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The Honourable Judy Sgro

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•(1115)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

This is the 15th meeting of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women. We are extremely pleased this morning to have Minister Oda with us. She will be here to answer questions.

I understand you will be here for an hour, Ms. Oda. It is now 11:15, unfortunately, so I hope that means 12:15, but I am going to turn it over to you as quickly as I can.

We very much appreciate your getting here this morning and sharing your vision and answering some questions that the committee members have.

Minister Oda.

Hon. Bev Oda (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Status of Women): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Good day.

[Translation]

I am pleased to appear before the Standing Committee on the Status of Women. I would also like to take this opportunity to offer my congratulations on the elections of Ms. Judy Sgro as Chair and Ms. Joy Smith as Vice-Chair of the Standing Committee. They bring a strong commitment to women and their contributions will strengthen the work of the Standing Committee.

Recently, I tabled in Parliament the Government of Canada's responses to three of this Committee's reports on Status of Women Canada. I will discuss the Government's actions in response to these reports throughout my presentation.

Canada's new Government is committed to supporting the full participation of all women in the economic, social and cultural life of Canada. Canada's new Government fundamentally believes that women are equal. We believe that women are strong, achievers, leaders in every sector of our society, providers for our families, and role models. And I am sure you share that belief, too.

[English]

As the minister responsible for Status of Women, I am pleased to discuss with the committee my work to date. In my first months, I met with a number of women's organizations and individuals. I held two round tables focusing on what actions can be taken by all levels of government, the private sector, and NGOs to make a real difference in Canadian women's lives.

There was a strong consensus. All demanded concrete actions. That is why I am pleased that this new government has adopted new terms and conditions for the women's program. We will focus on supporting projects that will directly assist women in their communities. We will focus our efforts and support to address the economic stability of women, particularly senior women, and to end violence against women. We will be working with other departments across the government to support women in their various roles as mothers, employees, entrepreneurs, community builders, and taxpayers.

We know organizations across Canada have been doing their part to directly support women facing many challenges. We will now be able to more effectively partner with them in their work. We know direct assistance for women delivered more locally will have the greatest impact.

Barriers such as the need for training and updating skills, the need for personal advice on preparing for job applications and interviews, the need for mentorship in their local communities, or the need for immigrant women to access services, whether those services are provided by non-profit organizations or different levels of government, are the real needs faced by women in communities across the country. Our support will make a real difference in the lives of Canadian women. This government wants to tackle the real barriers that exist.

After over thirty years of existence, Status of Women Canada must deliver real, measurable results directly affecting women and their families. Through our expenditure review announced early last week, the new government has concluded that \$5 million can be saved through greater efficiencies in the administrative operations at Status of Women. The women's program's grants and contributions will have the same annual budget of \$10.8 million. The savings will not affect the \$10.8 million available to support women.

In addition, we have committed to the Sisters in Spirit initiative. Our government will continue to provide \$1 million a year until the years 2010-11. As we all know, aboriginal women have traditionally played a key role in their communities, and in October 2005 Canada was cited by the United Nations Human Rights Committee for failing to adequately address the high rate of violence against aboriginal women. These women and their children deserve safe communities.

I have met with first nations, Métis, and Inuit women's organizations, and their message was clear. They are looking for a government that will deliver change, that will act and make a meaningful difference in their lives. We must continue to support those in the aboriginal community, like Sisters in Spirit, who are taking action.

Canada was also cited in that same 2005 report as failing to address the issues of matrimonial property rights for aboriginal women. I supported and am proud that last Friday my colleague the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Mr. Prentice, announced for this fall a nationwide consultation on matrimonial property rights. These consultations with provincial and territorial governments, first nations, and aboriginal women's organizations are an important first step toward finding solutions to protect the rights and to ensure the well-being of women, children, and families living on reserves.

• (1120)

Aboriginal women are strong leaders in their communities, leaders such as Tracy Gauthier, chief of the Mississaugas of Scugog Island in my riding of Durham, who has ensured that the social and child care needs in her community are being met. Also, there's Leslie Lounsbury, who started the first-ever youth magazine in Winnipeg, and she is seen as an inspiration for aboriginal women across Canada. These women, and so many more, are vibrant reminders of how vitally important they are to their communities and how women can make a difference if given a chance.

I would also like to point out that this government has taken measures to strengthen Canada's response to the unique needs of the victims of human trafficking, victims who are often women and children.

[Translation]

On another topic brought up in this Committee, the Government Response to the Standing Committee's Report on Gender-Based Analysis (GBA) focussed on accountability. Gender-based analysis is an important tool used by federal departments and agencies to develop policies and programs that reflect the needs of all Canadians. In fact, gender-based analysis was actively used in the development of budget 2006. Agencies have already begun training their staff in the application of GBA tools.

[English]

In our future work in supporting the full participation of all Canadian women in the economic, social, and cultural life of Canada, our focus will remain to directly support Canadian women and deliver real results. We will continue strengthening accountability and supporting projects that lead to the direct participation of women. I am committed to working with my colleague ministers to ensure their policies and programs address the needs of women, and in particular, women who face barriers in achieving their goals.

I look forward to the standing committee's continued role in making these goals a reality.

Merci beaucoup. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister Oda.

I'd also like to acknowledge Florence Ievers from the Status of Women, who will be with us for the full meeting this morning to answer additional questions after the minister leaves.

Starting out, questions and answers are seven minutes in the first round, Ms. Minna to commence.

• (1125)

Hon. Maria Minna (Beaches—East York, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'm going to try to do mine in four to four and a half minutes, because I want to share with my colleagues and get in as many questions as we can.

Thank you for coming, Minister. First, I want to say, Madam Minister, that I find it disrespectful to this committee and to the women of Canada for us to have to wait seven months to have you appear in front of our committee, and then to have only one hour, and at this, it's not even an hour, with the presentation.

I also want to table, Madam Chair, if I could, because this is part of my question this morning, a letter that was signed by the Prime Minister making a commitment during the election that he would respect the CEDAW agreement with the United Nations. I have a copy here for all committee members, if I may.

The minister talks a great deal about women's equality and talks about programs on the ground, most of which are being done by HRDC in any case, in terms of upgrading resumé's, and so on.

But let me get to the crux of it. The criteria of the department have been changed dramatically. This department was established to fight for the equality of Canadian women across this country. If it hadn't been for this department's activism and funding of equality organizations in this country, women would not have equal rights in the Constitution. As the minister very well knows, it was women who fought for that and had to march on Parliament Hill to get that right, and it was as a result of that kind of strength.

That brings me to the questions.

In this changed world where we have changed the criteria, women are being muzzled; that is, organizations, advocacy, capacity building, all that is gone. Can the minister tell me this—and I'm going to go through this, and I would appreciate it if she would be short in her answers, because the time is tight. The issue of equality is gone from your criteria. Why is that?

Hon. Bev Oda: I will respond.

Fundamentally, this government recognizes that it's been 25 years. The charter is there. We recognize that women are equal under the charter and under any democratic society.

Equality was not a criterion, and in fact, the original establishing legislation for the Status of Women, although it's moved ministries, indicated that the purpose was to "co-ordinate policy with respect to the Status of Women and administer related programs".

Of course, as I said in my presentation, we do not intend to touch the women's program or to touch the amount of money. We believe we have not in any way muzzled it. Every person, including women in this country, has the freedom and the support of this government to the freedom of speech and freedom of advocating on behalf of any interests. Women equally have access to all of that.

