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Chair

The Honourable Robert Nault

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● (1530)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Robert Nault (Kenora, Lib.)): Given that it's 3:30 and much later in Mozambique, pursuant to Standing Order 108 (2) and our study of women, peace, and security, I thought it would be appropriate if we started with Valerie Percival. She is an assistant professor of international affairs with the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University, and she's in Maputo, Mozambique. I don't know what time it is there but I think it's very late.

I thought we would let Valerie go first, and then, Yanar, you'll go second. Then we'll get into questions by the committee.

Welcome to both of you. Let me start by turning the floor over to Valerie for her comments.

Ms. Valerie Percival (Assistant Professor of International Affairs, Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University, As an Individual): Thank you very much for this invitation. I'm grateful that the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development is undertaking this review of the women, peace, and security agenda. More than 15 years after the UN Security Council adopted resolution 1325 in 2000, this is an opportune moment to reflect on progress, challenges, and opportunities.

Today I will make four main points and provide four recommendations on actions that Canada can undertake in this important area.

First, the evidence is unequivocal. Countries where the social, economic, and political rights of women are recognized, respected, and promoted are more peaceful, more prosperous, and better places for everyone to live.

Research also shows that gender equality is not only about social development. It is an important and underutilized peace-building tool. Given the current context of massive displacements and gross violations of human rights in contemporary conflicts, it is a tool that the international community must implement. Yet how countries transition to become more gender equal, and the role of the international community in promoting that process, is not easy or straightforward.

While the engagement of outside actors can be critical, for sustainable progress to be made, leadership must come from within a country and community, and that leadership must include both men and women.

Second, while UN Security Council resolution 1325 was critical for drawing attention to the differential impact of conflict on girls and women, the objectives of both the initial and follow-up resolutions have not been met.

The women, peace, and security agenda has four broad goals: protect women and girls from human rights violations during conflict and prosecute offenders; promote the participation of women and girls in peace negotiations in the security sector; prevent violence against women and girls, particularly sexual and gender-based violence; and ensure that relief and recovery efforts acknowledge and address the differential impact of conflict on women and girls.

Some progress has been made. More peace agreements include references to conflict-related sexual violence. The number of women involved in the security sector has increased. Militaries are encouraged to prevent and take action against sexual and gender-based violence. Special protection units have been established in multiple police forces in conflict-affected states. The UN includes women protection advisers in peacekeeping missions, and gender advisers are incorporated into each UN-led humanitarian operation. Funding proposals must incorporate a gender marker that codes projects on their efforts to promote gender equality.

Yet many of these initiatives have often been superficial measures not fully implemented, only providing the international community with the ability to check the box. Gross violations of the human rights of women and girls continue even within UN peacekeeping missions.

Sexual and gender-based violence remains widespread in conflict settings, and the impact of sexual and gender-based violence on boys and men is only slowly being recognized.

Third, for the women, peace, and security agenda to succeed it must be about more than checking the box. It must work to create the conditions for gender equality.

The approach of the women, peace, and security agenda, as with other international initiatives such as the millennium development goals and the sustainable development goals, is like a Trojan Horse. We believe that if countries meet certain indicators and check those boxes, such as women in the police and military, women in peace negotiations, and health services for survivors of sexual violence, we will by stealth have created gender equality.

This approach is necessary but not sufficient. While these are all positive initiatives, women and girls in conflict-affected states are seen as passive recipients of decisions made by others rather than active agents that are encouraged and supported to promote social change within their societies. For example, resolution 1325 and follow-up resolutions view the health sector as an institution that provides a service to women to repair the damage from sexual violence or provide health care during childbirth, not as an institution that should be engaged in the broad societal efforts to promote gender equality.

Fourth, the promotion of the rights of women and girls has not been easy in any context, and it is not only the responsibility of women. When I was a child, I watched the adoption of Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms and was horrified by how women advocating for their equal rights to be enshrined in and protected by the charter were vilified and bullied.

Much worse happens to advocates for gender rights in conflict-affected and fragile contexts. These advocates must be actively provided with financial and diplomatic support, as well as training to heighten their effectiveness.

● (1535)

Men must also be actively included in efforts to promote gender equality and encouraged and supported in their efforts to create safer and more equal societies. For example, studies show the critical importance of including men and boys within sensitization programs to reduce sexual violence.

