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Chair: Mr. Sameer Zuberi

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• (0850)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

[*Translation*]

Good morning, everyone.

[*English*]

I'd like to welcome everyone here this morning.

Today is the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. It's very apt that we're doing this study on women today.

This is the 20th meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights. We are meeting today in a hybrid format, pursuant to the order of June 23, 2022. We're meeting both here in person and on Zoom.

For those attending via Zoom who are new to the committee, you have interpretation through the globe icon at the bottom of your screen. I would ask that you wait until you're recognized. When you give your opening remarks, I'll give you a hand signal when you have one minute left. I will raise my hand at one minute and then at 30 seconds. Then I'll lean in and allow you to conclude your five minutes.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted on Friday, September 23, 2022, we will commence our study on the rights and freedoms of women globally and on women in Afghanistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

We have with us in this first panel three esteemed witnesses. From the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development, we have Jacqueline O'Neill, the ambassador for women, peace and security. She is here in person and will be testifying first.

From Human Rights Watch, we have Farida Deif, Canada director. She is joining us by video conference.

Also by video conference, we have Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini, founder and chief executive officer of the International Civil Society Action Network.

Without further ado, Ms. O'Neill, you may please proceed.

Ms. Jacqueline O'Neill (Ambassador for Women, Peace and Security, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks to the committee for initiating this very important study.

To be a woman fighting for rights and peace has never been risk-free. I'll never forget, about 15 years ago, a Kenyan politician telling me that when she went to campaign events, she wore two pairs of very tight jeans to prevent thugs associated with the opposition party from raping her at her own campaign events. As well, a Colombian woman told me just a few years ago that she refused an award from her own government for brokering a peace deal, because she knew that the recognition could lead to credible death threats to her family.

Now we have data showing that the risks facing women human rights defenders and peacebuilders are increasing. Last month, the UN Secretary-General reported that they "have increasingly been targeted with attacks that silence their advocacy and prevent them from participating in public life." He said that with respect to women's rights, "we are going backwards" and are "experiencing a reversal of generational gains".

[*Translation*]

Afghanistan is without a doubt an extreme example, where the Taliban is trying to completely erase women from public life. It's an approach that many activists have described as gender apartheid.

We've witnessed attacks against peaceful protesters in Iran, Sudan and Myanmar, where the army has killed hundreds of protesters.

We have also witnessed sexual violence linked to conflicts in Ethiopia and Haiti, as well as in the context of Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine.

Indigenous women fighting for the climate have been murdered.

Dangerous disinformation campaigns target human rights defenders as well as women fighting for peace.

Why are we seeing these trends?

One of the main reasons relates to attacks on democracy. In general, authoritarianism and misogyny mutually reinforce each other. Authoritarian leaders often perceive women who defend human rights and peace as a direct threat to their power. It is therefore in those leaders' interest to silence these women.

The government of Canada reacts in various ways. I will briefly describe only five of them, but it would be my pleasure to discuss them further during our conversation.

[*English*]

First, our starting assumption is that women human rights defenders and peacebuilders face significant risks because of their work. Particularly when they seek funding, the burden should not be on them to prove that their work can be dangerous. Our programming support to women peacebuilders now includes specific funding related to safety, recognizing they must sometimes buy locks or surveillance cameras for their offices or undertake digital security training.

Also, with civil society's input, we develop the "Voices at Risk" guidelines to give practical advice to Canadian diplomats to support human rights defenders.

• (0855)

[*Translation*]

Second, we're trying to obtain more funding for feminist organizations fighting the erosion of women's rights.

We have made significant investments, but we know that it is not enough. We must try to increase the quantity of resources, increase flexibility and improve accessibility.

[*English*]

Third, we're determined to listen to women human rights defenders and peacebuilders themselves to understand the changing nature of the threats they're facing. For example, they tell us that they're often the subject of online abuse and threats, and we're learning that these threats made against women online are more likely than threats against men to translate into physical violence.

In Moldova, just a couple of weeks ago, I asked a journalist about threats made against her and her peers. She explained that she and her team of four journalists had recently completed a study, an investigation, on corruption within the government. All four of them received death threats, and two women on the team had their photos and contact information posted across dozens of prostitution-related websites.

Dialogue with Canada-based diaspora refugees and women human rights defenders and peacebuilders has also been essential to understand their unique needs while here in Canada. For example, some have shared that unlike many other refugees, they prefer not to be located in areas with significant diaspora populations from their home countries because that can increase their vulnerabilities. Some have also raised the need for greater collaboration and coordination among federal partners.

[*Translation*]

Fourth, Canada is making an effort to increase this essential work's visibility, which is increasingly under threat. We are trying to raise awareness about it, for example during speeches and statements.

Fifth, we are proactively creating coalitions and networks, some official and some not, to correct the false narrative that gender equality is a Western idea.

To save time, I'll stop here. I'm happy to answer your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. O'Neill.

[*English*]

Now we'll continue with Farida Deif from Human Rights Watch for five minutes, please.

Ms. Farida Deif (Canada Director, Human Rights Watch Canada): Thank you so much.

Thank you, Mr. Chairperson and honourable members of Parliament, for inviting me to appear before this subcommittee.

I'll start my remarks today by addressing Afghanistan, a situation that is devastatingly grim, especially for women and girls. Severe food insecurity, an economic crisis and human rights abuses targeting women and girls have brought the country to the brink of humanitarian collapse, eroding decades of development and gender equality.

Over the past 15 months, the Taliban have effectively removed women from public life. They imposed a de facto ban on girls' secondary education and banned women from most forms of employment. A May order requires women to cover their faces whenever they're in public and leave home only when necessary, and imposes punishment for non-compliance on male family members, essentially compelling men to become the enforcers of Taliban rule on their own female relatives.

The Taliban dismantled the system to respond to gender-based violence, created new barriers for women accessing health care, blocked women aide workers from doing their jobs and attacked women's rights protesters with impunity.

Thus far, the international response to this crisis has been deeply inadequate. While many countries have issued statements, expressed deep concern and called on the Taliban to end the rights violations, concrete coordinated practical actions have been few and far between. We expect countries, especially those that have a feminist foreign policy like Canada, to be much more active in opposing Taliban violations. We ask these governments to coordinate closely with each other, use all mechanisms and measures at their disposal, including sanctions against Taliban leaders, and make the rights of Afghan women and girls a major priority in their foreign policy.

Turning to Saudi Arabia, it's clear that the kingdom is not progressing on human rights, despite promised reforms. The space for dissent has significantly shrunk, and new legislation has codified the abusive male guardianship of women, which essentially renders them permanent legal minors. In many ways, Saudi Arabia has become even more repressive.

A case in point, in August, a Saudi appeals court dramatically increased the prison sentence of Salma al-Shehab, a doctoral student, from six to 34 years, based solely on her Twitter activity. The sentence is believed to be the longest ever imposed on a Saudi woman for her peaceful online expression.

Another example of these hollow reforms is when Saudi authorities released three prominent women's rights activists from prison last year. They were previously arrested for publicly supporting the very reforms Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman says he's seeking to promote. While they're no longer behind bars, they remain banned from travel and are serving suspended sentences, allowing the authorities to return them to prison for any perceived criminal activity.

Saudi authorities clearly feel empowered to continue to crush dissent, and Saudi women are among their primary targets. Canada should ensure that it promptly and publicly condemns these actions, rulings and decisions, which further shrink the public space and target Saudi women.

And finally, there's Iran. Protests that started following the death in September of a young Kurdish-Iranian woman in the custody of the abusive morality police—

• (0900)

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Excuse me, Mr. Chair. I am sorry to interrupt. The translation is not working for me. The testimony is too important for me not to....

The Chair: Thank you for that, Ms. McPherson.

It's working well now, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe is saying.

We'll continue.

Ms. Farida Deif: Thank you.

While protests began as a response to Mahsa Amini's death and the oppressive hijab laws, they've transformed into broad-based grievances against repressive, unrepresentative and corrupt ruling authorities.