Hon. Maria Minna: Minister, with all due respect—

• (1130)

Hon. Bev Oda: As far as capacity building goes, we believe there are a number of organizations that have had many years to establish themselves. On a going forward basis, we've made a commitment. We made a commitment prior to coming into office, and we're fulfilling the commitment that we will make sure taxpayer dollars... They're hard-earned dollars.

They are not vulnerable and weak; they are taxpayers. They work very hard for their taxes, not only as women but as citizens of this country. Consequently, we believe and we know they support more direct action to help overcome the identified barriers. After years of identifying the issues and the problems, we are now committed to doing something.

Hon. Maria Minna: The minister is saying that all issues have been resolved, women are equal, they have no issues anymore, and there are no barriers. There are no systemic barriers, and all of the equality in every aspect of life is now provided; therefore, advocacy is no longer necessary.

Can the minister tell me why she dropped the issue of social justice from the criteria? Do women no longer have issues of social justice, and no issues with pay equity? Social justice is no longer one of your priorities for funding. Can you tell me why?

The Chair: Minister, can you try to keep the answer short? Many of the members have a lot of questions.

Thank you.

Hon. Bev Oda: Well, I think some questions, as they're posed, deserve a fulsome answer. I'm here to represent the actions of the government and the policies and thinking behind this government.

As far as social justice is concerned, I guess what I would suggest is that it's not one or the other. We've never proposed... We recognize there are barriers and there are challenges. We're proposing to use taxpayer dollars to help women in their daily lives and in their communities.

We have a numbers of studies that tell us what the barriers are. We received a report from Statistics Canada. In that report, at the presentation that was given, there were identified criteria or realities. We know that if we can move further ahead, if we can accelerate and emphasize the efforts in those areas, those trends will decrease as far as violence against women is concerned.

This is not a matter of saying there is a total disregard for whatever barriers are there. This is not about saying every barrier and everything has been solved. That is my first statement. Obviously we have not solved a lot of the challenges for women. It's why we are now focusing on helping women in their communities and in their daily lives to overcome those challenges.

The Chair: A very short question, Ms. Neville.

Hon. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Minister, I hope you will come back, because there are many questions that we have to ask you.

I have a couple of quick questions.

I lost count of the number of times you used the word "real" in your presentation. I certainly hope it's not code for anything else that is happening here.

Could you tell me this, please? In the response to the standing committee, why did you indicate that you were committed to the full participation of women in the economic, social, and political life of Canadian society, yet there is nothing in the criteria on political life?

Hon. Maria Minna: Well, she eliminated it.

Hon. Anita Neville: It's been eliminated. Why have you eliminated from the original criteria...where Status of Women Canada does not provide funding to emotional, spiritual, personal, or professional development, and that now appears to be allowed for?

There are many questions on the criteria—and on not-for-profit.

The Chair: Allow an opportunity for the minister to respond.

Hon. Bev Oda: I want to make sure I cover all your points.

Hon. Anita Neville: I didn't get them all in.

Hon. Bev Oda: I don't know what the question was about the reference to the word "real". I use real as opposed to artificial. I use real meaning concrete. I use real meaning direct. I use real, because I know that in my community to have seen a woman take her children to a food bank for the first time, that's real. That's what we understand that we have to act upon.

We also understand that the cause of those kinds of incidents may not necessarily be within one department. Some of those problems are in the justice department. Some of those problems come out and are addressed in human resources. Some of them have come in economic development. This government is saying that we will address those across this government in the most appropriate way.

We certainly support organizations that do help with the emotional and other aspects of a woman's life, but again it's more direct and it's in the communities themselves. We know a number of these organizations that actually do that. I know that Ms. Minna in Toronto is very familiar with what is done in the Italian community at Villa Columbo to help women and families participate and the social services in having one place to be able to go, one place to engage young children with their grandparents, etc. This is the kind of reality that we want to see happening for every woman across this country.

• (1135)

The Chair: The next questioner is from the Bloc, Ms. Mourani.

[Translation]

Mrs. Maria Mourani (Ahuntsic, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being with us today to respond to our questions.

I have a couple of brief questions for you, but I would like to begin by addressing what I consider the prerequisites for holding a position where you are responsible for the Status of Women.

Your spokesperson, Ms. Véronique Bruneau, said the following in *La Presse*: “From now on, we want to support actions, not words”.

I'm assuming that your spokesperson represents you. Having said that, do you believe that advocacy, as well as the possibility for women to influence the federal, provincial or municipal governments, is nothing more than words, as opposed to actions?

[English]

Hon. Bev Oda: I'm trying to understand the flow and the thinking behind your question, but I'll just get to the ultimate.

As for actions and the difference that actions can make, we can all articulate and identify the issue, which I think has been done clearly for many years. We can articulate in words and identify what some of the challenges are, which has been done through many studies, conferences, forums, reports, and so on. What we're saying is that now is the time to perform actions.

I can give you a good example of actions. I come from an industry of broadcasting that was predominantly male-controlled. Through the action of some very insightful leaders, who happened to be women, they decided this was not acceptable. So we created an organization called Canadian Women in Communications.

But we also asked the industry, why is it that women aren't participating more fully? They said because of the limited number of qualified women available. So that organization created apprenticeship programs, scholarships, etc., to address the exact challenge.

They also said it's a matter of training and experience and enabling them to participate in non-traditional roles. So there was a program set up to address this and make sure there were enough qualified women capable of taking on some non-traditional roles.

So the organization was able to identify the most meaningful ways to directly increase the participation of women in broadcasting. If you look at that industry today, they've done this without any government funding. If you look at it today, we have women who are the heads and the leaders of broadcast services, of broadcast industries. We have senior women in the telephony industry. To me, this is real action: identify what the problem is and then put into place measures that will help women. And they didn't do this from one central source—

[Translation]

Mrs. Maria Mourani: Yes, but is advocacy...

[English]

Hon. Bev Oda: —they did it from nine to 12 chapters across this country.

[Translation]

Mrs. Maria Mourani: I understand. I'll repeat my question, because I see you have just put on your headset. Are advocacy and defence of women rights action or nothing but words? I'll make it even simpler for you. Do you see advocacy in defending one's right to free choice, equality or equity as actions, or nothing but words?

[English]

Hon. Bev Oda: As I said, there are fundamental rights that we all share, believe in. We are part of a democratic country; we have the Charter of Rights, which says everyone is equal. And it's those words, “to defend one's rights”.... I think each one of us does that. We make sure we can stand up for ourselves. Those of us who maybe have had more opportunity have to stand up in each of our roles separately, and each of us has differing levels of ability to do that.

I think what we want to make sure is that women across this country—whether it's speaking on behalf of their children at a school board meeting or going to their volunteer organization and speaking up, or voting as a citizen.... What I think we're talking about is that if we empower more women in all different ways—economically in their ability to have good jobs, and in their ability to participate more in their communities and within their professions—that is how we're going to ensure that we can help each other. It's not just speaking about their rights and telling them they have rights.

● (1140)

The Chair: You have less than a minute left, Ms. Mourani.

[Translation]

Mrs. Maria Mourani: You referred earlier to the Charter of Rights. When your Government abolished the Court Challenges Program, do you not think that, in a way, we were creating two categories of citizens: those who can pay a lawyer to defend their rights and those who cannot afford to pay? Hiring a lawyer is very expensive, and it can be very difficult and costly to take a case all the way to the Supreme Court.

