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Chair: Mr. Sameer Zuberi

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• (1305)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.)): Welcome, everyone.

[Translation]

Hello everyone.

Thank you for being here in person or over Zoom.

[English]

Today we're having a special meeting to award human rights defenders, specifically women human rights defenders outside of Canada. We're so happy to have our guests, our awardees and members of Parliament here today.

This is the 32nd meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights. We are doing this in the hybrid format through Zoom and in person. Today we will be honouring three awardees.

[Translation]

The first one is Ms. Ayesha Hajeera Almas.

[English]

The second is Mariam Lamizana, and the third is Oleksandra Matviichuk.

I'll be speaking a bit about them and their courage and bravery.

As chair of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, I want to thank everyone for being here today, whether you joined us in person or by Zoom or are watching this broadcast.

The Subcommittee on International Human Rights was established to inquire into matters relating to the promotion of and the respect for human rights around the world. We are a subcommittee of foreign affairs, which is a committee of the House of Commons. Here in this committee, we are consensus-based. We have members from all parties represented here. We hear witnesses. We discuss issues. We issue reports and recommendations to government for action and change.

From this committee has come a number of studies. We've studied the case of the Uyghur and, very recently, Tibet residential schools. We've also looked at the situation in Haiti recently and the situation of women globally and specifically in Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran. We've done a number of studies.

[Translation]

Throughout the session, we have heard statements from many witnesses from around the world about various human rights injustices.

[English]

Witnesses have shared their life experiences, their invaluable work and the sacrifices they've made to defend the fundamental rights of others, oftentimes at great personal risk. Rights defenders themselves are often targeted, and it's for this reason that our committee has decided to highlight the important work of women, specifically, who are operating in the human rights field.

Women oftentimes face extra challenges that men don't. They face the challenges of gender-based harassment, intimidation and violence.

This subcommittee has met several human rights champions and knows of many women human rights defenders. It was challenging to choose three women who merit and deserve this award, which is conferred by our committee year after year, but after careful consideration, we have unanimously agreed that the women we're recognizing today are a testament to the immense sacrifices made to defend the human rights of others.

Today we're honouring three remarkable women, one of whom is with us by Zoom.

First is Mariam Lamizana. She's the president of Voice of Women, an association under the Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices. Mariam is a former legislator of Burkina Faso who has spent decades advocating for the rights of women in the region. She campaigns against forms of violence against women and girls, including the horrid practice of female genital mutilation.

Mariam is our first awardee and is present with us today.

We're also recognizing Ayesha Hajeera Almas, a high school student from the Indian state of Karnataka. In February 2022, she led a group of her fellow high school students to challenge the ban on hijabs in court. Ayesha is respected for her fight to protect women and their freedom of religious expression.

• (1310)

Our third awardee, who could not connect with us today, is Oleksandra Matviichuk. She is a Ukrainian human rights lawyer and democracy advocate. She is the chair of the Ukraine-based non-profit Center for Civil Liberties. The CCL's mission is to establish "human rights, democracy, and solidarity in Ukraine and the OSCE region for the affirmation of human dignity."

Oleksandra has also been a member of the advisory board on human rights of the Office of the Ombudsman of Ukraine since 2012. In this role, Oleksandra has worked to improve the protection of citizenship and human rights and freedoms.

I'd now like to pass the floor to Mariam, who has joined us from Burkina Faso. We want to hear about your important work.

I'll turn the floor to you now for your remarks and for our attention.

Thank you so much, Mariam.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Mariam Lamizana (President, Voice of Women, Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Hello to everyone.

Mr. Chair and members of the subcommittee, first of all, I need to express my heartfelt thanks to the chair of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development and to all its members for having actually thought of me.

Out of solidarity for my fellow women, I would also like to congratulate the other champions for being chosen, a choice no doubt justified by their commitment and determination to promote women's rights not only in their respective countries, but also around the world.

I am Mariam Lamizana, and I come from Burkina Faso, a country in West Africa.

The population of my country is 21 million, 52% of whom are women. The female population had a primary school enrolment rate for girls of 87.5% in 2019-2020, and it has a high infant mortality rate, which fell from 65% to 30% between 2010 and 2021.

It is also important to highlight the prevalence of negative socio-cultural factors which make worse things like child marriage, female genital mutilation, violence against women and children, femicide and rape, which has a terrible fallout on the lives of women and children.

With regard to female genital mutilation, thanks to the combined efforts of the government, civil society groups, technical and financial partners and some traditional and religious leaders, the prevalence of this practice among children aged 0 to 14, nationally, currently stands at 11%, according to the Continuous Multisectoral Survey. This level of prevalence reflects the enormous progress made, although these efforts must continue and intensify to achieve zero tolerance of female genital mutilation.