Iranian authorities have ruthlessly cracked down on these protests with excessive and lethal force. We should remember that one month before Mahsa's death, on August 15, a new presidential decree sanctioned women for showing their hair on social media, with female government employees facing dismissal from their jobs if they have profile pictures without their hijabs. The head of the morality police also announced plans to enforce dress codes through digital surveillance of public spaces.

Canada has shown strong leadership in response to the Iran crisis. Just yesterday, Canada supported a resolution at the UN Human Rights Council establishing a fact-finding mission with a mandate to investigate alleged human rights violations related to these protests. The government has also imposed a series of widespread targeted sanctions on Iranian officials. While we support Human Rights Watch measures like targeted sanctions on those responsible for serious human rights violations, we actively encourage states like Canada to do their due diligence. For anything beyond individual designations, we encourage Canada to consult with experts and those who can help assess the potential unintended harm on civil society.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Deif.

Now we'll continue with Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini, please, for five minutes.

Ms. Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini (Founder and Chief Executive Officer, International Civil Society Action Network): Good morning. Thank you for this opportunity.

First, they closed the schools. Then they stopped women from going to work. Then they came to put the ban on women going to parks. The latest news from Afghanistan is that women aren't allowed to buy SIM cards. This is the Afghanistan of 2022.

Could the Taliban takeover have been prevented at the negotiations in Doha? The answer to that question is to ask you, if Afghan women peacebuilders and activists, women's youth delegations and representatives from minorities had been present as delegations in those talks, would the outcomes have been the same? Would Mr. Khalilzad, the U.S. envoy, have been able to agree to the release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners even as the Taliban was bombing maternity clinics and schools?

Ladies and gentlemen, good morning, and thank you for this opportunity to speak to you.

My name is Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini. I am the founder and CEO of ICAN. We specialize in the practice of inclusive and gender-responsive peacemaking and the prevention of violent extremism. We spearhead the Women's Alliance for Security Leadership, WASL, which is an alliance of locally rooted, globally connected, independent women-led peacebuilding organizations in 40 countries affected by fragility, violence and closing political space.

We're grateful to the Government of Canada for its support to us, including for ICAN's innovative peace fund and She Builds Peace campaign, which to date have disbursed \$6.9 million to over 60 organizations in 31 countries, with grants ranging from \$200 to \$100,000.

I share this with you because the work that is happening on the ground at the front lines of countries affected by conflict and violence is often invisible. It is the work of women. It is not behind the headlines. They are ahead of the headlines.

The work that we at ICAN have done over the last few years is to provide the bridge between those local activists and the international community, and we couldn't have it done without your help.

That said, the situation on the ground is bleak, and we have to be very sober about what we're facing. As 2022 draws to a close, women peacebuilders are finding themselves in the centre of a complex web of intersecting and escalating crises.

As we celebrate and draw attention to the women of Iran—and as an Iranian by heritage, I find it extremely moving to see how the world is supporting the women of Iran—I'm struck by how the Afghan women are still left behind. As we watch what is happening in Ukraine and provide the humanitarian support needed to Ukraine, my colleagues in Yemen, Syria and elsewhere, where wars have continued to be waged, are still struggling.

The Ukraine war and the shifting of finances and attention are impacting women in other places and in other contexts. We cannot forget them. We cannot forget that there's a world beyond our own borders and beyond our own regional interests.

In terms of the information I want to share with you today, I want to focus on what women peacebuilders in my network are saying now about the issues they're facing—the conflict, the crises, the climate change crises, things like floods and so forth, and their experiences from COVID.

What we saw happen during the COVID crisis was that the world forgot the people at the front lines of war and fragility. When the WHO issued orders to wash our hands with soap and water, my colleagues in Cameroon, Somalia and Yemen were saying, “We don't have soap, and we don't have water.”

What we saw happen was women become self-reliant. They shared information across our WhatsApp groups about how to make soap from natural products and how to make hand sanitizers. We shared information from the ICAN side about what was coming from the American CDC and elsewhere. What we realized is that the global solidarity and connectivity, the ecosystem we have, is essential for the work and survival of women peacebuilders and the communities they're helping out there.

We also saw that it is women peacebuilders who draw on the reserve of trust that they have in their communities to actually provide services. So, when we talk about the triple nexus of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding support, it's women on the ground who are doing that. Peacebuilding these days cannot be done if you're struggling to have water or if you're dealing with a drought or a flood. These things go together, and the women at the front lines are actually delivering these services.

• (0905)

They are, as my colleague Ambassador O'Neill mentioned, at incredible risk. It is lonely work. Peace work is not easy. In polarized societies, when communities are polarized, whether online or in real life, to be the bridge, to try to be the interlocutors, to try to find a mediated space in the middle, means that your life is at risk and that your family is often at risk.

We're seeing more and more how women are doing their advocacy through public campaigns. Through our She Builds Peace campaign, which Canada, again, has been supporting, we are reaching deep into societies and we're making the idea of being an activist for peace, equality and pluralism—recognition for peace work—something that many ordinary people want to participate in, young people especially.

At a time when the world is having so many difficulties, when the UN is struggling to raise the money for the humanitarian emer-

gencies it already has and can't even raise a quarter of what it needs, these women and the activists on the ground who are running to protect their communities, who are running to take on the responsibility to protect, they are the actors who are there doing so non-violently. They are essential, and we need to support them. We need to foster the ecosystem. None of us can do this alone.

It is with this message I want to come to you: to ensure that the activists who are risking their lives are getting the support they need and that Canada and other countries are practising their own values by making sure that you are taking a gendered, responsive approach.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we're going to go into questions and answers.

We'll give each member in the first round six minutes so that we can get to a brief second round.

We'll start off with Mr. Viersen for six minutes, please.

Mr. Arnold Viersen (Peace River—Westlock, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank our witnesses for being here today.

One of the things I'm interested in knowing about—and I have my intuition on this, but something tangible would be helpful, and all of your organizations have probably done work in this area—are the trend lines on some of these things. It feels to me like it's all getting worse. I was wondering if you can point us to a particular article, a particular study, and probably to work you are doing that gives us a trend line.

Is there a bright spot in the world? It feels like everywhere it's getting worse. I follow a lot of the religious freedom indexes from around the world. They note that out of 200 countries, everywhere either has stayed the same or has gotten worse. Out of 200 countries, there isn't improvement.

I'll start with the Human Rights Watch Canada organization. Could you give us bit of a sense of the trend lines on the work you do?

• (0910)

Ms. Farida Deif: Thank you so much for the question.

What we're seeing in terms of trends, while we're not documenting it very closely, is that the more there is a sort of rapprochement with repressive states—whether that is Saudi Arabia, like we've seen just recently with the Biden administration, or other states that are allowed to use large-scale summits, bilateral meetings and large sporting events as a way to perform a kind of image laundering and attempt to hide their repression—and the more states agree to that and don't call for accountability and don't criticize the repression against women and against all human rights advocates, we see an increase in impunity in terms of their actions.

I think that's why we're consistently calling for states, every time there is a women's rights activist who is detained, including in states that are allies to Canada.... This needs to be called out very publicly, because what we see is a normalization of these practices, a return to business as usual with repressive states that are allies or where there are strong interests. Then we see the trend unfortunately and increasingly deteriorating for women and for civil society writ large.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: ICAN, do you have a comment?

Ms. Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini: Thank you.

We know from studies that have been done that today only 3% of the world's population lives in countries with open conditions for civil society action and that generally global peacefulness has been declining for 11 of the past 14 years. That is a trend line that comes from the annual terrorism study and so forth.

I want to echo my colleague from Human Rights Watch about the double standards that we see. We don't criticize what's happening in Saudi Arabia or what is happening by Israeli activism in Palestine, but we do criticize countries that are not necessarily allies of the West, or we ignore countries like India and what is happening there right now in terms of the Muslim population. There are severe early warning signs.