In a way, the most vulnerable among us, the people that can't afford to go to the Supreme Court to defend their rights, as well as certain underfunded women's groups, will no longer be able to advocate on behalf of women. Not only have you abolished the program, but you have cut \$5 million from Status of Women Canada's budget. What is more, your Government is not interested in passing legislation on equity.

Do you not think that, taken together, these developments are a real disaster for women?

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Mourani.

Let's have a short answer, if possible, Minister Oda.

Hon. Bev Oda: I think we've responded to the decision made on court challenges. It was something that I think has been there for 25 years. As I say, we as a government, with the support of Canadians, have decided to make sure the dollars are used in an effective way. I see it as our responsibility to make, through Status of Women, a difference in the lives of every Canadian.

As for the question on the ability to participate, I understand there may be some concern, but there also is...and we've looked at it; I know the justice department is very aware of what's available as far as legal aid and legal services are concerned. We're quite confident that we've made the right decision in more directly helping women in their daily lives.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister Oda.

Ms. Smith.

Mrs. Joy Smith (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Thank you.

It really is an honour to have you here today, Minister, to present to our committee.

Some of the things I have heard all across this country.... I too have met with a number of women's organizations that have been extremely pleased with the \$10.8 million for programs that is still in place. I commend you for working with these individuals. I had a woman in from the YWCA yesterday. She said she'd read the newspaper, and after making some calls she realized the \$10.8 million was there. She was so grateful about that.

The fact that you had the two round tables focusing on what actions could be taken by all levels of government, and working in such a collaborative way with all levels of government, and really being determined to take action on these issues, will make a real difference in Canadian women's lives. And I've heard that from several NGOs.

Certainly, it's a very exciting time for Canada right now, under your leadership, to see that action is going to be taken and things are really going to be done, so that it doesn't take years and years of reports and everything, but that things are actually being done. You're actually taking the work that's already been done and amalgamating it in such a way that we can have an action plan.

I'm very interested in the renewed terms and conditions that have been brought forward. I really like the idea that women are equal, that we have the Charter of Rights. That's why immigrants come to Canada. That's why my father and mother came to Canada: because under Canadian laws we are equal citizens, and we can rise to the top if we work hard and if we take those advantages.

You and I have talked. We've talked around this table today. I know that everyone around this table believes in the full participation of women in the economic, social, and cultural life of Canada. That is really what is so exciting.

I have a lot of women's organizations in my riding, and I've met with every one of them. They're excited about these new terms and conditions.

Can you specifically reiterate and talk a little bit more about how these renewed terms and conditions will actually benefit the women in the organizations in my riding? They're very excited about the fact

that they're not victims but are equal people. They're ready to go, and they're ready to grow in the Canadian society.

• (1145)

Hon. Bev Oda: Thank you for your question. It gives me an opportunity to provide some more description.

I spoke yesterday with the minister for women from Newfoundland, who was very enthusiastic because she was able to describe to me those organizations in Newfoundland. These are the same organizations, many of them, that are right across this country.

She told me about an organization that is struggling because of the employment level in Newfoundland, which has been seriously affected by some of the industrial changes that have happened there. She was able to tell me that she too wanted to undertake that kind of real action in supporting those women on the ground.

We have women's groups—and we know they're right across this country as well—who won't get the advantage of more direct mentorship. There are women leaders in every community, but it's a matter of connecting those who have accomplished something through opportunity, through hard work, through sometimes just good luck, with those who haven't had the same opportunities, etc., and to be able to encourage them to help the next generation.

I know that we have a program in Heritage—it's in Heritage—called "citizenship". In answer to a previous question, that's where I see the work having to be done to encourage and promote increased participation of women, of youth, of our immigrant population, and of our new Canadians in the political life of Canada. That's where it has to happen.

I also know that the Department of Health actually gives grants and helps out people. There are organizations that we have in every one of our communities. We all have the Red Cross. They get support from the Department of Health, not through Status of Women.

We also have an official languages program, which we will use then to help immigrant women who are struggling with having to adopt one of Canada's official languages.

We have a program that we support, the aboriginal women's associations, in making sure that they can have a voice. Many of these bands are now led by predominantly male organizations.

We have many programs under our multiculturalism program as well, and we believe that the status of women program certainly can play a role that will complement the existing programs within every department.

So I think what we're saying here is that we have settlement houses, and we can support some of the projects within those settlement houses that are specifically directed to women.

In my riding we have a women's entrepreneur organization. We can help them spread out and be able to mentor, as I said, and include more women who have aspirations to themselves being entrepreneurs.

So there are different ways. I think the primary thing here for me is that the responsibility of the Minister of Status of Women is not only to ensure that the programs are available, that the resources for effective programming are there, but also to be an advocate at the cabinet table and to challenge every one of my colleagues and to ask how this will affect women, how will it benefit women, when you present legislation. Ensure us that the gender analysis has been done and do not just allow any group of people to say, well, that's not our job; it's the job of that unit over there.

• (1150)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister Oda.

Our next questioner is Mrs. Mathysen.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Minister, you're on record as stating that you believe women in Canada have achieved equality rights. The groups that have come to this committee, deputations, have indicated that we have senior women who still live in poverty. One in five Canadian women lives in poverty. Women who seek shelter are turned away due to lack of space. In Ontario already this year, 12 women have died at the hands of a spouse. Four women in my community have died in the last two years.

Are you telling this committee, and Canadian women, that there is gender equality?

Hon. Bev Oda: What I am saying is that if we don't believe women in Canada have equal rights.... We have equal rights. What we don't have is equal opportunity and equal chance. What we don't have is an equal—I guess I still have to go back to it—opportunity to fully participate.

What we're saying—and we totally agree with you—is that there is a disproportionate amount of poverty when you look at the statistics for senior women. But that's what we want to address, more than just identifying the program. I hope some of my colleagues who are sitting at this table and who have been leaders in their own professions, in their own lives, will come to the table and bring real solutions, bring real initiatives as to how to we can change whatever program the government has on equal rights.

We are going to do something about violence—

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: Thank you very much. I appreciate that. I'm glad that you are, Madam Minister, and I do have other questions.

I'd like to ask you, for example, if you have read reports like the January 2003 report of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women; the May 2006 UN Economic and Social Council report; or the 2005 report of the Expert Panel on Accountability Mechanisms for Gender Equality. How about the "Pay Equity Task Force Final Report 2004"; Stats Canada's "Women in Canada", 2005; and finally, Minister, your briefing book? Have you read these documents, Minister?

• (1155)

Hon. Bev Oda: Yes, I have.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: Well, thank you. If you've read these documents, then I'd like to know how you can cut funding and

change the funding mandate for Status of Women Canada. These reports clearly state and outline that more funding is needed, more programming is needed to promote women's rights and the funding for advocacy.

Your new funding mandate clearly does not reflect the important role that women's groups play in Canadian democracy. These changes that you've made will make it impossible to sustain the women's movement in Canada. Your government is not listening to women's groups. It is not living up to Canada's international obligations, and women across this country agree. How can your government justify the restrictive funding mandate for women's programs and the funding cuts to Status of Women Canada and other important equality initiatives like the court challenges program?

Your mandate as Minister for the Status of Women is to promote women's equality. That role is clearly being ignored. Equality is not being promoted here, and you are letting down Canadian women. You're not fulfilling your mandate, Minister, and I have to say that I think it's important that I demand your resignation from the Status of Women portfolio. Until and unless you're prepared to do your job, we need someone else in that role.

