance and advocacy within support systems is in serious jeopardy.

When women's shelters were created, they rose out of a reaction to women "disappearing" into mental health or other mainstream systems where their specific needs could not be addressed and the analysis of violence often blamed women and colluded with abusers. The mental health focus many agencies used led to expectations that women look at their own behaviour and personality for a solution to the abuse. Although much has been done to educate traditional systems and progress has been made, there is no substitution for women-centred advocacy for effectiveness and sensitivity to abused women and children's experiences. Any shift to generic models of service, private services and amalgamated, centralized programs can be expected to adversely affect appropriate service to abused women.

Following the money: Premier Mike Harris has spoken of "balancing the budget"[78], "restructuring"[79], and a "spending crisis"[80] that drives the need to downsize social programs and government in general. Behind claims that hard budget decisions have to be made on behalf of children who "deserve a better future[81]," and that government programs are "not working[82]," is a government agenda, paid for by all taxpayers, serving the special interests of business.

The uncontrolled spending argument falls hard on the ears of abused women and women's shelters. Although it is true that the costs of violence are high--estimated at over $4 billion a year in Canada[83]--abused women's shelters in Ontario are well aware that spending is not spiralling out of control as a result of overspending on services to end violence against women and their children.

"We're spending vast amounts of money on these programs for women."

Dianne Cunningham, Minister Responsible for Women's Issues, referring to the funding given to women's shelters by MCSS. *Hansard*, October 4, 1995.

"To suggest our motive is not to help women or children or the unemployed or those on welfare is 100 per cent wrong. And clearly we have a challenge in getting that message through as others are spreading a different message. I think we're getting a bum rap."

Mike Harris, Premier of Ontario, in an International Women's Day speech. *Toronto Star*, March 7, 1996.

An examination of 1995/96 Ontario budget actuals illustrates the point. According to information from the Ministry of Community and Social Services, MCSS spent a total of $48.2 million on emergency shelters in 1995/96[84] (including funds spent on the MCSS 80% share of municipal per diems), and a total of $66.7 million on *all* direct funding for programs addressing violence against women funded by MCSS, including programs for male batterers[85]. Based on the total actual expenses of the Province of Ontario reported in its Quarterly Update of September 30, 1996[86] at $57,085 million, ***the percentage of provincial spending paid out for abused women's emergency shelters is less than .085% of provincial costs.*** Taken as a calculation per shelter, for example, each of Ontario's 97 women's shelters receiving funding from the Violence Against Women Program budget of MCSS would receive *less than $500,000 per shelter*. Now that's efficiency!

The $66.7 million total funds spent in 1995/96 on Violence Against Women programs in MCSS represents .117% of the total provincial budget costs of 1995/96[87]. Clearly, abused women's safe shelters are not responsible for the debts of the Government of Ontario, nor are they responsible for spiralling government costs. Women's advocates may justifiably argue, based on the numbers, that abused women are bearing more than their share of the consequences of cost-cutting, and that they are being unfairly expected to shoulder responsibility for fiscal problems.

Abused women and women's shelters, therefore, have a strong argument in favour of demanding *increasing* support, rather than accepting government restraint.

Women's rights as human rights

Internationally, there has been an increasing acceptance of women's rights to freedom from violence as a human rights issue, and to recognize the state's role in ensuring that such rights are protected. Canada has been one nation leading the way to this recognition. Since 1979, the United Nations has seen a flurry of activity: conferences, conventions and declarations to expose and address violence and gender crimes inflicted on women around the world[88]. Through these instruments, the UN has outlined its recognition of state responsibilities to prevent and appropriately address violence against women. Those responsibilities clearly include recognition of male violence against intimate partners[89].

In her article Some Reflections on Violence Against Women, Radhika Coomaraswamy, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, outlines state responsibility as a duty to prevent violations of the rights and freedoms of women by private actors either as individuals, or as corporations. She adds, "a state which tolerates violence against women within families or communities and which does not take effective measures to prevent this violence, or hold accountable those who are responsible for the violence, are as guilty as the individual perpetrators"[90].

Part of the legal standards set out in the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women also makes states responsible for ensuring that abused women are given both social and legal assistance as a fundamental right. The Declaration also defines state violence as acts that are perpetrated as well as acts that are condoned[91].