I want to remind people that this practice has caused, and continues to cause, serious harm to the sexual and reproductive health rights of thousands of girls and women in the country, and has bereaved several families.

By way of illustration, I'm reminded of the sad situation experienced by the niece of one of my school friends. This niece, the only daughter among her mother's four children, became disabled for the rest of her life because her paternal aunt had performed an excision on her without her parents' consent.

When that happened, something in me snapped. In light of this tragedy, I wanted to understand whether this practice was justified in any way. I did not find an answer, either from my family or from society, so I then knew in my heart of hearts that I would do everything in my power to put an end to this practice. Later on, this deep-seated conviction would be reinforced in my professional career, when I implemented the recommendations of a national seminar on excision in Burkina Faso, held in May 1988. Indeed, this historic seminar marked the beginning of the country's awareness that it needed to stop the practice of excision. This fight culminated in the adoption, in 1996, of a law banning female genital mutilation, otherwise known as the anti-FGM law.

As the first permanent secretary of the national structure to combat the practice of excision, I led the fight against this practice and helped set up programs across the country.

My involvement in the fight against the practice of excision has helped bring this issue into the open, as for a very long time it was considered taboo in my country. Bringing it into the open made it possible to bring on board traditional, religious and political leaders, as well as many civil society organizations, who all helped to promote the idea of ending this practice. This collective effort enabled Burkina Faso to record a prevalence of 11% among children aged 0-14 and it made Africa a leader in the fight against female genital mutilation.

On top of that, we are driven by the desire to end female genital mutilation and other forms of gender-based violence as quickly as possible. And so, in collaboration with others and thanks to the support of technical and financial partners, we have set up a national framework called *Voix de Femmes*, a non-governmental organization.

• (1315)

This organization is a key player in promoting an end to violence against women and children in my country. In Ouagadougou, my country's capital, it has created a program for the prevention and holistic management of violence against women and children. This program is unique and also a reference in the area of prevention of gender-based violence and victim care.

At the regional level, I should point out that I am also President of the Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children, a regional organization that brings together 29 African and 17 non-African countries. It is in this capacity that I, along with the other members of the Inter-African Committee's leadership, have made greatly helped to mobilize the heads of state and government of the 29 member countries, as well all first ladies, to take the practice of excision into account in public policy and to call on partners to help end this scourge.

Internationally, my involvement, along with that of other interested parties, led to the adoption of a historic resolution on December 20, 2012 by the United Nations General Assembly, calling on the global community to step up the fight against female genital mutilation.

My tireless work, over some thirty years of my life, has also been fuelled by the collective commitment and enthusiasm of people who believe in community and social mobilization and by the political will of various political figures. In short, it has been fueled by a chain of national and global solidarity around the fight against female genital mutilation.

The merit of our work at a national, regional and international level has been recognized by the United Nations Population Fund in Burkina Faso through the creation of the Mariam Lamizana Prize. This award celebrates excellence in all types of media communication and encourages journalists and bloggers to fight against female genital mutilation.

At this point, I would like to again sincerely thank the chair of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development for the study on the recognition of international human rights champions, which values and honours our work with this award. Beyond the award, being recognized in this way will challenge us to stay the course and continue the struggle until there is zero tolerance for female genital mutilation in Burkina Faso, in Africa and around the world.

This is why my commitment to mobilize the whole of society will never waver in the interest of making everyone and every organization join in the fight to prevent violence against women in Burkina Faso. The coming years will be crucial for this mobilization in my country, Burkina Faso, which is currently experiencing an unprecedented security crisis.

Violence against women and girls continues to play out physically, sexually and psychologically. It includes domestic violence, battery, psychological violence, sexual exploitation, female genital mutilation and child marriage. This has negative repercussions on psychological, sexual and reproductive health, particularly for the more than 1,999,127 internally displaced people, 58.42% of whom are children, 23.97% women and 17.61% men, and who are currently the victims of a humanitarian crisis with all kinds of ramifications.

However, despite this difficult context which could upend gains made over decades of struggle, I am firmly convinced that if everyone involved remains determined and engaged, we will succeed in putting an end to this degrading practice from another time.

In conclusion, I would like to assure you that my commitment to the well-being of women and children has, over the years, become a sacred trust that is part and parcel of my life and will remain so as long as I live.

Women and children nourish our society, and no sacrifice has ever been, nor will ever be, too great in the fight for their rights.

Long live global solidarity. Long live cooperation.

Thank you.

• (1320)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Lamizana, for your courage and your commitment to fighting for the rights of women and girls. The work you are doing is very encouraging.

[English]

We salute what you've done and the changes you've made to make the lives of women and girls better. We hope you continue to inspire people in your region and country.