The question is, what is the leverage that countries like Canada have? What we've seen in the case of Iran, Syria and elsewhere is that the blanket sanctions that affect a large swath of the population embolden the hardliners and have a tremendously detrimental impact on civil society and ordinary civilians. We need to make sure that we're not doing harm, that we're not adding harm.

Targeted sanctions, like the ones you've just introduced in the case of Iran, are much better in terms of ensuring that the public hears what you're against and what you're for.

We've done a lot of harm to the Syrian population and to the Iranian population with past blanket sanctions, and it's very hard to undo that kind of harm.

I'm happy to answer more.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: You mentioned the terrorism list. Do you know of an organization that carries out this kind of work to rank countries, a list of them? I know that, in the religious freedom realm, there are a number of organizations that spend a lot of time ranking countries for religious freedom. Is there a list that you use for the work that you're doing?

● (0915)

Ms. Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini: There is the global terrorism index and the global peace index that are produced. I can share the details of the organization that provides that kind of ranking. It's an annual study that comes out that we draw on.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: It also sounds like you're recommending to continue using and maybe increase the use of the Magnitsky sanctions process.

Ms. Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini: Anything that can be specific and targeted to individuals and their ecosystem of friends and family and so forth is the direction to go. The types of sanctions that we've had historically, even if they don't.... For example, you have

banking sanctions that were not meant to affect civilians, but the fact of the matter is that it has a chilling effect. Ordinary Iranians, even ordinary asylees who come abroad and try to open a bank account can't do so because banks are terrified of doing so.

Right now there is a real demand for increasing Internet connectivity, and technology companies are getting involved. If they are not given strong guarantees about being able not to face penalties.... It's one thing to say, "Come and set up the companies", but if they're not given guarantees that they're not going to be penalized later on, companies are not going to take the risk. It really needs to be very tailored and targeted. The companies in the private sector, banking, etc. need to be given reassurances of where and how the sanctions rules are drawn.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll continue to our next questioner.

We have Ms. Vandenberg for six minutes, please.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I think it's very noteworthy that we're meeting here today at the beginning of the 16 days of activism against violence against women.

I'd like to address my first question to Ambassador O'Neill.

I was glad to see that you, in your remarks, equated the decline and backsliding and threats to democracy with the increasing violence and threats against women. We're seeing right now that the polarization is no longer left and right. It is between authoritarianism or tyranny and democracy, and along with that the values of democracy, including gender equality, pluralism and diversity.

What I'd like to ask you is a little bit about that, about the fact that right now we're seeing a perfect storm between COVID-19, climate emergencies and increasing conflict, which is really causing the women of the world to be the ones suffering the most. At the same time, we're seeing an increase in gender conservatism. That's not just happening in authoritarian countries. We see it south of the border in the rollback of important hard-fought rights of women over their own bodies.

In this context, could you tell us a little bit about the need for global networks? How important is it that when women's voices are being silenced in one country, women in other countries are able to amplify and draw attention, and in so doing provide safety for those who are on the ground fighting?

The other question I have comes from our previous study in a previous Parliament in this committee on women human rights defenders. One of our recommendations at that time was that Canada create a human rights defenders immigration stream, because what we were hearing was that when things go bad, they go bad quickly.

Yesterday I was at a Dignity Network event, where I heard from a transgender woman living in a country where the legal structures are not helpful. She said that when it happens, she needs to get out in three hours. But they don't want to leave. It's not immigration. They're not refugees. These people want to return, want to keep fighting for their country. They just need temporary asylum, to be able to get out when it's hot, and then be able to go back when it's safer.

After that, the Government of Canada did create a human rights defenders stream of 250. I think we all agree we need more than that.

Would you give some advice about how we could tailor that so that it is more rapid and so that it is more reflective of the realities of human rights defenders on the ground?

Also, maybe elaborate a bit on how Canada could more readily foster global networks, even among parliamentarians, that would allow us to be able to amplify the voices and make sure that the women who are really fighting on the front lines are fully supported by the international community.

• (0920)

Ms. Jacqueline O'Neill: Sure.

One reason that this study... I'm so happy that this committee has taken this up. We have to recognize that these attacks on gender equality and on women's rights are not haphazard. To the previous member's question about data and trends, there are absolute trends and there is an absolutely concerted and organized opposition to women's rights. We have to be as organized, concerted and strategic as those who are opposing us. I think we have to do that in a number of different ways.

To dial back to the start of your question related to democracy and authoritarianism, and maybe to the previous member's question, one of the key indices that we have to look at is the repression and the silencing of voices. The voices of women in civil society tend to be the first to be silenced.

We're seeing what some have called an epidemic of coups around the world. Often, they are military takeovers of government and again...deep forms of suppression. I don't have the numbers in front of me, but whereas we'd seen a handful in the previous 20 or 30 years, we're now seeing three or four times the number of coups in countries. We're seeing really dramatic declines on those fronts.

We're also seeing very intentional attacks on gender equality by countries that are working together—Russia and China in particular. They're doing this at institutional levels. At the United Nations, the Organization of Security and Co-operation in Europe and the African Union, for example, we're seeing countries deliberately and often subtly try to roll back gains that we've achieved. A colleague of mine said that we used to be pushing a boulder up the hill, but now we're just trying to keep the boulder in place.

For things like the rights of civil society and for women activists to address the forums directly—to hear from them, as opposed to just through government representatives—or recognizing the role of civil society in partnering with government, we're getting subtle rollback on these at an institutional level. The networks that you

mentioned are exceptionally important so that we can identify these tactics, anticipate them and work against them.

That happens also at an individual level. You referenced that the pandemic has really been exacerbating these problems. First of all, as you all know very well, people couldn't meet in person. They had to take a lot of their work online. That created massive opportunities for state surveillance of human rights activists and organizers. Again, we need to think about networks and being able to provide security for people differently.

I really commend the committee and the work of committees in doing things like recommending a dedicated stream for human rights defenders, which, as you know, translated into very specific action. We're really proud that we have that and we want to keep growing that.

As we mentioned, there are very specific needs that we understand by listening to activists. Many human rights defenders and women peacebuilders say they're not seeking permanent status. They need to be able to escape while they manage the risks and then their ultimate goal, of course, is to go back. That's not their barrier to begin with.

As I mentioned, some people say that they don't want to go to a place where there's a concentration of people from their own country because they have to lay low, so it exposes them to different risks. They might have different needs for supports.

We have to be collecting gender disaggregated data on all of these applications and resettlements to make sure that women and men equally understand the opportunities that face them. The 250 number, of course, includes family members, so that adds up very quickly.

Thank you.

The Chair: On that note of disaggregated data, we'll conclude this round and continue on.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank all three of you for being with us today for this important study.

I will go relatively quickly. I was the Deputy Chair of the Special Committee on Afghanistan, so I will start with the situation in that country.

Many Canadian NGOs came to see me, often privately, to tell me that the Canadian Criminal Code was preventing them from doing their work in Afghanistan. The United Nations Security Council passed resolution 2615, but Canada never followed. In July, everyone said they agreed, including Minister Joly and Minister Sajjan. In September, we were told that changes were coming.

To date, Ms. O'Neill, have you seen a change in the Canadian Criminal Code pertaining to NGOs?

• (0925)

Ms. Jacqueline O'Neill: No.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Do you want a change?

Ms. Jacqueline O'Neill: I would like for more Canadian NGOs to work in Afghanistan.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Nevertheless, do you agree that some NGOs are not working in Afghanistan right now because they are afraid of being prosecuted under the Canadian Criminal Code?

Ms. Jacqueline O'Neill: Yes.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much.

I'd like to talk with Ms. Deif, from Human Rights Watch Canada.

I will ask you the same question: are you aware of the fact that Canadian NGOs can't do their work for fear of being prosecuted under the Canadian Criminal Code?

[English]

Ms. Farida Deif: Yes, that's been an issue that we've been concerned about, as well, at Human Rights Watch.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: What is the current impact on women in Afghanistan of NGOs being unable to do their work?