Canada played an important role in the development and negotiation of the original Security Council resolution, and has yet another opportunity to exercise leadership, furthering our engagement in new and innovative ways. I have four overarching recommendations that would enable Canada to fulfill this role.

First is diplomatic leadership and expertise. Global Affairs Canada has recently faced significant criticism for the prioritization of process over substance in policy development and implementation. For the women, peace, and security agenda, the department cannot contract out policy development and thinking or outsource leadership to the United Nations or other multilateral actors. Expertise must come from within the department. Canadian diplomats abroad must show their commitment to the principles and priorities of the women, peace, and security agenda and officials at home must work to integrate these priorities into Canada's projects and programs in fragile states, yet many Canadian diplomats I've met, including women, are wary of discussing gender-based violence or advocating for the rights of women and girls in contexts such as Mozambique, as these subjects are culturally sensitive.

The women, peace, and security file is often sidelined in our stabilization and recovery programming and given to junior officials to oversee and implement. In the effort to protect women and girls in conflict, and the broader fight to build gender equality, every word and action counts. Canadian political leaders and diplomats who exercise leadership and condemn gender-based violence show that the lives of women and girls are valued equally and that the promotion of gender equality is not taboo. They should use every available opportunity to advocate for the protection and promotion of the rights of women and girls, condemn violations of those rights, discuss the value and benefits that a gender-equal society brings everyone, and highlight that the actions of those men and women are critical.

Second is the innovative use of social media and data-gathering. The power of technology to document violations of human rights, which empowers individuals and supports social change, is untapped and has not been sufficiently mobilized to support the women, peace, and security agenda. For example, in Egypt, a group of women created an online site called HarassMap, which documents sexual harassment in Cairo and provides women with tools to cope with such harassment. The possibilities are endless. Information technology can be used to share messages to encourage and support the rights of women and girls, such as crowdsourced information on human rights violations and cellphone gathering of data on sexual violence and other information critical to the implementation of the women, peace, and security agenda. Moreover, social media and information technology can offer important tools to share information about best practices and empower women and girls to protect themselves. Canada could spearhead efforts to utilize information technology in these innovative ways.

Third is the meaningful protection of women and girls and accountability for crimes. As previous witnesses have noted, there is little accountability for sexual violence and other human rights violations during war. Despite international law recognizing sexual violence as a war crime, only a small number of offences are documented, and even fewer prosecuted. Canada could support the efforts of the International Criminal Court to document, investigate, and prosecute these crimes. Canada could also work with relevant multilateral and non-governmental human rights organizations to provide meaningful protection and support for victims of sexual violence.

Fourth is dedicated funding for women, peace, and security activities. This past February the United Nations announced the global acceleration instrument for women, peace, and security and humanitarian action. The objective of this funding instrument is to support the promotion of gender equality within conflict-affected and fragile states, specifically supporting the activities of civil society organizations. Australia, Ireland, Spain, and the United Kingdom have pledged their financial support, and Canada should follow.

● (1540)

But Canada must also have its own flexible and rapid funding mechanism. The Canada fund for local initiatives at embassies and high commissions, once known as the Canada fund, provides small grants that are flexible and effective in supporting civil society organizations. Canada should first increase the allocation of money to this fund, and second, ensure that there is a dedicated funding envelope to support activities related to the women, peace, and security agenda, such as support to civil society research, advocacy, and training; data gathering; and human rights reporting.

In addition, Canada should create a mechanism to provide leadership for civil society members in fragile and conflict states that would include human rights training, sensitization on gender issues, as well as such practical skills as advocacy and negotiation.

In closing, I would like to reiterate that the evidence is clear. Promoting the rights of women and girls is an effective tool for peace building, and there are important opportunities for Canada to further the objectives of the women, peace, and security agenda in innovative and meaningful ways.

I would like to thank you for this opportunity. I look forward to any questions you might have.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Percival. That was very helpful.

I want to go now right to Yanar Mohammed of the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq for her presentation. Then we'll go to questions.

Yanar.

Ms. Yanar Mohammed (President, Baghdad Headquarters, Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq): Thank you.

I will address the issue of women's security in Iraq under the current conflict circumstances, which have divided the country into three zones based on religious and sectarian identity, in addition to a previously decided ethnic division. Violence against women in these zones differs in its source and intensity, but has persisted in taking place throughout the recent decade.