Hon. Bev Oda: Let me just respond very quickly.

I have read the reports. In fact, that is why I've made the decisions and the government agrees with the decisions that I've made.

We have those reports, and I've actually taken the reports and all the reports that reference aboriginal women, and that's why I've been able to sit down with the Minister of Indian Affairs and get him to move in concert with all of my colleagues on increased funding for aboriginal housing, for a better plan for the education of aboriginal children and youth, and on establishing a process to address matrimonial property rights.

That is why this government is moving ahead: because we know that women are equally affected by not recognizing their foreign credentials. The number of qualified, experienced, educated women who come to this country.... I met a page last year. Her mother has two master's degrees from a foreign university and now she's cleaning office buildings. That is why we're acting.

We've read those reports, and we're saying that's why it's so important now, after all of those reports, after millions of dollars, for us to use those dollars now to effect real change and make a real difference.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: Minister, if you've read the reports, I assume you've read this report. It says very clearly that women earn 71¢ for every dollar earned by a man. Why aren't you prepared to accept the findings here? Why haven't you come forward with new pay equity legislation? You say we have this legislation, the status quo, that it is acceptable. Well, it is not acceptable.

It's your job to advocate for women. If you're not prepared to do that, then would you step aside for someone who will?

Hon. Bev Oda: I will not step aside, because I believe I have been effective. In eight short months, this government, together as a government, has done more in real actions to help women in Canada than the previous government. I will suggest to you—

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: Minister, you say that, but where are the results? Where is the pay equity legislation?

Hon. Bev Oda: If you will allow me to answer, please—

The Chair: Order, please.

Hon. Bev Oda: We've had Minister Finley talking about changes to seniors' pension plans, which will affect women. We also know what the reports have asked regarding pay equity. First of all, we want to ensure that what we have on the books regarding pay equity is being enforced and being recognized, and that is what Minister Blackburn is proposing—don't let those who come under the legislation ignore it. That's what we're saying—get in there and make people recognize their responsibility to women.

We have not ignored the reports, but in eight months we have taken many acts that will benefit all Canadians. Canadian women are not excluded when we reduce the benefit, because Canadian women care about the next generation, and that reduction in having to spend \$650 million annually on just paying interest on our national debt is going to help. It's not Canadians without women; it's Canadians as taxpayers, equally.

The Chair: Thanks very much, Minister Oda.

Some of the reports that Ms. Mathysen has referred to were various other reports, but I understand the minister has reviewed them and is very much aware of the content of them.

Ms. Guergis, you had a point of order.

Ms. Helena Guergis (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): It's very much on what you're talking about, Madam Chair.

I just want to point out that on the pay equity report, we did not ask this minister to respond to this committee. I just checked with the researchers, and they've confirmed for me that we did not officially ask this minister to respond on that. I do know she has read it, but we are supposed to be having the minister who is officially to respond to that to this table.

I just want to point that out before we get our knives all over her. She wasn't specifically and officially asked to respond to that.

Hon. Bev Oda: I appreciate the clarification, but I just want to demonstrate that this cabinet works as a team. We do not work in silos. We, all together, as ministers responsible to the people of Canada, are equally responsible to the women of Canada.

• (1200)

The Chair: Thank you.

We did get a government response to all of those reports, including the one on pay equity, that again is reflective of the government's response.

Ms. Stronach is the next speaker. We are now at five minutes for questions and answers.

Hon. Belinda Stronach (Newmarket—Aurora, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Back in May, this committee recommended a minimum 25% increase to the budget for the Status of Women. Now what we have is almost a 40% cut to the administrative part of this budget. We also have met with women's groups across this country, and there is serious concern that this cut, when you look deeper, is more than administration. It affects the important research work that's done, which is the basis for advocacy and reform to the system. The Status of Women is the one government department whose *raison d'être* is to give a voice to women. Now we see that the funding criteria have changed: equality is out, social justice is out, advocacy is out, capacity building is out. What's in? Funding for for-profit organizations is in and funding for spiritual initiatives is in.

I'd like to know who the minister consulted with, because once upon a time, back in May, this minister stood for equality for women and backed equality for women, and in fact said it needed more work. So after pressure from the Prime Minister to meet with REAL Women, this has changed. Why? What's happened? I'd like to know whether this minister, after listening to other women's groups across the country, listening to this committee, will have the guts to go to the Prime Minister to fight for the 25% increase, minimum, for this department.

Hon. Bev Oda: This government has responded to the report that has been tabled. As far as funding for this organization is concerned, I know there was 24% in the report...that indicated that they felt the funding for Status of Women was quite adequate.

I would suggest that the previous Liberal government also found it was quite adequate, because they decreased the women's program funding three times in the last ten years. If they had wanted to increase it, they had that opportunity during the more than 13 years of being in office.

What we have committed to the women of Canada is effective use of their tax dollars, and I would suggest that for those of us who have had professional experience, who have had experience in life, who have had to budget for families, and who have had to make decisions as to where their dollars go, it is not acceptable to spend 31¢ to deliver \$1. My professional experience says that 15% may be satisfactory, but not twice that amount to deliver \$1 in services.

The Chair: You have one and a half minutes, Ms. Stronach.

Hon. Belinda Stronach: I have to say I'm not very satisfied with this answer.

Let's go back to May 19. It was this committee, not previous governments, that recommended the increase to the budget, and now we see a decrease, after pressure from other organizations like REAL Women. You were for equal rights for women and you said you'd back that. You said it needed more work. Then that organization put pressure on the Prime Minister. You met with that organization, and suddenly we see a change in the funding criteria.

I'd also like to ask, what does "for-profit organization" mean? Give me an example of what a for-profit organization is that would now receive funding under these criteria.

Hon. Bev Oda: You can look this up—everyone is aware of it—I've worked very closely with Canadian Women in Communications. Within that organization there are many for-profit organizations that have put forward scholarships, apprenticeships, etc. They've asked for support from government at various levels to hold their awards events, to celebrate, to enable the mentorship programs, the gatherings to hear from entrepreneurs on how they can improve their businesses.

I want to say this and I want to make it clear—and I want the full opportunity to do this, Madam Chair. I sit here as a member of this government. I sit here not only as a colleague of cabinet ministers, but I also have full support. I agree with our Prime Minister. He has asked me, and every minister, to deliver real action, to deliver and make changes in the lives of Canadians. Consequently, I have responded in the House that the organization called REAL Women is one organization out of hundreds of other organizations. Just as individuals are entitled to their different positions, so are organizations, and a responsible government.... I am glad I am part of the government, because it means that I can do something, that I have the support of my colleagues, and as government we can effect change.

Consequently, we listen to all organizations. That is the task that has been given by the Prime Minister. He supports me, and I support him.

• (1205)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister Oda.

Ms. Guergis.

Ms. Helena Guergis: Thanks very much.

Minister, we really do appreciate your being here. You and I have even had some personal conversations on women's issues. I really appreciate the feedback and the respect and the time you've taken to hear what I have to say from my previous experience, and how you're incorporating that into what you're doing.

I do want to say that I think some of the suggestions around the table that women have been muzzled are absolutely ridiculous. I believe in the strength of women, and our party believes in the strength of women. I think all women in the House of Commons should have this same approach.