[English]

Ms. Farida Deif: I think for civil society organizations in Afghanistan, women's NGOs in Afghanistan, the situation is incredibly bleak, so it's really important for states to remove any types of additional obstacles that they may face.

Ms. Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini: May I add to that?

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Yes, of course.

[English]

Ms. Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini: At ICAN, because of the funding that we receive from different countries and from private sources, we have been able to get money into the country since September 2021. We were getting money in before, including Canadian support, but we've been getting money in since September 2021. It really would make a difference to have consistency. For example, we can't use Canadian grants to pay salaries to our colleagues who are on the ground. These kinds of things make a tremendous difference.

In terms of the rapid response issues, we do rapid response. We've been helping people get out. What we find across countries is that the foreign ministry that knows us will take referrals from

us, but it's immigration that drops the ball across many countries. The only country that has been effective in doing the support with resettlement in a consistent way for women is Germany right now. This is very important.

Going back to the question of networks, this is exactly why we have the networks that we do, because at ICAN we can do things. We have access. We can help our partners in many different ways, and we are not politically bound by the limits that a UN agency might have. We have direct access to bilateral donors and to the partners, and we don't have the bureaucracy. We're able to get small amounts of money in to people and assist in terms of protection and evacuation, but also protection on the ground. We have a big protection guidance framework that we'd be happy to share with you that's very detailed in terms of the kinds of support that governments can provide.

Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Yes, we would definitely like to see that. If you could provide that to the committee, it would be very interesting for everyone.

Let me turn back to you, Ms. Deif, from Human Rights Watch Canada.

I receive a lot of calls from various organizations which represent, among other things, religious minorities in Iran, Afghanistan or Saudi Arabia. These people tell me about the situation of women in those countries, such as the Hazara in Afghanistan. That is what we are here for, to examine the situation of women in those three countries.

Can you elaborate on what happens to women from religious minorities in those countries?

[English]

Ms. Farida Deif: The situation of the Hazara minority is something that is very concerning to Human Rights Watch. We've documented a number of abuses. As you've seen in September, there was a suicide attack on ethnic Hazara students in Kabul that sparked protests by women and girls across the province. The attack took place as female students sat for a university examination. It claimed the lives of 53 students, most of them girls and young women, and injured about 110.

This is something that adds to the overall very grim picture that we're seeing in Afghanistan in terms of the specific targeting and impact of Taliban rule on ethnic minorities and women, in particular, within them.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much.

Ms. Naraghi-Anderlini, can you enlighten us on some of the perceptions we have here, in Canada. Watching what is happening in Iran, it seems that Iranian men are supporting the Iranian women. In Afghanistan, on the other hand, it seems that men don't dare speak up for fear of being sent to prison. In Saudi Arabia, men seem to be quite comfortable with what is happening right now and do not really seem to want to support the women.

These are our perceptions. Are they correct?

The Chair: You have 30 seconds to reply.

[*English*]

Ms. Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini: First of all, men are supporting women in Iran. It's not the first women-led revolution in the world, but it is the first revolution where the clarion call for women's rights is unifying everybody. It has taken 43 years—three generations—of women's resistance to get men to stand alongside them.

This is why it's so important. This is why, in many ways, women in the region are watching and are very supportive, but governments in the region are very wary of what's happening in Iran as well. This is because the dynamics of having a women's rights call and uprising are threatening to others, including probably Saudi Arabia and elsewhere.

• (0930)

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: We'll continue for six minutes with Ms. McPherson.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses. My goodness, what an interesting panel, as everyone has mentioned, on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women.

Ms. Naraghi-Anderlini, I know the other two witnesses very well and consider them leaders in this work, and your testimony has been such that I'm certainly adding you to that list of powerhouse women who are fighting for women's rights around the world. I thank you all very much for doing that.

I want to follow up a little bit, very briefly, on what my colleague from the Bloc brought up. We do look at the fact that Canada cannot work in Afghanistan the way that we should because we don't have that humanitarian carve-out. There are implications on that. One of my big worries is that if we are not careful, if we are not thoughtful, and I guess looking down the road with regard to Iran... Is there the potential that if we were to, for example, declare the IRGC a terrorist organization, that would give us the same implications in Iran that groups would not be able to work with civil society in Iran? That would limit what Canada can do because we don't have that humanitarian carve-out in our Criminal Code.

Mr. Naraghi-Anderlini, could I ask you?

Ms. Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini: Thank you.

The sanctions in Iran are so profound right now, and the crack-down from the state systematically, that the idea of civil society organizations per se is itself very different. That said, absolutely, carve-outs for humanitarian, civic action, etc., should be there. Carve-outs for ordinary people to send stipends to their family members should be there.

It is almost impossible to try to get resources to ordinary people, including, by the way, to Afghans who are passing through, because what we're seeing is that Afghans, for example, in our net-

work, get verified by Germany, but they need to come to Iran or Pakistan to get their visas at the embassies there. It's really important to have the means and the measures for people to be able to pass through, and the embassy presence and so forth is also very critical for other reasons.

Humanitarian carve-outs are absolutely critical. We can't get money for charities for kids with cancer or orphans, things like that, each time. It's meant to be possible, but it's been very hard.

Thank you.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

Of course, the goal of all governments should be to be punitive towards the terrorists and the murderers who are in the leadership of the IRGC and not to hurt regular Iranian citizens. I think we've seen in the past that the Canadian community has not done a good job of that. We have to be very cautious in how we go forward with that.

Thank you for that.

Ambassador O'Neill, of course it's always lovely to see you. Thank you so much for bringing your expertise here today.

You spoke a little bit about the online threats and what that means to women around the world. Could you expand on what Canada could do, and how Canada could work with other countries, work with our allies to limit the impacts of those online threats against women rights defenders?

Ms. Jacqueline O'Neill: Sure, thanks so much.

There are a few different things.

One, we can learn from other countries on how they are approaching this as it relates to programming. I mentioned that we've included now budget lines for digital security for women peace-builders we're supporting. I think we can continue to share and learn from other countries on how they're doing that better.

We have been working within different forums. For example, the Organization of American States now has a cybersecurity program, and Canada funded a free online course on cybersecurity and gender, so we're working within various multilateral institutions to try to raise the fact and keep the attention and focus on women. We have a women and cyber fellowship, a few different things.

We also just joined—and I think this is an area for increased attention, including hopefully at a parliamentary level as well—something called the global partnership for action on gender-based online abuse and harassment. That's recognition that we have to work internationally to identify standards and good practices.

We also have a massive dearth of research in this area about what actually works, what works vis-à-vis IT companies, tech companies and what role they have to play, what role legislation has to play, and then specifically what governments can do.

• (0935)

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

I'll just finish with you, Ms. Deif, if I could.

I'm constantly aware that we pick and choose human rights in this country and in this world. We choose which countries to prioritize. It's often based on our trade relationships. It's often based on our geopolitical location.

How do we stop doing that? How do we work with the Canadian government, with our allies, with other governments to ensure that human rights are protected regardless of where they're happening? We should have been calling for the protection of women's rights in Iran before what's happening in Iran started occurring. We should have been doing that beforehand, and we weren't. What can we do to make sure that happens going forward?

The Chair: You have a minute.

Ms. Farida Deif: Thank you for that question.

I know Ambassador O'Neill mentioned the "Voices at Risk" guidelines, which are meant to be implemented by Canadian missions all over the world. They have very clear recommendations around ambassadors requesting prison visits with human rights defenders and women's rights defenders who have been detained, asking the government to observe trials of human rights defenders, etc. Even when countries are unlikely to grant a Canadian ambassador that request, we should be making that request in order to signal our interest in human rights in the cases of specific human rights defenders.

What's missing here really is a sort of review of how actively our ambassadors are using those "Voices at Risk" guidelines. How actively are they using that specifically in countries with very strong bilateral trade relationships? I think of Egypt. I think of Israel. When was the last time these ambassadors requested to meet with a detained human rights defender, or to observe a trial? There is really a question here of implementation that's the problem.

Then, as mentioned earlier—

The Chair: I apologize, Ms. Deif.