The first zone is the ISIS-controlled zone of Mosul, Tal Afar, Hawija, and many other cities, where the Islamic government imposes a situation close to the dark ages in which women are treated as demonized subhumans whose appearance is not desired in public and in which enslavement and sexual violence is a common and regulated practice against many groups: first, against more than 2,500 women of the Yazidi faith—I'm guessing that you have heard some of their testimonies lately—second, wives of men who serve in the Iraqi military, among whom the number who are being enslaved is growing into the thousands; and third, women with no males in the family.

The second zone is the transitional zone between ISIS-controlled zones and Iraqi government zones. The transitional zone includes the areas bordering ISIS zones, where different kinds of violence are imposed against women.

First, there are the crossover routes, such as the Hamrin mountain route, which women and their children cross on foot for the whole night in order to escape ISIS threats of enslavement, from Hawija city and surrounding villages. In this current week, according to our local activists, more than 60 families of mostly mothers and their children escaped on foot to the destination of Rubaidha village on the Iraqi side. ISIS snipers and fighters managed to kill and enslave 20 families, executing the men and some children while enslaving most of the women.

Another crossover route from the ISIS zone is the Bou Hamdan checkpoint through to Kirkuk, where Kurdish security does not allow the Arab women and children access to safety. Families are returned daily to face the same destiny of execution and sexual enslavement under ISIS and in what is called ISIS's “entertainment houses” in their controlled zone.

These routes have witnessed massacres of a fleeing population who are willing to risk their lives in order to escape ISIS oppression and sexual exploitation.

The cities and towns regained from ISIS—and this is also a transitional zone—such as Ramadi city and parts of Anbar have witnessed the enslavement and rape of hundreds of women, who are left pregnant or with a baby. When the tribes of the compromised women return to the city and after the Iraqi army regains the city, the immediate goal of the tribes is to cleanse their honour by killing the violated women. The honour killing practice is still a legal practice in Iraq in spite of 13 years of presumed liberation.

The Iraqi government celebrates the military victories of the army and the tribes, thus letting them have their way in executing their women, whom they fail to protect. Women in this transitional zone are subject to double-fold violence, first from ISIS and then from their own tribe, while the government does not intervene to protect them and to consider them victimized by the enemy.

The third zone is Iraq proper, which is the capital Baghdad, the cities of the south, and small parts of western Iraq, such as the city of Samarra. After the fall of most of the city to the hands of ISIS in June 2014, the Iraqi government mobilized and recruited more than 40 Shia Islamic militias, which are financially supported by public money, in order to overcome ISIS, with a popular front called al-Hashd al-Shaabi, but in reality they are extremist, religious sectarian armed groups.

In a highly militarized scene in which youth are fully armed and carry governmental IDs, Iraqi streets became dangerous places for women and for minorities. It is noteworthy to mention the following.

● (1545)

Honour killings continue to have the legal cover of laws and legal practices, and this is after 13 years of the so-called liberation of Iraq. Forensic institute storages continue to be filled with unclaimed women's bodies, and the legal committee in the Parliament does not address the issue.

Second, trafficking of women in broad daylight—and this is in Iraq proper, not under ISIS—is increasing every year due to extreme poverty, tribal cruelty, and a thriving trafficking network. An anti-trafficking law, number 28, was passed but is not enacted yet. To our knowledge, no traffickers have been detained to date.

The third issue is protection of women in shelters. It is a task of which the government does not approve. Although they have set up formal shelter buildings as a response to international community requests, there is not a single resident in these so-called shelters; moreover, officials from extremist and patriarchal parties threaten all endeavours to shelter women as a socially destructive practice that promotes “immorality”.

The last one is blocking women's rights to citizenship. The extremist government in Iraq refuses to provide females with their citizenship identification papers unless they are accompanied by a male relative. Although there is no legal article pertaining to this effect, it has become a common practice among all the relevant governmental establishments.

As well, there is censorship of feminist voices. When women raise their resisting voices over the radio stations, such as our initiative of Al-Mousawat radio, which means “equality”, the governmental establishment of the commission of media and communications or CMC issues an order for the closing of our radio under the pretext of registration requirements.