I'm actually quite offended by the suggestion that maybe I'm weak or something like that, that someone can just barrel over me, that I have no voice and I have no way of dealing with things here in Canada. I mean, that's just absolutely absurd. I'm really getting sick and tired of the character assassination, because when that is said, it's placed on me as a woman in this House.

I want to know what you think of that as a woman too, when you hear someone accuse you of that, because I'd be interested to see how it affects you. I think it's absolutely ridiculous.

Any barriers that have been suggested around this table are barriers that all Canadians experience, and we have a responsibility, as members of Parliament, to get rid of those barriers for all Canadians, for new Canadians who come here as well. Your reference to taking care of new immigrants and their foreign training credentials, which is something that was ignored by the previous Liberal government for years and years, I think is extremely important. I'm glad to see that we're finally taking that on as well. If you care to comment a bit more on that, you can.

At Status of Women Canada, of the money they have been receiving, \$13.6 million is spent on administration. Having been a small business person, I have a hard time believing that any corporation, for 13 years, would allow an organization to go on and spend \$13.6 million on administration, while only \$11 million went to the grants—only \$11 million of it is going out to the front line to solve the problems. I think it's just absurd that anyone would advocate that this should continue in any way. We have a responsibility, again, as members of Parliament, to ensure that the money is not only spent wisely, but that it's actually producing results.

Now I'll get into my personal side, which we have discussed, which is talking about violence against women. Thirteen years ago I has been volunteering in rape crisis for just shy of eight years. One out of two women was being assaulted. That hasn't changed at all. So I suggest to the honourable members across the way that whatever plan they had in place was not working. It did nothing. Nothing's changed. Can we please put our swords down here and actually work together to try to solve these problems?

I appreciate that you're actually listening to me, that you're listening to other organizations across the country, and that you're prepared to tackle that. If you wanted to comment a little bit more on the commitment we've made to seeing some real changes in violence against women, I would really like to hear what you have to say.

Regarding pay equity, again, I'll just point out that I look forward to hearing from the minister, who has been tasked with responding to this committee. From what I've seen, I'm very impressed, because again we'll see some real action. We won't just see more reports; we'll see some action, and I'm really looking forward to that.

If you want to give us more on that, you may. Thanks.

The Chair: Just hold on for a minute, Minister. There was a point of order raised by Ms. Minna.

Hon. Maria Minna: Madam Chair, I have no problem with people having their own opinions. I take objection to misinformation being intentionally put to this committee, first, in terms of what we did or did not do. Second, more importantly, is the suggestion that the department was using money only for administration. Its job is advocacy across the system and research. That's what the money was being used for: to speak on behalf of Canadian women in all departments.

This is absolutely unacceptable. I'm sorry, Madam Chair, but I will not accept—

• (1210)

The Chair: Thank you for clarifying that.

Minister Oda.

Hon. Bev Oda: Madam Chair, I am prepared to clarify the numbers.

The Chair: Go ahead, Minister Oda.

Hon. Bev Oda: I will clarify the numbers. One thing I have certainly learned is that reading government numbers is not the easiest task an individual is given. Even after years of reading business plans, it seems it's very different.

To clarify, the entire \$13 million is not just administration; there are areas of activity. That's where we will be reviewing what activities will continue that are included in the \$13 million. It's misrepresentation to say that it's going to come out of programming.

I know, Ms. Ievers, that we are going to be looking, because we know we can reduce that 31¢ cost to deliver \$1. For example, in order to administer and give out \$10.8 million, the administrative cost, the directorate cost, is \$3.3 million.

When we also look at another area, at directorate costs in some of the areas of delivery.... There are different areas, and we're very clear—I asked for these numbers and I got these numbers—as to how many of these dollars are going to programs, to activities, and how many are for administration. I'm comfortable that we will be able to find the \$5 million in administration.

One of the things Status of Women voluntarily undertook, before expenditure review, was to look at the points of contact with Status of Women across the country, and to look at how it could be done more effectively and more efficiently. They had already undertaken that.

If I could, I would like to have an opportunity to speak about being called weak and frail and about being part of that nomenclature.

I have to say, Madam Chair, that as a visible minority, as a woman, as a person of colour, I face challenges that are unique. I would say also that there was a time in my life, in my youth, that I maybe felt weak, because I was being told I was different, I was being told I didn't belong, I was being told that I was special and would need extra help, and I was also being told that whatever I did would reflect not only on my family but on a whole community.

There are women like me, and many women around this table, who have maybe not the same challenges but different challenges,

who have been able to not only work and advocate on their own behalf, but advocate on behalf of other people.

I believe we have a role, those of us who are fortunate to have won the confidence of the people in our communities. We are role models. The first thing I would not do is go back to my riding and call the women and address them as weak, vulnerable, or disadvantaged.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister Oda.

Ms. Deschamps or Ms. Mourani, which one of you chooses to go forward.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Maria Mourani: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'd like to make a brief comment, and then I will turn it over to my colleague.

Minister, in response to Ms. Mathysen, you said that your Government had done more in six months and that you will not resign. It's quite true that your Government did take concrete and immediate steps as early as January 2006: no more money for Quebec for daycare services, no Canadian daycare services, no legislation on equity, a \$5 million cut in the budget of Status of Women Canada, abolition of the Court Challenges Program and, contrary to what the Committee was asking, no increase in funding for the Women's Program.

You're right: your Government did take immediate and concrete steps to deal a blow to the status of women in Quebec and Canada.

I'll turn it over to my colleague now.

Ms. Johanne Deschamps (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Minister, I'm looking at the new version of the Women's Program. From now on, it will be limited to achieving women's full participation in the economic, social and cultural life of Canada.

You clearly believe that it is no longer necessary to facilitate the participation of women's groups in the process of developing Government policy and improving the public's understanding of issues related to women's equality; that it is no longer necessary to promote the development of policies and programs in key institutions that reflect the different impacts they can have on women; and that it is no longer necessary to help women's groups work more effectively to improve the status of women.

Probably because of your Conservative ideology to the effect that all women are strong, you likely believe that there are no longer any differences, that there aren't weak women out there anymore and that there is no systemic discrimination against women. You say that they can assert their rights using a tool called the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. In other words, you are telling women that they are basically on their own.

Do you realize that you are depriving an organization such as the Fédération des femmes du Québec of the power to advocate for women and defend women's rights?

•(1215)

[English]

Hon. Bev Oda: I guess I'm just going to have reiterate it again. What I've learned is that if you keep saying it and saying it and saying it, maybe people realize what the truth is; the difference is that you have to make sure what you say and say and say is the truth to start with.

What I'd like to say is that in no way does this government say all women are strong. In fact we recognize that among all women, just as among all men, there are those who will have the opportunities and the strength and the personality and the support to take leadership roles. There are those men who will not play the same role as other men. There are children who have different advantages and opportunities, just as there are women who will have different opportunities, disadvantages, and advantages. So to characterize what we are saying as a belief that all women are strong is a mischaracterization.

We are not saying there are no weak women, but what we will not say is that all Canadian women are weak. We will not say that all Canadian women are vulnerable. What we're saying is that we also know at the same time that all Canadian women have dreams and aspirations, all Canadian women want to feel safe in their communities, all Canadian women want to be able to participate in their chosen ways, and in some areas they have more challenges than in other areas. What we're saying here is that there are women who are facing barriers we can do something about with real action, who are facing challenges we can do something about by helping them in their local communities through organizations. That is what this government is saying.