We'll continue on to our next very tight round of two minutes.

We have Mr. Aboultaif for two minutes, please.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC): Thank you.

I have a couple of quick questions for Ms. O'Neill.

Why do leaders of countries with human rights violations insist on holding back women who could make a greater contribution to the well-being of their nation? Why are those leaders so unconcerned about world opinion? It seems, as time goes on, that they are less concerned as we move forward, which is very concerning on the human rights side and the women's rights side.

I would love your opinion in a very short time.

Ms. Jacqueline O'Neill: My very brief opinion on that broad question is that they're afraid of being held accountable by their own people. They have power that is tightly held, and introducing more voices leads to greater accountability, which leads to greater transparency, and that is threatening to them.

Why are they not feeling pressure? I think they're feeling pressure from some, and reinforcement and tangible support from others who share their world view and desire.

To the earlier point about networks, they are coordinated and mutually reinforcing, so lots of authoritarian governments are actually, right now, reinforcing each other and providing an alternative form of peer pressure that is actually reinforcing this type of behaviour.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Ms. Deif, would you like to add to this?

The Chair: Please respond in less than 30 seconds.

Ms. Farida Deif: I think that was adequately covered by the ambassador.

Thank you.

Ms. Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini: May I add a point?

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Yes.

Ms. Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini: Just very quickly, even the pressure that comes from countries that claim to care comes in siloed ways. It doesn't come in the high-security spaces; it comes in the women's spaces. It's like parallel universes that are existing, and we need to combine those.

Thank you.

The Chair: On that note, we'll conclude this round.

We'll continue with Mr. Ehsassi.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all of the witnesses we have.

Perhaps I could start off with the ambassador.

Thank you very much for your remarks. It was nice to see that you were specifically talking about women leaders who are now refugees. Specifically, we see lots of Afghan leaders and Iranian women leaders. Apart from the stream that was mentioned earlier for human rights defenders, are there other means by which your office is trying to assist these women leaders? Do you take an active interest in identifying them and assisting them to come to Canada?

• (0940)

Ms. Jacqueline O'Neill: Absolutely. I think the primary role that my office can play in this is listening to them while they are here, especially about their priorities as they relate to political processes and security processes. For example, with Afghans, I've met with a number of Afghan women networks in Canada that include many new refugees, and I recognize that we have an incredible resource now of many Afghan women who have thoughts, priorities, etc.

I know you want to move on because of time, so I'll leave it there, but that is a key role—actually listening to them while they're here, to inform our government policy.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you very much.

Perhaps I can now turn to Ms. Deif.

You talked about Saudi Arabia, and how we are seeing lots of hollow reforms and a lot of image laundering. Could you provide us an update on the case of Ms. Loujain al-Hathloul, who has been such an inspiration for her leadership? We're not hearing much about her fate. Perhaps you could provide us an update on her specific case.

The Chair: Please give a brief comment, within 30 seconds.

Ms. Farida Deif: Yes, thank you.

Loujain al-Hathloul was one of the three Saudi women's rights activists I mentioned in my earlier remarks. While released from detention, she continues to face a travel ban, so she can't leave the country. Those types of travel bans are often used.

What governments will do is try to get praise for releasing human rights defenders, women's rights defenders, while at the same time they may suffer asset freezes, travel bans and an inability to leave the country. They might have to report to a police station every night. These are the types of things that governments will do to try to create praise for their actions, while really, if you dig deep, you can see that what's happened is that it continues to be repressive and that states should continue to document it.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

We'll continue now to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for two minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Deif, we have seen images and reports on Afghanistan recently. A number of rumours suggest that the physical punishment of women is increasing right now, as though the Taliban feel freer to treat women that way.

Do you get the same impression?

[*English*]

Ms. Farida Deif: Yes, we've also heard those kinds of concerning reports in terms of lashings and other really abusive types of actions by the Taliban, who have become increasingly emboldened to do this.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

Ms. O'Neill, we know that Canada has adopted a feminist foreign policy, which is now supported by all political parties in the House of Commons.

We have seen some concrete action recently. For example, Minister Sajjan went on a diplomatic mission to Qatar for the World Cup of soccer.

Don't you think it would have been better for the Government of Canada not to attend and to diplomatically boycott the World Cup in order to send a message about women's rights?

If you think it was a good idea to attend, do you think the minister did a good job?

[*English*]

Ms. Jacqueline O'Neill: I'm not going to comment on whether it was right or wrong to go.

I do know that he has expressed a commitment to raising difficult issues while there.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Do you think his approach will change anything in Qatar?

[*English*]

Ms. Jacqueline O'Neill: I can't say.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Okay, thank you.

Regarding actions, policies and images, Ms. Deif, do you see a difference between the image Canada wants to project internationally and the action it is taking currently, with regard to women's rights in particular?

[*English*]

The Chair: Give very brief comments, please.

Ms. Farida Deif: It's a very large question. Yes, certainly there is very strong messaging on a feminist foreign policy, on a rules-based international order and on prioritizing human rights, but we do see that there is often a disconnect in terms of actions on the ground, particularly with states that are considered to be allies of Canada.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll continue to our final two-minute round with Ms. McPherson.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thanks very much, Mr. Chair.

Again, thank you to the witnesses.

Very quickly, Ms. Deif, should Canada be selling weapons to Saudi Arabia? Does that align with a feminist foreign policy?

Ms. Farida Deif: No, it doesn't. We've said repeatedly that Canada should no longer sell arms to Saudi Arabia and that there should be a total boycott, given the level of humanitarian law violations committed by the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen.

• (0945)

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

Ms. Naraghi-Anderlini, what would a real activated feminist foreign policy do to protect the women of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Ukraine, Afghanistan and all around the world?

Ms. Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini: That's a very big question. I think the starting point, though, is what we're seeing right now with the Human Rights Council and the resolution that was passed yesterday for an investigation mechanism.

We need to make our multilateral spaces have teeth. They need to use the strength that they have to engage non-violently and shine the light in all of these places. We also need to align our policies. As my colleague said, whether it's Canada or my own country, the United Kingdom, or the United States, why are we selling arms and supporting the war in Yemen that the Saudis are waging? They are killing children and women. Why did we do Libya? Why are we not doing an investigation into how we failed in the diplomacy on Afghanistan in Doha? What we did there, we are repeating elsewhere. We are stonewalling women out of these processes.

If we want to have a feminist foreign policy in Canada, Germany and other countries, it is a bit of a reflection reflecting backwards, but it's also putting some of these principles into practice.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

To be fair, we don't have a feminist foreign policy in Canada. We have a feminist international assistance policy, which is, as you mentioned, in some spaces, but certainly not in all the spaces where it needs to be.

Ms. Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini: We could share a lot more with you, in terms of what your assistance has done, at least through us. The impact is profound. I'm incredibly grateful for the support, and for the trust the Canadian government has had in us.

The Chair: Thank you to all the witnesses today for being here—for coming in person and by Zoom.

We're going to continue on to our next panel.

I sincerely thank everybody who came here. Ms. O'Neill, Ms. Deif and Ms. Naraghi-Anderlini, thank you all so much for being here.

We're going to suspend for a moment while we flip to our second panel.

• (0945)

(Pause)

• (0955)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

Welcome, everyone, to the second panel on this International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. Welcome to our study on women, in particular women in Afghanistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the rights and freedoms of women globally.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here.

[*Translation*]

With us in person, we have Julia Tétrault-Provencher, legal advisor with Lawyers without Borders Canada.

[*English*]

Remotely, from Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights, we have Meghan Doherty, who is the director of global policy and advocacy. As an individual, we have Maître Sayeh Hassan.

Thank you both for joining virtually.

We're going to start now for five minutes with Maître Tétrault-Provencher.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Julia Tétrault-Provencher (Legal Advisor, Lawyers without Borders Canada): Thank you very much.

Esteemed members of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, let me begin by thanking you, on behalf of Lawyers without Borders Canada, or LWBC, for your interest in the rights and freedoms of women and girls around the world.

