

The Honourable Chuck Strahl
Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities
Tower C - 330 Sparks St.
Ottawa, On
K1A 0N5

The Honourable Lawrence Cannon
Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of State (National Capital Commission)
125 Sussex Dr.
Ottawa, On
K1A 0G2

February 7, 2011

Re: OCTEVAW's response to the mock human sale during "Les 7 Doigts de la Main" performance at the opening ceremonies of Winterlude, Friday, February 4, 2011

Dear Minister Chuck Strahl and Minister Lawrence Cannon,

The Ottawa Coalition to End Violence Against Women (OCTEVAW) is a coalition of organizations and individuals dedicated to ending violence against women and, through leadership, education, advocacy and political action, to promoting a coordinated response to women and their children who have experienced abuse. Our members include women's centres and shelters, sexual assault and counselling agencies, community resource and health centres, victim services, child protection services, hospital and police representatives, the crown's office, academic researchers and other concerned community members. We have collaborated for more than twenty years to ensure that our broad network of services work together for the best interests of women and children.

We would like to express our concern over the content of a performance entitled "Les 7 Doigts de la Main." The free twenty minute show was performed at the Canadian Museum of Civilization at 7 pm on Friday, February 4, 2011 during the opening ceremonies of Winterlude.

"Les 7 Doigts de la Main" a performance company from Montreal, featured four talented female acrobats using trapeze, hula-hoop, chains and gymnastics equipment to showcase their athletic and theatrical abilities. The third act featured one of the acrobats with chains. When she was led out, the host of the show addressed the audience by saying that they were going to auction off the woman to the highest bidder. He was trying to get men to participate from the audience by yelling out bidding amounts. He declared to the men that they should be encouraged to bid because "look at what she could do for you" with implications towards her body and flexibility.

Finally, a young male audience member was pulled on stage from the front of the auditorium and was declared the winner. This young man was told that he was going to have a good time and was invited to sit on a chair on the stage to watch her. After her performance he was prompted to lead her off stage. After the fourth acrobatic performance was completed, the woman from the chains routine walked back on stage holding the audience member's hand with his sweatshirt in her hands, indicating the removal of clothing.

OCTEVAW believes that this type of display condones the objectification and the sexual exploitation of women. It sends a very public message that it is alright for us to joke about human slavery and sexual violence against women. Human trafficking is a very real problem here in Canada. Such spectacles stand in stark contrast with the work of many groups in our community, such as PACT-Ottawa. PACT-Ottawa aims to recognize the human dignity of trafficked persons and to change harmful attitudes, including the demand for sex slaves and the oppressive belief that slavery is entertaining.

OCTEVAW would like a direct explanation from the National Capital Commission and the Canadian Museum of Civilization as to how this type of content is permitted to air at a public, free and government-sponsored event like Winterlude.

Who is responsible for vetting the content of these performances?

What will be done to rectify this situation now that the performance has aired?

How will the harmful nature of this message be revoked or challenged?

After the show, I approached a man who an usher indicated to me was her boss. I requested the contact information of the person responsible for the show. The man's reaction was hostile, evasive and demeaning. He proceeded to raise his voice, demanding to know "Why?" I briefly explained to him that I had a concern regarding the content of the show, specifically, the mock sale of a woman's body. In a raised voice he stated, "I will not give you the information of anyone if you are going to be negative ... you can go on the internet." Shortly after that the conversation ended and I exited the auditorium with him yelling behind me "Sorry that you did not like the show." I was unfortunately unable to get his name, but he did mention that he worked there and that he did not need to answer any of my questions.

Ottawa should be proud of our opening ceremonies for a winter festival that attracts many tourists. The events are anticipated and promoted as safe family entertainment. However, simply by attending this year's event young people and other audience members may have internalized harmful messages that reduce women to sexual objects available to the highest bidder. There are women in this city who have survived trafficking and rape and witnessing such a show could have re-traumatizing effects, not to mention the treatment received afterwards when voicing a legitimate concern. The show stood on its own in terms of talent and merit and did not need to be marred by the mock sale of a human being. By allowing this segment of the show to air, the National Capital Commission and the Canadian Museum of Civilization have failed in their responsibility as community leaders to uphold the value of equality and dignity for women.

It is the responsibility of everyone, especially leaders in our community to take a stand against sexism and attitudes that mock violence against women. We hope that this prompts a public

dialogue and that other community members come forward with their impressions of the piece. We look forward to hearing from you soon regarding your course of action.

Feel free to contact the OCTEVAW office at 613-725-3601 x105.

Sincerely,

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