It is a total mischaracterization to say that by redesigning the terms and conditions, we are automatically saying that women are not weak, that all women are strong. That's not what we're saying. That is a mischaracterization of what we're saying.

I think the first step is totally the opposite. We recognize there are some women who are going to need our help, and that's why we want to get to the communities and to help them in their daily lives.

The Chair: Minister Oda, thank you very much for spending the hour and five minutes for questions and answers. As a committee, all of us very much appreciate that. We have, of course, made a request for you to come back to talk with us again about some of the other issues and to respond to some of the reports we have some questions on. We look forward to your coming back as soon as you can.

Thank you very much. We will allow Minister Oda to leave. Ms. Ievers will be here for the balance of our meeting to answer other questions that we still have.

Yes.

Hon. Belinda Stronach: Madam Chair, I would like to advise you that I'll be tabling a document from today's *Winnipeg Free Press*. They actually conducted a poll that I think Ms. Smith would be very interested in because it pertains to her constituency, which she claims is very happy. The poll says, "Do you support the Harper government's decision to stop funding women's advocacy, lobby and research groups?" Only 29% say yes; 70% say no. I will be tabling that.

Thank you.

•(1220)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Mathysen, you are next on the list to question the departmental witnesses.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: Thank you very much for being here.

With regard to gender-based analysis, can you describe what accountability mechanisms are in place and are they effective? Do government departments essentially have the available resources they need in order to be accountable, and are managers held accountable in regard to gender-based analysis?

Ms. Florence Ievers (Coordinator, Status of Women Canada): I must say that in the last year, and you will see that from our response to the standing committee report, a lot of effort has been put into making sure the central agencies, which are really key to holding departments accountable, are playing a key role in making sure that gender-based analysis is implemented on policies and programs. When I talk about central agencies, I mean the Privy Council Office, which has a challenge function when they look at MPs and when they look at the programs and legislation that's coming about. I'm talking about Treasury Board, and I think our response quite describes the kinds of roles they've begun to play, as well as the Department of Finance.

This is something new. I think the committee has been very effective since its inception in holding the feet to the fire of those central agencies, which are really the key. And if you look at the expert panel report, they are the key to making accountability work.

Now, you ask me, do all departments do that? No. But with the help of the central agencies and with the help of Status of Women Canada in providing the tools and providing expertise, I think we will build on the results. Our focus at Status of Women will be to focus on the government priorities. And the minister mentioned the economic situation of women, aboriginal women. Those are the kinds of things that we will be focusing on. We're really pleased at the progress that was made last year; that continues with central agencies in order to build in more accountability, which was greatly needed.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: Thank you.

When do the funding cuts begin in your department, and could you provide the committee some detail in regard to a list of the cuts? Will regional offices be affected? Will there be closure in some of the regions?

Ms. Florence Ievers: The cuts apply only in the next fiscal year, so we're talking about 2007-08. The cut is for \$5 million, to look for efficiencies in the operations of the agency. It's too soon to tell. We were only informed of the magnitude of the cuts recently. We will be working in the coming weeks with the minister and others to find the appropriate means to apply the savings that the government has requested, but also to continue to improve women's lives and bring tangible results for the women of Canada.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: Now, \$5 million is a considerable amount of money. Could it have been reinvested into programming if it's an administrative savings? Could it have been reinvested, and should it be reinvested?

Ms. Florence Ievers: That is a policy question that would best be asked of the minister.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: Do you believe that gender mainstreaming is an effective policy to promote gender equality?

Ms. Florence Ievers: Yes. At Status of Women Canada, we have promoted gender mainstreaming, and what the minister was talking about this morning is making sure that departments are held accountable for ensuring results for women. Not only Status of Women Canada but the whole of the government needs to be accountable. That's really what mainstreaming is. It's not having one agency parked somewhere being the only entity that endeavours to ensure gender equality results, but that all the entities of government do so.

As I said earlier, blanketing that at this present time is not necessarily the best way to go, but with the help of the central agencies and holding departments accountable for gender-based analysis, and with the minister's efforts in working with her colleagues—and she mentioned a few this morning—the mainstreaming is becoming more and more a way of life.

•(1225)

The Chair: Mr. Stanton.

Mr. Bruce Stanton (Simcoe North, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Ievers and panel, for coming to join us here this afternoon.

My question actually pertains to the testimony that this committee has heard relating primarily to economic security but also to access.

We heard that there have been some gains for women in particular, but there remains a segment of our population, particularly women seniors, native aboriginal women, and new Canadian or immigrant women, for whom we have not been able to close the gap with regard to access and being fully integrated and having the same economic benefit. The gap continues to be there and doesn't seem to be moving all that quickly, despite the fact that we've seen some announcements around, for example, support for immigrant settlement. There's been a reduction in the residence fee—and I'll context this by saying I want to focus on immigrant women in particular—and we've seen some movement towards helping foreign-trained immigrants get their equivalency to participate fully in Canadian society.

I wonder if you could comment on why we still don't seem to be closing the gap in those issues, specifically for immigrant women.

Ms. Florence Ievers: A number of policies have begun to help immigrant women. Obviously some barriers still remain, and the minister was acknowledging that. The work that's been done on foreign credentials is essential. A lot of women and, as the minister said, a lot of men in Canada have come to this country expecting that they can be full participants, and when they come here their credentials are not recognized. Obviously the government is putting a lot of effort into that, and that is an area where we will see improvements. When policies are introduced, you don't see results overnight. Results take time.

I believe that on foreign credentials this issue is also in the purview of the provinces and territories. So there is a lot of work to be done there.

It's clear that women who are immigrants are probably facing barriers that are different from those of even male immigrants. Some of them are language. Some of them are just the cultural ways of their previous countries, where women were not necessarily part of the active life. I am not saying that very well but—

Mr. Bruce Stanton: So these are cultural barriers that pre-exist, for example.

Ms. Florence Ievers: That pre-exist, yes.

As the minister said, we're fortunate in Canada that our Charter of Rights does guarantee equality. What often happens to women who are immigrants particularly is that they're not necessarily informed of their rights or are not knowledgeable about their rights. I think that what the minister was leading up to is that in providing some services directly to Canadian women, those women will be able to be more informed of what challenges they have to surmount and what opportunities are there for them.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: With regard, then, to programming provided by Status of Women Canada, could you briefly describe that segment of programs that really is targeted to that group of women and is there to help them with bridging those gaps?

•(1230)

Ms. Florence Ievers: I know that there are a number of funding programs. The \$10.8 million funds a number of groups with different interests.

Perhaps Jackie Claxton, who is the director general of the women's programs, can give you some idea of the kinds of initiatives that we have taken and that we have with some aboriginal women's groups and other groups that are interested in immigration.

Ms. Jackie Claxton (Director General, Women's Programs and Regional Operations, Status of Women Canada): What we could do is provide the committee with a list. If I look at the figures for last year, we have supported a number of initiatives related to refugee women, some related to visible minorities, and others dealing with immigrant women. There are about 15 or 20 of those, and they would be taking place at the local and regional levels as well as the national level.

We can look at a group like the National Organization of Immigrant and Visible Minority Women. Right now they are concluding a strategy that is unfolding across the country looking at how to improve the connections between the private sector and immigrant women in the communities who are seeking employment. That's just one example that comes to mind, off the top of my head.

The Chair: If you can supply that list to the clerk, she will distribute it.

Next, I have Ms. Minna.

Hon. Maria Minna: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would first like to make a statement to follow up on what was said earlier by the minister with respect to immigrant women.