I'll now turn the floor over to our vice-chair, MP Arnold Viersen, for remarks for three minutes.

Please, Mr. Viersen, you have the floor.

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

It's an honour to be able to honour these three human rights champions and to witness the presentation of our award to these individuals.

In a world full of conflict and exploitation, it's truly exceptional when people dedicate their lives to fighting for the rights and freedoms of others and seek to leave this world a better place than when they came into it.

Today, Canada's Subcommittee on International Human Rights recognizes these three very special people. Our committee is unique in that we aim to leave our political affiliations at the door and work together to uphold international human rights.

On behalf of the Conservative Party and His Majesty's loyal opposition, I want to express our sincere gratitude for your bravery, courage and tireless work. Daily, you risk your reputations, your freedoms, your livelihoods and your safety, and you continue to do this work in an increasingly hostile world.

Mariam, your lifelong commitment to the women of Burkina Faso is exceptional. You've spent your life as a pioneer in the fight against female genital mutilation, Mariam, and we are happy to celebrate you and your tireless work. I would also like to highlight the work the UN has done in naming an award after you. This award goes to journalists and communicators who are most active in promoting the elimination of FGM.

Keep up the good work, Mariam.

I would also like to thank Ayesha. She has been working for religious rights in India. Over the past few months I have received petitions signed by thousands of Canadians highlighting the growing threats that Muslim and Christian minorities are facing and how they are subject to planned and targeted threats, assaults, sexual violence and killings.

I want to thank you for your work in advocating on behalf of those others and their religious freedoms. It's an ever-growing concern and I will continue to raise the rights of minorities in India in our Parliament.

As the invasion of Ukraine continues, it's important to remember the toll it takes on civilians. Oleksandra, I would like to thank you for the work you are doing in securing the well-being of Ukrainians during these unprecedented times. I'd like to thank you and highlight your commitment to the safety of women and children in the world today.

These are some of the most vulnerable groups and we know that, during war and conflict, women and youth are often at an increased risk of exploitation. Now that millions of women and youth have fled Ukraine, we know that human traffickers have been targeting them. I've raised this issue in our Parliament. I want to thank you for your work to protect and uphold the rights and dignity of these vulnerable people in your country.

To all of you, on behalf of the official opposition, I want to congratulate you on receiving this distinguished recognition—the Women Human Rights Defender Award. Your tireless commitment to uphold the God-given human rights and dignity around the world is admirable and extraordinary. It's an inspiration to us.

Thank you. May God continue to bless you in your work.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1325)

The Chair: Thank you, MP Viersen, and vice-chair of our committee, for your remarks.

One of our awardees was actually in flight at the beginning. Her flight was delayed, but she has since landed and is now with us.

In addition to Mariam Lamizana, we have another awardee with us today—Oleksandra Matviichuk, who I mentioned earlier is a Ukrainian human rights lawyer and democracy advocate. She's the chair of the Ukrainian-based, non-profit organization Center for Civil Liberties and has been a member of the advisory board on human rights of the Office of the Ombudsman of Ukraine since 2012. She is joining us just after landing.

With the permission of the members in the room, we'll not have interpretation for this. Normally all of our proceedings must have interpretation, but we're doing this just for you. This is very exceptional. I don't know if you know how exceptional this is.

Without further ado, I would like to open the floor to Ms. Matviichuk, please, for your remarks.

Ms. Oleksandra Matviichuk (Head of Organization, Center for Civil Liberties): I am very grateful to you for providing me with the floor.

I'm a human rights lawyer, and I have been applying the law to defend people and human dignity for many years. At present, I am doing my job in circumstances in which the law doesn't work. Russian troops deliberately shell residential buildings, schools, churches and hospitals; attack evacuation corridors; manage a concentration camp system; organize forced civil deportations; and commit murder, torture, rape, abduction and other kinds of offences against civilians. An entire international system of peace and security can't stop this.

We document a lot of human rights violations against women and children particularly, but I know from my own experience that when you can't rely temporarily upon the legal instruments, you still can always rely upon other people. I'm very grateful for all the solidarity and support we've received from people in different countries of the world, and especially Canada, in this difficult time of Ukrainian history.

Thank you very much for your humanity.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Ms. Matviichuk, for being here. We appreciate your being present despite the circumstances, and we respect the work you're doing for the rights of women and all people in your space and region of the world.

[*Translation*]

I will now give the floor to our second vice-chair, Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe.

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

There are times when we see the full importance of political involvement. There is no doubt that the fight for democracy and the defence of human rights is part of that.

Ms. Almas is not with us, but, Ms. Lamizana and Ms. Matviichuk, I am honored to be able to speak today, and I want to take advantage of your presence to express my gratitude and admiration for the work you have done in recent years. I emphasize the word “admiration”, because what you do takes courage.