Over 13 years our Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq sheltered more than 450 women from honour killing, trafficking, and sexual enslavement. We currently have six locations for sheltering: three in Baghdad, one in Dohuk, one in Samarra, in addition to one for threatened LGBT individuals.

In September 2013 we launched a network for anti-trafficking of Iraqi women, which has attracted more than 40 organizations from the civil society, including women, youth, and human rights organizations.

We believe that it is possible to address our culture and society at large towards better treatment and respect for women; nevertheless, the current extremist Islamic government in Iraq is the main obstacle at this point. We therefore believe that our previous efforts on drafting and passing the Iraqi national action plan can be a potential way of addressing issues of women and security in the future, but not at this moment in history, when the government is not co-operating for the well-being of women.

We need the Canadian government to acknowledge the value of civil society and its potential role in advancing the striving of Iraqi women towards safety and equality.

We also need the meaningful support of the UN Security Council in addressing the Iraqi government on its duty in the following areas.

The first is for the ministry of labour and social affairs to issue a formal statement clarifying the shelter policy and to allow Iraqi NGOs to operate shelters for women and other vulnerable individuals fleeing violence.

The second is to increase support to Iraqi organizations meeting the immediate needs of women and other vulnerable individuals fleeing conflict-related violence, including safe shelter, psychosocial support, medical care, and vocational training.

The third is to ensure funding for and implementation of the Iraqi national action plan for the implementation of UN Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security and to establish and maintain a system for monitoring the implementation of the NAP or national action plan.

The fourth is to expand current documentation efforts on sexual slavery to include other crimes committed against women, including crimes against women as human rights defenders and based on gender.

The UN agencies in Iraq did not play an adequate role in addressing the issues of women; neither did the governmental facade “ministry of women”, whose role bordered on oppression of women's dress code and freedom of movement, which is understandable for a woman whose allegiance is to her extremist party.

It is time that civil society takes a bigger role and addresses the issues of women's security in a bottom-up direction.

● (1550)

We believe that the women of Iraq can play a better role in shaping the future with the support of the international community and particularly of the Canadian government.

We hope you will find these recommendations informative for your work. In bringing these concerns to your attention, we are lending our support to and pledging our future assistance with efforts that the international community may undertake to remedy the plight of women and girls affected by the conflict in Iraq. To this end, we respectfully request that you consider prioritizing these recommendations in your efforts.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Mohammed.

Colleagues, we'll go right to questions.

We'll start with Mr. Kent.

Hon. Peter Kent (Thornhill, CPC): Thank you, Chair. I'll be splitting my time with Mr. Clement.

Thank you, Madam Mohammed and Professor Percival, for your testimony, for your insight.

I would like to ask my question to Professor Percival to take advantage of the fact that she's on location in a country about which we receive very little continuing news, and given that Canada this week has just cut off government-to-government direct aid, which in recent years has been close to $100 million per year.

I'm wondering, as the Government of Mozambique seems to be slipping backwards—given the testimony of Canada, the IMF, and the other countries that have suspended aid, given their debt of well over one billion dollars in a relatively impoverished society—what you might advise, Professor Percival, in terms of avoiding entirely, in these sorts of governmental situations, government-to-government aid and directing it entirely to delivery through reliable NGOs.

Ms. Valerie Percival: Thank you very much.

It is a really timely moment to be in Mozambique. I've been here for two and a half years. When I arrived, Mozambique was seen as the development success story.

Hon. Peter Kent: Yes.

Ms. Valerie Percival: Now, I'm about to leave in a couple of months, and sadly, we have this more than two billion dollars in undisclosed debt. The whole donor community that provides direct budget support to the Mozambican government has just declared that they are suspending it, including Canada. The United States has also indicated that they're going to review their assistance.

What's really interesting about the United States' reviewing their assistance is that most of the individuals who are HIV-positive and who receive antiretroviral treatment do so because of PEPFAR, the President's emergency plan for AIDS relief. If the United States draws down some of those commitments.... The USAID does not provide direct support to the Mozambican government, but even drawing down some of the resources they provide to organizations that give HIV antiretroviral treatment is really worrisome.

In terms of Canada and our engagement in Mozambique, I think that in a way this can present an opportunity for us to engage in a more meaningful way with civil society organizations here. One of the pernicious consequences of direct budget support is that it's very time-consuming for development officials to implement. The Canadian development officials I know here in Mozambique really don't have the time to engage with civil society organizations in the manner that they would have 10 or 15 years ago when this kind of funding mechanism wasn't in place.