There was a great deal of discussion this morning both by the minister and members opposite with respect to programs for immigrant women, assisting immigrant women on the ground and all of these things, which of course is fair. I'm someone who has lived the immigrant experience and I worked for about 30 years with immigrant women in the city of Toronto. I have a strong understanding of what they go through, I can assure you.

I'm also a co-founder of NOIVMWC. I also know that if it wasn't for a charter challenge to the Government of Canada in 1986, immigrant women would not have received English as a second language subsidized language training. It was deemed at the time that women did not need language training and so on.

There are still many barriers. Multicultural health is an issue. Immigrant women deal with certain health issues in different ways. On language there are a lot of barriers. The fact that we have charter rights doesn't mean they automatically are applied to women in this country. You have to fight for them and you have to challenge them, as everyone knows.

My question is, having removed the advocacy part of the criteria, will NOIVMWC be one of those organizations that will be defunded once the new criteria come into effect?

Ms. Jackie Claxton: As the minister has indicated in her remarks, the focus of the terms and conditions, the objective of the program, relates to the full participation of women. We look at the specific proposals that groups come forward with and it's on this basis that we make the decision. Whether it's the National Organization of Immigrant and Visible Minority Women or any of the other groups that we fund currently, or new groups out there that may now be coming forward, the process is starting with the basic framework of the program—in other words, the objective, the kinds of outcomes we're looking for, and then we look at the specific proposal.

Hon. Maria Minna: To go back, given the fact that the criteria have now changed.... I don't know whether the staff has had time to do an analysis, but given that advocacy, capacity building, and all of those things are no longer funded—and basically that's what NOIVMWC does, it is an advocate organization like NAWL and others—could you give me an idea of whether you've done any analysis at all about whether NOIVMWC would qualify under the new criteria, and of which organizations would not qualify under the new criteria, and which ones are they?

Ms. Jackie Claxton: As committee members are aware, the terms and conditions were approved last week. What we are now in the

process of doing is developing the detailed funding guidelines, the application form, and the assessment criteria that we will be putting into the hands of staff across the country and providing the staff with the necessary information and tools in order that they can respond to the kinds of calls and inquiries that are coming in across the country.

I want to clarify the question related to capacity building. If you look at the specific wording, what you'll note is that capacity building is in fact something that can be supported by the program under the new terms and conditions, provided that those activities relate directly to a strategy that's going to have a direct impact on women. Capacity building is something that I expect at this point will very much continue to be part of our activities. When we look at some of the specific groups that the program has supported over the years, like aboriginal women, or immigrant women, we know how important that capacity building component is to their ability to be able to participate in their communities and to work on the issues that affect them.

• (1235)

Hon. Maria Minna: Just to finish off—and this is my last question, because I think I'm probably running out of time—under the new criteria, though, will the advocacy work that NOIVMWC has been performing be funded or not, do you think? I think you've looked at the criteria.

Ms. Jackie Claxton: I think it's clearly indicated in the terms and conditions that advocacy is an activity that the program will no longer be supporting. What we now have to do is develop the funding guidelines in order to provide both the staff and groups clarity as to the kinds of things we now can support.

As you know, the program is delivered in a decentralized manner. We've always been very responsive to the specific issues, whether it's at a national, regional, or local level, and I think one of the crucial things we will want to retain is the kind of flexibility that the program has historically had that has allowed us to fund women dealing with issues in the fisheries, or in offshore oil development in Newfoundland, or immigrant women working in specific industries in British Columbia. I think the question of flexibility in how we deliver the program is part of what we will be looking at as we deal with the funding guidelines.

Hon. Maria Minna: Well, despite the government's protestations, women's voices are being shut down. That's basically what it is.

The Chair: Your time is up.

Ms. Davidson.

Mrs. Patricia Davidson (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to answer our questions. I think it's very encouraging to see that you're here to carry on after the minister had to leave.

Some of the things we've heard here this morning are extremely important, and they're things that I think each of us sitting around these tables agree to. I think we do believe in equality for women, and strength for women, and I think that's extremely important. We have to remember that those are some of the goals we're trying to work towards.

It has been very encouraging to hear the minister say that she has participated in round tables and consultations with groups, and many different groups regardless of what their mandate is. I think that's important. We need to deal directly to assist women in their communities, where they need it. These are all very important things.

We need to address the economic stability of women, the violence issues. These are all things that women in all communities are facing, in most cases, regardless of their age or their background.

We need to support training and skills, and mentorships, to try to increase the betterment of women across this country. It's also very encouraging to think that we're going to be looking for measurable results.

Status of Women over the years has done some remarkable work. We have seen that in a lot of different aspects of this great country of ours. But we also have to realize that times change and issues change, and the outcomes that we're looking for sometimes have to be approached in different manners. I think it's important that there is flexibility and that there is a broad, open-minded approach to how we can better the status of women in Canada.

We've had \$10.8 million for programming, and we've seen that amount over several years. I'm extremely pleased to see that in the cost-saving measures that have been put forward, we are not affecting programming. It is vital that that money stay in the programming and that we continue to support women.

At this committee, one of the areas of our society that we have seen greatly disadvantaged in many ways is the aboriginal communities. I think somebody spoke earlier today about the United Nations having cited us in 2005 for the incidence of violence against aboriginal women and failing to address matrimonial property rights. Those are just two of the issues, but they're certainly on a very international scale, and Canada and the plight of women was made very much in the forefront.

We do know that in the 2006 budget there was \$450 million allotted for improving water supply and housing on reserves, education outcomes, and socio-economic conditions. Minister Prentice launched the second phase of the national consultation process on matrimonial real property on-reserve. We have seen an approval of a final Indian residential school settlement agreement. Those are some of the things that are going towards helping aboriginals in general.

Can you tell me, are there specific ways Status of Women has identified to help aboriginals in particular?

• (1240)

Ms. Florence Ievers: Yes, I'll give you one example. It's the Sisters in Spirit initiative of the government, which Status of Women is coordinating. That initiative came about a year ago. The government had identified \$5 million over five years to go to the

NWAC, the Native Women's Association of Canada. The minister confirmed this morning that not only did the funding of the women's program remain at \$10.8 million, but also that the Sisters in Spirit initiative will continue. That is one area where we are working very closely on the issue of aboriginal women.

Also, an aboriginal policy conference took place last March, with policy-makers who have special interest in looking at the plight, the challenges, and opportunities of aboriginal women from all jurisdictions in Canada. This took place with aboriginal women, representatives of all three groups: the Métis, the first nations, as well as the Inuit. We are now in the process of looking at how government policies in all of the jurisdictions can be improved in order to improve the lot of aboriginal women across the country.

Matrimonial property is something Status of Women has done research on. We're working very closely with INAC to develop and look at how this will proceed. We're very interested in seeing and attending the consultations that will be held shortly on this very fundamental issue for aboriginal women in Canada.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ievers.

Ms. Mourani.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Maria Mourani: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you all for being with us today to answer our questions.

I really have two main questions. First of all, I understand that there will be \$2.5 million worth of cuts this year, which will go into effect with the next budget. I also understand that the Minister has asked you to see where further cuts can be made. I would like to get a detailed breakdown of those cuts—if possible, in hard copy—for reference purposes. But could you give me a verbal answer now?

When will the new criteria for the Women's Program come into effect? Under the new criteria, can groups such as the National Association of Women and the Law, the FFQ and the Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action expect to disappear?