The march towards justice and democracy is a long-term undertaking, and the road is full of pitfalls. It's a struggle that never really ends, but every victory we manage to achieve deserves to be recognized.

I would therefore like to thank you for being here this afternoon at the sub-committee and to offer you my congratulations in person on behalf of myself and the Bloc Québécois. But above all, and I emphasize this once again, to tell you that what you do is not only important, but necessary, vital and crucial for the groups you protect and represent. Without you, the world would be a worse place. You make the world a better place by improving the fate of the people you defend.

The award you're receiving may be a small thing in your eyes, but for us it's important to award it to you in recognition of all the work that you've done. Let's not forget that you're also becoming role models. When we award this kind of prize, we obviously want to get the word out through the media, to make it public, and, ultimately, there will be young girls and boys who will look to you as role models and who will want to participate in your work. These young people are the future of human rights advocacy because you are leading the way. It's important to do the work you do. As I said, this work is crucial, vital and necessary.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart. Congratulations once again. Keep going, don't give up. If you need us, the Bloc Québécois, or the parliamentarians who sit in the House of Commons, we will always be by your side.

Thank you so very much.

• (1330)

The Chair: Thank you for your moving words, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Ms. McPherson, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, I just want to say thank you so much to the leaders, who we are celebrating today. Thank you for being here. Thank you for sharing your words with us.

I'm a mother of a young girl, and the work that you have done just warms my heart and makes me think about the world that I want for my daughter. The work that you have done to make this a better world for my daughter and for all women and girls around the world is vitally important.

I'm inspired by your resilience and I'm inspired by your bravery as you stand on the front line fighting for equality in India, in Ukraine and in Burkina Faso.

I sit as the foreign affairs critic for the New Democratic Party, but we all know in this committee, in the foreign affairs committee, in the House of Commons, that women's rights are under attack around the world. We are witnessing the rollback and the reversal of hard-won gains on gender equality across the globe.

Democratic institutions are facing grave threats, and civic spaces continue to narrow. There is a rise in gender-based violence, including online harassment and reduced access to sexual and reproductive health rights. This is happening in countries like the United States, Poland and around the world.

Women rights are human rights, and we must ensure that those rights are always upheld. We must ensure that women and girls are included in decision-making, that their voices are heard, and that we are actively addressing and eliminating the barriers that continue to widen the inequalities faced by women and girls.

I want to thank you for your fight and guarantee and share with you that I will continue to fight for the protection of women's rights

defenders and ensure that women and girls are at the centre of all of the work that I do in Parliament.

Congratulations again to you all.

Thank you.

• (1335)

The Chair: Thank you, MP McPherson.

As chair, despite the fact that I'm from the governing party, I am here to chair and be neutral, so I will give the floor to a representative of the Liberal Party.

MP Anita Vandenberg, please, will make a few remarks. Thank you.

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

This is something that our committee has done since 2018, and it is a very high honour, because this committee has selected all of you unanimously, with every single political party agreeing. What we hope this will do for you is that it will validate your work. It will let others see that you are seen in the world and that we do recognize and know the work you are doing and the difference that it's making.

That's why I am very proud that we are able to have you here today.

To you, Mariam Lamizana; to you, Oleksandra Matviichuk; and also to Ayesha Hajeera Almas, who wasn't able to join us today, this is the highest honour that our committee can afford you. At a time when we know there is a global battle between democracy and authoritarianism, when human rights and women's rights are being undermined globally, you are the ones on the front line. You are the ones we stand with and beside, because we want you to know how important what you're doing is and that we appreciate it very much around the world.

Thank you.

The Chair: This concludes our ceremony. We wish we could have had you all in person, but circumstances didn't allow. We're happy that we are gathered together for this important award. You'll find this video on our committee website. It's accessible for all of you, and you can share it if you want within your networks.

We thank you for sharing with us your advocacy and your path to champion human rights and the rights specifically of women and girls. We thank you especially for all the challenges you face. We know and recognize that you face extra challenges and that you do so at personal risk.

I want to extend my gratitude to all my colleagues, the MPs on this committee, for being involved in this process, and in helping to get this award to where we've gotten it to.

[*Translation*]

Your hard work has enabled us to respond effectively to human rights issues.

[*English*]

Thank you, Ayesha Hajeera Almas, for the work you do.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lamizana, thank you for your work.

[*English*]

Oleksandra Matviichuk, thanks for being with us today.

Congratulations to all for receiving this award. Your accomplishments inspire us and remind us that we must continue to serve and of the impacts that are made.

Again, thank you for being here. I hope that we will cross paths again, either virtually or, hopefully, in person.

[*Translation*]

Have a good day, everyone.

The meeting is adjourned.

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