One of the major obstacles to a life free from violence that has not been adequately addressed is women's relative lack of economic independence. The lack of economic security for women makes it extremely difficult to challenge male violence and forms of power[92]. Needless to say, the policy directions of the Province of Ontario as outlined above do not challenge women's economic insecurity. Rather, they entrench inequality.

At the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women, Canada reaffirmed its commitment to international agreements of the United Nations. Specifically, Canada committed to "ensure the full implementation of the human rights of women and of the girl child as an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of all human rights and fundamental freedoms[93]". In addition, Canada stated its intention to "prevent and eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls"[94] and recognized that: "the implementation of the Platform for Action requires commitment from governments and the international community. By making national and international commitments for action, including those made at the Conference, governments and the international community recognize the need to take priority action for the empowerment and advancement of women"[95].

The initiatives identified for government action included allocating adequate resources within government budgets, and mobilizing community resources for activities related to the elimination of violence against women, including resources for the implementation of plans of action at all appropriate levels[96]. ***In addition, governments were to provide well funded shelters and relief support for girl children and women subject to violence, as well as medical, psychological, and other counselling services and free or low cost legal aid where it is needed, as well as appropriate assistance to enable them to find a means of subsistence[97].*** (Italics ours.)

The policies and practices of the Government of Ontario call into question the honesty, integrity and morality of our leadership within Canada, both at the provincial and federal level.

The cumulative effects of the cuts to services that abused women use to free themselves from violence denies them their fundamental human rights. The Government of Ontario is breaking international law agreements, and it should be held fully accountable for actions that violate the international right of women to live free from violence.

Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms: If obligations to international law fail to move Canadian provincial and federal governments to uphold responsibilities to abused women, one would hope the laws of their own state would. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Canadian Bill of Rights, for example, ensure the rights of every citizen to live lives free from violence, and for the state to ensure that these rights are protected.

- The Canadian Bill of Rights, Part I, Section 1 (a) guarantees all Canadians "the right of the individual to life, liberty, security of the person, and enjoyment of property, and the right not to be deprived thereof except by due process of law."

- The Canadian Bill of Rights, Part I, Section 1 (b) guarantees "the right of the individual to equality before the law and the protection of law."

- The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Section 7, guarantees the right to life, liberty, and security of the person and the right not to be deprived thereof except in the accordance with the principal of fundamental justice.

- The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Section 12, guarantees the right not to be subjected to any cruel and unusual treatment or punishment.

- The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Section 15, Subsection (1), guarantees every individual is equal before the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefits of the law without discrimination and in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age, sexual orientation or mental or physical disability.

- The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Section 28, guarantees that not withstanding anything in the Charter, the rights and freedoms referred to in it are equally made to males and females[98].

These laws are not simply abstract principles for the federal and provincial governments to dispense at their discretion. Instead, the Constitution Act, under which the Charter and the Bill of Rights fall, outlines the importance of these laws.

The General Section of the Canadian Bill of Rights begins:

"Primacy of the Constitution of Canada

52(1) The Constitution of Canada is the supreme law of Canada, and any law that is inconsistent with the provisions of the Constitution is, to the extent of the inconsistency, of no force or effect[99]."

More specifically, the Charter outlines the applicability of the laws to include:

"Application of the Charter

32(1) This Charter applies:

(a) to the Parliament and government of Canada in respect of all matters within the authority of Parliament including all matters relating to the Yukon Territory and Northwest Territories; and

(b) ***to the legislature and government of each province in respect of all matters within the authority of the legislature of each province***[100]**."** (Italics ours.)

Results of our surveys showing that women are clearly naming the cuts to social assistance, legal aid and other supports in their decision to remain with or return to abusive partners, is evidence that actions of the Province are locking women into violent situations where they risk more frequent and severe violent assaults and, perhaps, death.

Based on all of the above, we believe that the Government of Ontario is guilty of, de facto, condoning the violence inflicted on women as a result of its failure to uphold its legal responsibilities, both nationally and internationally, to protect abused women and to implement the programs necessary for their safety and freedom.

Both morally and legally speaking, then, women may argue that:

- having the responsibility, the power, the knowledge of need and, given the small budget already allocated to support for abused women's services, the means of providing progressive measures to end violence against women, and

- deliberately choosing instead to cut services and supports to abused women and their children,

that the government of Premier Mike Harris can be held accountable for the consequences abused women suffer and for the infringement of their security and equality rights under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms of Canada.

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