LWBC is a non-governmental international cooperation organization that, for the past 20 years, has contributed to the implementation of human rights for women and girls by strengthening access to justice and legal representation.

A number of our projects funded by Global Affairs Canada are in fact designed to fight gender-based violence, which we call GBV, to promote and protect the sexual and reproductive rights of women and girls, and to protect human rights defenders.

In the countries where LWBC is active, that is, in Colombia, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Mali, Benin, Burkina Faso and the Democratic Republic of Congo, our work with human rights defence organizations has enabled us to identify certain trends which appear to be quite widespread, bearing in mind the different contexts. I would like to address five of those trends here in the time available to me.

First, discriminatory socio-cultural standards, practices and beliefs represent considerable obstacles to access to justice for women and girls. Women and girls must be able to access effective legal services and receive multisectoral assistance suited to their needs. For example, LWBC and its partners have strengthened legal assistance and legal aid services in Mali, providing support that is sensitive to the realities of women and girls who are the victims of GBV. More than 80 women who were victims of the conflict have received legal representation before national and international bodies.

Secondly, the erosion of civic and democratic space and the rise of various forms of extremism significantly undermine the work of civil society organizations, which can no longer defend and promote the rights of women and girls. We have witnessed three types of attacks on human rights defenders: the criminalization of their activities; threats and attacks on their physical integrity and lives; and defamation and public attacks. These attacks disproportionately affect women who defend human rights.

Third, women and girls are too often excluded from decision-making circles, and their specific experiences are not considered. Yet we have found that, to ensure the continuation of the peace process, specifically as regards transitional justice, they must be involved in political life, as well as economic and social life. They must have a place at negotiation tables, as provided for in the women, peace and security program.

Fourth, we are very concerned by the growing lack of respect for the sexual and reproductive autonomy of women and girls. We have in particular witnessed governments that have tried, sometimes successfully, to criminalize access to abortion under all circumstances, which is a violation of international standards on the issue. LWBC and its partners are actively working to protect access to sexual health and reproductive services, particularly in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, by reminding the countries of their legally binding international obligations.

Finally, women and girls who are vulnerable or marginalized, including those with a disability, living in rural areas or in poverty, those from a sexual or gender diverse community, as well as women from a minority group, are more susceptible to having their rights and freedoms violated and being the victims of GBV. We have seen cases of forced sterilization, obstetric violence and forced marriage involving these persons in particular. We can no longer remain silent about the shadow pandemic and the rise in femicide committed by intimate partners or family members since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In view of our work to better protect the rights of women and girls, we consider it very important to have an international legal framework that is upheld at the national level. In this regard, our first recommendation to the sub-committee is to utilize international fora to call upon countries that have not already done so to immediately ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, including Iran, and to remind those who are already signatories, including Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia, of their obligations under this convention. We are also asking for a more active contribution, for international cooperation in particular, to promote assistance programs focused on access to justice for women and girls. These programs should support the protection of local organizations that defend the human rights of women and girls, as well as lawyers who specialize in GBV issues.

• (1000)

With these brief remarks, I wanted to provide a general overview of our experience. I will be pleased to provide further details about certain issues during the question period.

Thank you very much for your time.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Tétrault-Provencher.

[English]

We are now going to go to Zoom. For those who are online, I am just going to give you a signal at the one-minute mark and then at the 30-second mark, and then lean in.

Without further ado, we will now go to Ms. Doherty for five minutes, please.

Ms. Meghan Doherty (Director, Global Policy and Advocacy, Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

At this moment, we are living through concurrent health, economic, environmental and humanitarian crises. All of these have profound and differentiated gendered impacts, which are compounded by where women are socially, economically and geographically located. These impacts are undeniable and include sharply rising rates of femicide and gender-based violence, inability to access or pay for essential sexual and reproductive health services, increased unpaid care work, and more precarity, lower pay and fewer labour protections than men. These are not unfortunate and inevitable side effects of a world in turmoil, but an abject failure of human rights and those responsible for upholding them.

What makes this current moment in history particularly dangerous for women is that at the same time as these crises we are also witnessing rising anti-democratic sentiment within well-established democracies, an emergence of far-right and authoritarian regimes, an acceleration in the spread of disinformation, a deliberate erosion of trust in the institutions charged with upholding human rights norms and standards, and increased transnational organizing and funding among anti-human rights, white supremacist and anti-gender equality actors.

This confluence of events and actors has resulted in an unprecedented intensification of attacks on rights related to sexuality, gender and reproduction, those who defend them and the mechanisms we use to seek protection, remedy and accountability. This is happening online, in schools, in parliaments, in bureaucracies, in the courts and at the United Nations.

This past September, Afghan women human rights defenders addressed the UN Human Rights Council to demand that the international community act on women's complete erasure from all aspects of public life since the Taliban took over. In Saudi Arabia, women have been sent to jail for decades under the state's terrorism laws for tweeting. The recent protests in Iran, sparked by the killing of Gina Mahsa Amini, who was arrested for violating strict laws about what women can wear, are truly emblematic of the ways in which women's rights and bodies are deeply tied to the nation state.

No country or region is immune, and it would be a mistake to think that violations of women's rights only happen in what we think of as repressive states. One only has to look at the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision that reversed almost 40 years of federal abortion rights protections.

The question is, why do these actors target gender equality, and sexual and reproductive rights? Gender and sexuality are deeply symbolic and culturally meaningful concepts in all societies. Anti-democratic actors understand the potency of using issues that can be culturally contentious, such as abortion, trans rights, and sex ed to galvanize people to support them.

At the heart of many of these anti-rights movements is a commitment to the perpetuation of patriarchal families and systems that are hetero-normative and reproduction-oriented, and can only exist through the control of women's bodies, sexuality and gender expression. As such, the realization of sexual and reproductive rights and gender equality is a direct challenge to autocrats and populist movements that have identified and targeted these rights as threats to their purpose. Feminist sexual and reproductive rights defenders are on the front lines of attacks against human rights and democracy and face enormous risks to their lives, livelihoods and the safety of their families.

When we are talking about access to abortion, gender-based violence or early and forced marriage, we are also talking about democracy, human rights, peacebuilding and freedom from tyranny. When we identify state and non-state actors organizing, financing and influencing democratic institutions to undermine bodily autonomy, women's rights and the rights of LGBTQI persons, these are clear signs that democracy is under threat.

History has shown us that social justice, women's rights and feminist movements have been at the forefront of the expansion and strengthening of human rights all over the world. Political scientists have long documented that advancement in women's rights and democracy go hand in hand, as women's political participation is a precondition for genuine democratic and egalitarian progress.

To turn the tide of cascading human rights violations against women, we need the strongest possible commitment to nationally driven feminist and social justice movements in all aspects of Canada's domestic and foreign policy.

• (1005)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Doherty.

We're going to continue on to Ms. Hassan for five minutes, please.

Ms. Sayeh Hassan (Lawyer, As an Individual): Thank you for the opportunity to address the Subcommittee on International Human Rights on the issue of the rapidly diminishing rights of women and girls in Iran.

This is my first time appearing before the subcommittee, and it's a pleasure to be here. Thank you very much for having me.

I would like to tell you a little bit about myself to put in context my testimony before you today. I was born in Iran in 1980, right after the revolution and after the Islamic regime hijacked the revolution and took control of the country. When I was seven years old, my parents decided to flee Iran, in part because they didn't want me and my younger sister to grow up under a repressive regime that had no respect for women's rights.

My family and I lived in Turkey for five years as refugees before we were able to come to Canada when I was 13 years old, and I'm so grateful for that difficult decision my parents had to make and so grateful for the opportunity to be living in Canada.

For the last 20 years, I have been a very vocal advocate of human rights and democracy in Iran. I started my activism during my undergraduate studies at Carleton University, where my sister and I started, to the best of my knowledge, the first Iranian student association that focused on human rights in Iran. I continued my activism after becoming a lawyer through blogging, writing articles, staying in touch with activists inside Iran, speaking to members of Parliament and speaking at various conferences both nationally and internationally.