One suggestion I outlined concerning the Canada fund for local initiatives—which is operated out of this building, in fact—is that it could support women's organizations in a much more meaningful way.

One final point is that I also think that, with much of the money of Canada and other key donors going into direct budget support, civil society organizations have suffered here. There's a very strong organization called Women and Law in sub-Saharan Africa that has led advocacy on legislation on domestic violence, the penal code, etc. They're almost out of money. They're basically struggling to survive.

In every crisis there's an opportunity to re-shift and refocus and rethink how we engage. I think that in Mozambique this presents an interesting and important opportunity under difficult circumstances.

● (1555)

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you.

Tony.

Hon. Tony Clement (Parry Sound—Muskoka, CPC): Thank you for the opportunity.

I have one question for Professor Percival and then one question for Madam Mohammed.

Professor Percival, you mentioned the power of social media and how to use it as a greater methodology when protecting women in these situations. You mentioned specifically how Tahrir Square is a good example of the power of social media.

Of course, social media goes in both directions. I also worry about those who want to incite violence, using social media for that purpose to rally people. Whereas before, they would use shortwave radio to get the message out through code names and terms, social media is used for that purpose now, particularly by ISIS but also by other groups.

I wonder whether you want to comment on that double-edged sword aspect of social media.

Ms. Valerie Percival: Okay.

Definitely the examples of social media being used for bullying and exploitation and potential incitement of violence, particularly against women and girls, exists and is there, and it is a double-edged sword.

I'm not sure whether any members of the committee are familiar with the author Steven Johnson, who has written a book called *Where Good Ideas Come From* and one called *Future Perfect: The Case For Progress In A Networked Age* . He talks about social media and information technology and the double-edged sword aspect that you mentioned.

I guess what we have to do is be aware of the potential pernicious consequences of social media and work on safeguards, to the extent possible. It would be a shame if it we didn't use that tool for fear of negative consequences.

I don't really have a more specific answer than that. I can't think of any particular examples, but it's a very good question.

Hon. Tony Clement: It's a human invention, and therefore it has all the good things about it and all the bad things about it.

Do I have time for another question?

I'll get another chance.

The Chair: I'll go to Mr. Sidhu, please.

Mr. Jati Sidhu (Mission—Matsqui—Fraser Canyon, Lib.): Thank you, Professor, for your testimony today. There's a lot of light shed on different issues.

You touched on the leadership's needing to come from within the country and you touched on the Canada fund help and then the human rights issue.

What steps can be taken as part of development interventions in post-conflict settings to improve access to health services, including reproductive health care for women and girls? How can we intervene?

Ms. Valerie Percival: That's a very good question, and it's also a very big question.

In an immediate post-conflict setting, humanitarian organizations come in, they implement health services through direct delivery by non-governmental organizations, and then there's a transition period to national health services.

I think one thing we need to do better is in looking at that transition period. We need to build the capacity of national health workers in the immediate recovery phase and build an understanding of the gendered dimensions of health, the differential impacts of conflict on women and men, and ensure that we engage with the national health service to empower and train the national health service in ways that will ensure that health delivery is more gender equitable and sensitive to these needs.

I'm involved in a project with the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, and we're looking at that very topic. I'd be happy to provide the clerk of the committee with a link to resources, if you're interested in looking at them.

● (1600)

Mr. Jati Sidhu: I have just a quick follow-up. You said you were going to be done in a couple of months. Do you have a replacement after you're back here?

Ms. Valerie Percival: I'm not the ambassador, sadly. The current ambassador is also leaving, and I'm not sure who the replacement is. I'm going back to teach at Carleton University, so I'll be in the same city in a couple of months.

Mr. Raj Saini (Kitchener Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Mohammed for coming today, and Professor Percival.

Professor, I have a structural question for you. You have stated in the past that in certain areas of the world gender shapes males' and females' access to medical products and technologies. You have also stated that key decisions about how the health system is run tend to be taken chiefly by men.

I want to talk to you about something you mentioned in one of your writings, about how decentralization of health services at the local level is often part of health care reform.

Can you comment on this idea?