In 2005, consultations were held with respect to the criteria of the Women's Program. The Minister said she had consulted with women's groups. I would like to know what women's groups were consulted. Are we talking about the same group as in 2005? It would be rather strange for the criteria to suddenly have changed after meetings with other people. I would like to know which women's groups were met with the second time.

• (1245)

Ms. Florence Ievers: Thank you for your questions.

The \$5 million budget cut will be effective in the 2007-2008 fiscal year. That cut is spread over a year and all subsequent years, as opposed to only two years. Status of Women Canada will have to absorb the \$5 million cut beginning next April 1st.

The cuts have just been announced, and we have work to do internally, of course. A number of them are of an administrative nature, but we will have to determine with the Minister where they will be made. That work has not yet begun. As I already said, we have until next April 1st to determine how those cuts will be made. I have no information in that regard, because the work has not yet started.

Mrs. Maria Mourani: Did the Finance Minister just get up one morning and decide he needed to cut \$5 million? How was that figure arrived at? I'm trying to understand.

Ms. Florence Ievers: You'd have to put that question to the Minister.

Ms. Maria Mourani: Yes. My understanding, since you say that...
[English]

The Chair: Excuse me, Ms. Mourani. A point of order has been raised by Ms. Smith.

Mrs. Joy Smith: There are a few comments that have been put on the record here today. One was about the advocacy question, and there were other things about the budget. Maria Minna said that the voice of Canadian women has been shut down because the advocacy has been shut down.

On a point of order, I want to indicate that the people who are answering these questions now are officials, not the minister. They're doing a great job, but as Ms. Ievers has just pointed out, things are just starting to get settled and organized. At this time to make a statement like I heard earlier... The minister is not shutting down the voice of Canadian women; she is trying to make sure that problems are solved, and to promote the voice of women in Canada.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Smith.

Mrs. Joy Smith: Just hear me out for a minute, Madam Chair.

So when we listen to all these different questions, I think it might be unfair—

The Chair: I'm not sure that's a point of order, Ms. Smith.

I will ask Ms. Ievers if she can respond quickly. I think that will be our last question and answer session.

Ms. Ievers.

[Translation]

Ms. Florence Ievers: Yes, I will continue.

The \$5 million budget cut will apply starting next April 1st to future years.

Mrs. Maria Mourani: Will it be \$5 million a year?

Ms. Florence Ievers: Five million dollars will be cut from Status of Women Canada's operating budget.

Mrs. Maria Mourani: Do you mean every year?

Ms. Florence Ievers: We're still talking about the same \$5 million.

Mrs. Maria Mourani: So, when the Treasury Board Secretariat talks about \$5 million over a two-year period, that is not in fact correct.

Ms. Florence Ievers: Some cuts announced by the Treasury Board apply to the current and the next fiscal years. The cuts do not apply to us this year. They will only come into effect starting on April 1st.

Mrs. Maria Mourani: I see.

Ms. Florence Ievers: That's why we are not in a position to give you the details today. That work remains to be done.

Mrs. Maria Mourani: So, when the Minister says she consulted with you about the \$5 million cut, that is not actually true. You say there will be a \$5 million cut, but you don't know yet where it will be made. Is that correct?

Ms. Florence Ievers: What the Minister is saying is that in the next few years, we will be working with her to determine how the \$5 million in cuts will be made. That's what she said.

Mrs. Maria Mourani: That means that the \$5 million cut that has been announced is a figure taken out of thin air and that, in actual fact, it has not yet been determined where the cuts will be made. Is that correct?

Ms. Florence Ievers: That's a question you should put to the Minister.

Mrs. Maria Mourani: To the Minister? Yes. That's a very good question to put to her.

Madam Chair, you interrupted me.

[English]

The Chair: The department has not had the opportunity, given that the announcement was recent, to decide where those cuts are going to be. They will spend the next several months or weeks, whatever it takes, defining how they will meet their budgetary restrictions. So the department can't answer those questions because they haven't made that decision.

• (1250)

[Translation]

Mrs. Maria Mourani: I was interrupted. Could the witness be given a chance to answer my question with respect to the Women's Program?

The Chair: No.

Mrs. Maria Mourani: No? I also asked a question about the program, namely when the new criteria would go into effect.

[English]

The Chair: Your time is up and we don't have an opportunity for anything further.

We still have the issue of main estimates to discuss. There are two votes that need to be done. If you want to do them today, we have several options. We don't have a lot of time to study them at this point, but we could defer the estimates until the beginning of our next meeting, and take some time with departmental officials then to go over the other estimates, if that is the wish of the committee.

Hon. Anita Neville: I would prefer an opportunity to continue reviewing the estimates, and vote at the next meeting of the committee.

The Chair: If it's the will of the committee that we deal with main estimates, we only have 10 minutes left. I don't think we have time.

Ms. Smith.

Mrs. Joy Smith: Madam Chair, I know we have a work plan that's been laid out, and I know we are continuing on the human trafficking. The minister is coming back in November, when we can continue this questioning.

My greatest fear at the beginning of what we were trying to do here was that human trafficking would go off our agenda. We have had our meeting today, and I think we can look forward to when the minister comes back, but I think we need to continue with our work plan—human trafficking—when we come back from the break.

The Chair: Thank you.

I want to thank the witnesses very much for coming today. We do appreciate the information you were able to give us. You've provided more insight. Thank you all very much.

To members, the estimates have to be reviewed. That's a responsibility of the committee. We don't have time now, with seven minutes, to do so, which leaves us no other option but to have them come at the beginning of the next meeting. If everybody could meet with department officials before then—if you have additional questions—we could deal with the estimates as expeditiously as possible at the beginning of our next meeting. We do have officials from DFAIT and Justice Canada confirmed for our next meeting. If members could come prepared to do a fast review of our estimates, and have any questions asked ahead of time with departmental officials, the committee could deal with them.

There was reference, Ms. Stronach, to distribution of some material. You'll see that gets done in English and French.

Is there any other business we need to talk about? Ms. Mourani.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Maria Mourani: Madam Chair, if I understood you correctly, you are saying we should send our questions with respect to human trafficking to officials with the Justice Department?

[*English*]

The Chair: No, I was referring to the estimates, the main estimates that we are going to have to vote on at our next meeting. Just so that we don't have to waste the whole meeting on estimates, if you have any questions or concerns on the estimates, the department officials are always available in between meetings to clarify and to assist us to make sure we are knowledgeable about it. That's just so we don't take too much time on that.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Maria Mourani: Will we be voting on the two budgets? Will we be voting on the 2006-2007 budget, without the \$5 million cut? Is that correct?

[*English*]

The Chair: Votes 110 and 115 will be before you. That's what you'll be voting on.

You'll have the option, when we get to voting on them, to approve what's ahead of us, reduce the amount, or pass a motion against the estimates before us. But I would suggest that members get additional information from the department officials so that you understand fully the process in advance of next week.

Mr. Stanton.

• (1255)

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Madam Chair, I have just a technical or procedural point. Do you need or even want a motion now to endorse the estimates, which would then be the subject of discussion at the next meeting?

The Chair: No, it would be discussion of the estimates, any questions that need answers, and then the endorsement of what is in front of us, or of any changes that someone might move at that point.

All right?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Okay.

The Chair: Anything else, members?

Thank you all very much. I hope you have a wonderful Thanksgiving break. We'll all come back the week after.

This meeting is adjourned.

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