Speaking out against the oppression of the Islamic regime is not a popular activity, and, as a result, I have been subjected to consistent backlash from supporters of the regime both in Iran and in Canada. The most noteworthy example was about 10 years ago, when the regime's national TV put up my picture on live television. They referred to me by name, and they announced that I was an enemy of the state. I continue to watch others who are also outspoken opponents of the regime face similar threats and harassment.

However, I consider myself both privileged and fortunate because I live in Canada, where I can speak out without the fear of being arrested, tortured, raped and murdered for my opinions and beliefs. Sadly, that's not the situation for millions of Iranian women and girls who have been subjected to exactly those types of treatment for the last 40 years. It is that oppression that has motivated me to speak out against the Islamic regime whenever I've had the opportunity. I want to ensure that the world can and will hear the voices of millions of women and girls in Iran.

For the past two and a half months, Iranian women and girls have been able to show the entire world not only the oppression that they have been facing for the past 40 years but also that they are ready for change. They are ready for freedom, and they're willing to risk their lives to achieve that change and that freedom.

Current Iran protests, which many of us refer to as the Iran revolution, started with the murder of one young woman, Mahsa Amini, by regime agents because they didn't like the way she was wearing her mandatory hijab.

Her murder sparked an outcry in Iran that has led to the largest protests we've seen in 40 years. What is so unique about these protests, besides the fact that they're nationwide and that they've been relentless for the past two and a half months, is the fact that they're being led by women and young girls. Elementary school-girls are taking off their mandatory hijabs, taking down the picture of Khamenei in their classrooms and saying no to oppression. It's incredibly humbling for me to watch these brave young women claim what is rightfully theirs, the right to choose what they wear, what they think and how they conduct themselves. I'm grateful for the opportunity to be here today to try to be their voice.

The Canadian government has condemned the regime's brutality in the past two and a half months, and they've taken limited steps to sanction the Iran revolutionary corps under the immigration act. Those are very positive first steps, but there's so much more Canada can do, including listing the entirety of the Iran revolutionary corps as a terrorist organization under the Criminal Code.

I am hopeful that the Canadian government will take concrete, meaningful steps to help these brave women and girls achieve their goals of freedom and equality.

Thank you.

• (1010)

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We're going to continue on to Mr. Viersen for five minutes.

Go ahead, Mr. Viersen, please.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for being here.

Ms. Hassan, on your testimony around the harassment that has happened to you here in Canada, could you explain a little bit more what that looks like?

Ms. Sayeh Hassan: Yes. It goes back really to when I started 20 years ago, especially because at time it was not a very popular.... A lot of the harassment I've experienced has been online, which is one reason why I am no longer online. I have a very limited social media presence. It's very easy, I find, for people to attack individuals who are active online.

I've had situations where I've gone to protests and I've been followed. I've gone to events at community centres and have been followed by men in the back of the community centre until I was able to get inside or get to public transportation.

I've attended a protest with my husband at night where, when the protest was finished and we were going into the parking lot to get our car, men were following us. My husband recently received a threat online—he's an activist as well—telling him that if he continues what he's doing, they're going to come after him. The threats are not limited to women; it's men as well.

I think the Iranian Canadian community has been very vocal about the fact that there are Islamic regime elements in Canada that are threatening and harassing activists who are outspoken about the situation in Iran.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Would you say that this is connected back to the Iranian government, or is it local actors on their own?

Ms. Sayeh Hassan: I would certainly say that it's connected to the regime.

There's a very systematic way that the Islamic regime has been harassing and threatening activists—people who are vocal against the regime—in Canada and in other countries as well. In the U.S., there have been threats of people being kidnapped. They haven't been kidnapped, but there were reports of very outspoken activists who were going to be kidnapped, but that was stopped.

It's very common. It's the regime elements in Canada that are trying to stop activists like myself and many others from speaking out.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: It's very concerning that this is happening right here in Canada.

Is there something that the Canadian government can do to ensure that you feel safe, essentially, at home in Canada—never mind what's going on in Iran?

• (1015)

Ms. Sayeh Hassan: Part of it is that Canada, sadly, has been a safe haven for the Islamic regime and the people who support the regime. They've come here for many years. They've brought their investments and they've felt very safe and secure here. The government hasn't taken any steps to ensure that the Iranian Canadian community is protected.

I think it's great that we're having this conversation right now. This is really one of the few times that I've been able to raise this issue and feel like it is being listened to. I think this is a very positive step.

The Canadian government needs to ensure that the regime elements and sympathizers do not feel that Canada is a safe haven for them—that they can just come here, bring their money and do whatever they want to do, in terms of threatening and harassing Iranian Canadian activists, and get away with it.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Is it fairly easy to identify folks' connections IRGC, or does it take a little bit to prove that?

The Chair: You have 50 seconds.

Ms. Sayeh Hassan: I think this something that the government will need to do, along with CSIS. It's not for me to identify who the revolutionary guards and their sympathizers are here.

I do know that a lot of them are here and they have assets that are not necessarily under their own names, but in their families' names, which is another concern. I think the government needs to look not specifically at the names of particular revolutionary guard individuals, but also their families and associates who are here and have the assets of those individuals.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll go to Mr. Sidhu for five minutes, please.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu (Brampton East, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for taking time to join us here today.

Women's rights are human rights, and they are at the heart of our foreign policy. We heard a lot of testimony about Canada's foreign policy today, and completely agree with what the well-intentioned mandate from Minister Joly is in terms of international feminist foreign policy on the world stage.

I have a few questions in terms of our international feminist foreign policy approach. I want to hear some of your thoughts on that, if you can provide some insights on that.

I know Global Affairs has committed 15% of its bilateral international development assistance across all action areas to implementing initiatives dedicated to advancing gender equality and improving women and girls' quality of life. As part of her mandate letter, Minister Joly was asked to continue developing and implementing Canada's feminist foreign policy with the support of partner organizations.

My question is this: How can the international community help promote and protect women and girls' human rights, gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in fragile conflict and post-conflict settings?

It's open to any of the witnesses who would like to comment.

Ms. Meghan Doherty: Thank you. I can start.

One of the first things I would say to that is that the international community, particularly the global north, states that there must be a stop to perpetuating this false divide between development and human rights—between civil and political rights on the one hand, and economic, social and cultural rights on the other hand. The fundamental principles of human rights demand that we understand that all human rights are interdependent and indivisible, so we cannot enjoy one set of rights without the other.

Looking specifically at the context of fragile states, and in humanitarian settings, I think women's rights—in my area of expertise, particularly sexual and reproductive rights—can't be relegated only to development assistance or special conferences that focus only on women, and then they're conveniently left out when we're talking about trade deals or debt financing or arms sales or pandemic responses. You cannot separate those things, because we see how they are interconnected, so they must be part and parcel. We must be looking at the civil and political aspects as well as the economic, social and cultural rights.

• (1020)

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you, Ms. Doherty.

Does anyone else want to comment?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Julia Tétrault-Provencher: Yes, I would like to add something.

In conflict situations or in the period thereafter, we often note that the justice system is very fragile. So investments are needed in the justice system and in the training of lawyers and judges, not on-

ly to ensure access to the justice system, but also to provide a gender perspective. Women, victims and survivors of gender-based violence must have access to information and to justice. The information must also reach the most remote communities, which in some cases are even more fragile.

The voices of survivors and victims must always be included when rebuilding or strengthening a justice system.

[*English*]

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you for that.

Mr. Chair, how much time do I have left?

The Chair: You have one minute.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Okay. I'll quickly get to my question.

You mentioned some of the initiatives we can take, but how can the international community increase the meaningful participation of women and women's organizations and networks in conflict prevention, conflict resolution and post-conflict state building?

I have less than a minute, but I'm hoping to get a little bit of insight from you.