Ms. Valerie Percival: Yes. The idea of decentralization is that you want to ensure that communities are empowered to take decisions on health care and to direct health care resources towards the issues that are most important within their community. This is a really important principle, and it's one that has been implemented well in places such as Canada, Europe, and to a significant extent in the health reform process in central and eastern Europe.

In Mozambique, for example, there is a decentralization of resources and a deconcentration of authority, but what happens is that at the local level there isn't the capacity to really analyze health information, and there might be more intransigent norms regarding the rights of women and girls. It's like social media, in a sense; it's a double-edged sword.

The idea of decentralization and deconcentration of authority to the local level is a really important one, but it's a question of how it's implemented. Ensuring that women and girls and their access to health care services are protected during that process is really quite critical, as is ensuring that local authorities have the capacity to make decisions.

I'm just finishing a paper that includes Sierra Leone and the Ebola crisis as a case study. One of the interesting comments about Sierre Leone during the Ebola crisis is that there had been a decentralization undertaken in the health system. What happened was that local health authorities did not feel empowered to act quickly on information they were receiving at the local level about Ebola. They were waiting for the central ministry. It shows that it's a good idea in practice, but the implementation can be quite tricky.

Mr. Raj Saini: I have one follow-up question, since you're in Mozambique.

The question I have is about the political system in Mozambique, where 40% of the MPs are women. Because 40% of the MPs are women, it seems the power is still not shared equally in terms of income and employment, access to education, and access to health. We know from the situation that during the civil war the men and women fought equally.

What happened in the post-conflict period? What was the reason and how can we improve upon that situation?

● (1605)

Ms. Valerie Percival: That is a really good question, and it's something that shocked me when I came to Mozambique. If you look at some of the scores in the gender equality indexes, Mozambique ranks very well. As you mentioned, almost 40% of MPs are women, and you had a significant engagement of women in peace processes. There are very strong women advocates here, yet the health indicators are appalling.

In terms of what we did wrong or what the Mozambican government did wrong, it really comes down to the point of my presentation, that you can establish indicators for maternal mortality and access to education for girls, but unless you have a broad dialogue that promotes the value of women and girls in society, and unless you address head-on some of those social norms that undermine and exploit women and girls, then your indicators are just going to be surface. They're not going to contribute to meaningful change.

Mozambique is the place where I really started to think about our not doing gender equality in the right way and also about our needing to engage civil society members more readily.

One of the challenges of Mozambique is that, because there's so much development assistance flowing in, many high-capacity women are working for the Canadian High Commission, USAID, CDC, or DFID, or for the UN. Their voices are silenced, and they're not able to contribute as members of civil society. Also, civil society organizations that are there are underfunded.

It's a challenging, interesting, and sad place to examine gender issues.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Madame Laverdière.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you both for your presentations.

Ms. Mohammed, you have painted a rather sad picture of women's rights in Iraq at this time. I would like to ask a few questions. What level of participation do women have in the political process in general and in decision-making relating to security operations and so forth?

[*English*]

Ms. Yanar Mohammed: It's a well-known fact that the percentage of women in the Iraqi parliament came about as a result of a quota, which was the result of Iraqi women's organizations demanding it from the authorities at the time.

We do have 25% of the parliament as women, but you may also have noticed the term “meaningful representation of women” being repeated many times. Most of those parliamentarians belong to religious, patriarchal parties where their role has been drawn for them, and their loyalty is more to their political parties than to their gender. It is not meaningful participation in bettering the situation of women in Iraq.

In response to the question about the role of women in the reconciliation efforts in the country, women are not being included at all. Even civil society voices are being silenced.

I wrote in the speaking notes that one of the initiatives that was silenced was the radio for women, the only radio station for women, which we had started in Iraq. Because we had campaigned against a very misogynous law called the Jaafari law, the government gave us an order to close it under many pretexts.

The meaningful voices of women are being silenced. Their meaningful representation in the councils and committees is not desired by the government. The government itself is in a state of flux at this point, because the prime minister is in a difficult situation, although unfortunately it's not moving towards a change for the people or towards an egalitarian situation. It's just religious parties doing a reshuffle inside the government to give more seats to this group and not that group.

According to the way the government is run, the chances that are given to women do not look very good. Unless civil society is empowered and given a role with the encouragement of the international community, and with some support from the Canadian government, we will not see better times in Iraq.