Ms. Meghan Doherty: I can start and maybe say that the intervention should happen before a conflict starts. While I appreciate there are people who have much more expertise in post-conflict peacebuilding, my area of expertise is really looking at the things we can do to intervene before we get to that crisis point.

The human rights framework, as part of the international community, provides an excellent foundation that all states should be looking at through their development assistance programs, trade negotiations and climate justice negotiations. It's about a human rights-based approach to addressing the situations in countries that are of immediate concern.

I would draw on the Office of the High Commissioner's groundbreaking work on a human rights-based approach to maternal mortality and morbidity as an excellent example of some of the things we can do to prevent those conflicts in the first place.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Doherty.

[*Translation*]

We will continue with Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for being with us to consider this extremely important matter and to examine the role Canada can play in it.

My question is for Ms. Tétrault-Provencher.

The study pertains to the rights and freedoms of women around the world, primarily in Iran, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan. Yet there is also cause for concern when we see what is happening to freedoms south of the border as anti-abortion laws are gaining ground. We saw this when the decision in *Roe v. Wade* was overturned. I know this might sound crazy, but when the decision was announced, some MPs and elected officials in Canada even rejoiced publicly and openly, judging from what we have seen on some videos.

With things like that happening in countries like Canada and the United States, is this dangerous for women in the rest of the world?

Ms. Julia Tétrault-Provencher: It's safe to say that there is a backlash in the United States that's being seen around the world right now. Abortion access rights are under threat. Honduras recently passed a constitutional change, as did the U.S. El Salvador also wants to impose a few more penalties.

What we are seeing in Canada, the United States and elsewhere in the world is an obvious backlash. No matter where it happens, it is dangerous. Everywhere, we must ask questions, talk about it and denounce this situation. I also think that elected officials should condemn such things.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: In a way, when other countries see the United States and Canada rejoicing, it gives them an excuse to act the same way and pass anti-abortion laws.

I don't know if I'm right in thinking that. We are here to discuss this very issue. You're more of an expert than I am on the subject.

Ms. Julia Tétrault-Provencher: Conversely, it can also provide a pretext for creating a coalition of countries reminding others not to adopt such laws. It can become an opportunity to strengthen existing conventions, for example the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. So these conventions can be brought to the forefront and the obligations that exist can be repeated. So I also see this as an opportunity to remind people of these rights, to prevent the same situation from happening in other countries.

• (1025)

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You spoke about access to justice during or following internal conflicts. Can you tell us more about the reparation process for survivors in the context of difficult access to justice?

Ms. Julia Tétrault-Provencher: We also work in contexts where there is not necessarily conflict, although there may be difficulties.

As far as redress is concerned, usually we realize that it is very difficult to obtain, especially for women and victims who are survivors of gender-based violence, and especially in the case of sexual violence. There is a lot of stigma. Women do not have access to the system and often do not trust it. There are stereotypes linked to this. Often they are also abandoned by their families.

For them, it is very difficult to access justice, first of all. Once they have access, the redress is minor or not implemented. Finally, there are no funds that exist for that, no implementation of reparation, no follow-up in this regard. So it is very difficult for women to access reparation. In many places, reparation never happens. There

is no implementation. This is particularly the case in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where we work. This often needs to be emphasized.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: As we know, rape is often used as a weapon of war. Sometimes there is an outright desire among some belligerents to destroy the reproductive organs of women. There are even regimes where it has been proven that women are currently subjected to forced sterilization. This is the case with Uyghur women in Xinjiang, China.

When people are prevented from reproducing, it is not far from a desire to exterminate populations. Can this be considered a genocidal act, in your opinion?

Ms. Julia Tétrault-Provencher: The definition of genocide is something found in international law. You always have to evaluate situations to see at what point you can start to consider it a genocidal act.

That said, we can also act in terms of prevention. When we see acts of this kind happening, we can understand that they are red flags and we have to act accordingly, to prevent it from going to genocide. These are certainly acts that must be taken into account. We must try to suppress them, eliminate them and prevent them.

We have to see how far these acts will go, before we can really talk about genocide in the sense of international law.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Is it already over?

The Chair: Yes, unfortunately, your time is up.

We will finish with Ms. McPherson for five minutes.

[English]

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank all of our witnesses today. My goodness, I'm in my office alone in Edmonton—it's quite early here—and I wanted to yell out "Yes!" to so much of the testimony.

I also want to acknowledge particularly Ms. Hassan for the front-line role that she is playing in standing up for women's rights in Iran. Hearing what is happening in Canada and how that reach is happening in Canada.... I compliment you on your bravery. I'm so sorry that you are having to face the things that you're having to face.

Ms. Sayeh Hassan: Thank you.

Ms. Heather McPherson: I also wanted to ask a quick question.

Ms. Doherty, honestly, your comments comparing democracy and women's rights.... When we lose women's rights, we lose democracy and we lose so much of our capacity. I think that's very important to recognize.

One thing I do want to push back on a little bit in terms of some of the previous testimony is that we do not have a feminist foreign policy in Canada. That has not been implemented. We have a feminist international assistance policy, which is fantastic and which I helped develop, but we don't have a feminist foreign policy. That means, as you point out, Ms. Doherty, that on trade, defence and all of these things where we need to have that feminist lens, we do not.

I want to make this very clear for this testimony.

Ms. Doherty, what are the direct impacts on women when we don't use that feminist foreign policy lens on things like trade and defence?

Ms. Meghan Doherty: Thank you very much for the question.

In the context of trade, for example, we know that women are the lowest-paid, that they have the most precarious working conditions and that they are subject to the most exploitation. When we are talking about trade deals being made without taking into consideration the labour consideration and protections of women in particular countries or regions, we are exacerbating women's lives, their health, their security and the security of their families.

I would take the example of international financial institutions like the IMF and the World Bank, when they are going in to look at debt refinancing with a policy of austerity measures. We know that women are the most impacted by austerity measures in terms of health and social services. Unless those things are being taken into account and they are recognizing what a harmful impact those policies can have on women, it undermines a lot of the other work that Canada and other countries are trying to do to enhance women's rights.

You have to have a coherence across this range of foreign policy areas if you are serious about advocating and promoting the rights of women. It does not make any sense to only do it in one area and undermine it in another area. A cohesive policy is necessary to make that happen.

• (1030)

Ms. Heather McPherson: One thing that I am quite worried about is that even with our feminist international assistance policy, the words are there and the words are strong, except we're not seeing the adequate funding for that in place.

For example, through an access to information request that I did, I found out that the Canadian government's funding for SRHR has not all been spent. Clearly it could be. There is so much work to be done around the world, but those dollars have not gone out.

Can you talk specifically about access to sexual and reproductive health? What are the impacts on women when we don't do our part and when we don't stand up for the rights of women around the world? What are the direct impacts on women and girls?

Ms. Meghan Doherty: Thank you again for the question.

Yes, Canada has made a huge commitment of \$700 million for sexual and reproductive health and rights over the next 10 years and \$500 million of that should be allocated towards the neglected areas of abortion, contraception, adolescent sexual and reproductive health and advocacy for SRHR.

The impact of not supporting organizations and feminist movements that are doing the hard work every single day to ensure that people have access to the services and the information that they need is that people die. That's the most immediate one. We know the rates of maternal mortality around the world are skyrocketing and.... Sorry, I should rephrase that. They are very high. Around 300,000 women a year die and the numbers are potentially increasing because of the pandemic.

When we have restrictions on access to abortion, we see that women will seek out unsafe means if necessary, if there's no legal means. They suffer severe health outcomes and long-term disability in the context of unsafe abortions.

The Chair: On that note, we will have to conclude. We're very tight on time, so unfortunately we also have to be tight in this round.

I want to thank all the witnesses for being here.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Tétrault-Provencher, thank you for joining us in person.

[*English*]

I'd like to thank Ms. Hassan and Ms. Doherty for joining us online.

Again, to all the witnesses, I would offer a sincere thank you.

We will now go to our closed session. For those online, please flip quickly to the closed session so that we can conclude our committee business by 10:45 a.m.

Thank you.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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