Between ISIS-controlled zones and the Iraqi government, women are paying the price in all of that conflict. Although the men do get killed—and these are massacres being committed—women are enduring long-term sexual victimization that neither the government nor the international community is addressing in an adequate way.

The only response is to lend support for the military conquest in Iraq while nobody asks about the victims. We know that, because we have the only shelters in Iraq proper for women. We have opened some for Yazidi women, and some in the western part of Iraq, but the international community is more concerned about military support for the Iraqi government's army.

I come from civil society. I'm a Canadian Iraqi woman and that's why my vision might be a bit critical, but we believe that the change can come from there. It has to be a bottom-up change, because all the millions of dollars—and now the number is half a trillion—spent on the Iraqi government did not bring us anything.

● (1610)

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Thank you very much for your testimony.

Do I still have a bit of time?

The Chair: Yes, you do.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: What you said about participation in the reconciliation or peace negotiation and things like that was very telling. We also see it in Syria where women are not involved at all.

As a follow-up question, when you talk of the need for support for civil society, I presume you're thinking in terms of funding, and also the fact that women are not included in the reconciliation efforts there. Could Canada do something?

Ms. Yanar Mohammed: Definitely. Money is part of the story, but the bigger part is that after 13 years of—I don't want to call it a struggle, but that's how we talk in civil society—working to spread a culture of egalitarianism, we have reached a point where we can negotiate with the government on issues such as sheltering women and ending honour killings. Believe it or not, the laws have not changed. Neither Paul Bremer wanted to change them, nor consecutive governments wanted to lift the honour killing law or do anything against the trafficking of women.

The whole world is looking at the trafficking of Yazidi women under ISIS, but nobody knows that tens of thousands of Iraqi war orphans are being trafficked in broad daylight in Baghdad, in Basra, and Iraq proper. The government officials are not lifting a finger because some of them are beneficiaries of the fact that women are poorer and more vulnerable. We need logistical support in empowering our voices in negotiating with the government for a women's conference to be set up, for these issues to be put on the table, and for answers to be required from the Iraqi government. They are receiving all the income from oil revenue, and women are being impoverished and made more vulnerable in society.

As for inclusion on the reconciliation committees, that will definitely be one of the demands or requests on which we will need your support in the coming negotiations with the government.

● (1615)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Miller, please.

Mr. Marc Miller (Ville-Marie—Le Sud-Ouest—Île-des-Soeurs, Lib.): Welcome, Ms. Mohammed.

It's important to understand, when it comes to talking about reconstruction or aid, we're not starting from scratch when it comes to Iraq. If you examine the historical role of women in Iraqi society, relative to other similarly situated countries in the Middle East, Iraq started relatively higher with participation of women in civil society; they were active in the workforce and in political life.

Indeed, if you look at the provisional constitution of 1970, rights were guaranteed to women and the laws enacted thereunder gave rights to women or enshrined rights to women that were being exercised. Then in the 1990s it started spiralling under. Then, as you said in your testimony, the Security Council in 2003...and it's been even worse since then.

What are the elements in the current constitution that strip women further of their human rights guarantees and promote a more religious-based agenda? What do you think could bring us back, and then be better, to where Iraqi society left off before the various iterations of wars that have happened since the 1990s?

Ms. Yanar Mohammed: Thank you. That's a very good question.

In the constitution, article 41 is one that formally addresses freedoms. It says that all Iraqis are free to choose their matrimonial law, under which women are married or divorced, and under which all family issues are to be taken up. But it is a very tricky article, because it has allowed the Islamic court and Islamic judiciary to override our previous law, which was called the personal status law.

The current constitution is flawed in many ways, but in this article it has given the upper hand to the extremists to abort all our previous achievements in Iraq, which decades of struggle by Iraqi women had put on the table. Article 41 needs to be repealed. We have been demonstrating and speaking about it and writing petitions against it for 13 years.

Then again, the strongest idea of the Iraqi government is the religious extremist idea, at this point. If they repealed this article, it would be as if they were announcing the failure of their political message.

I would say this article is the most important one to address.

The other thing is that the constitution does not have an article that protects personal freedoms in Iraq. I don't know what to say, what we should repeal, because the personal freedoms have not been enshrined in our laws. The reason I'm addressing this is that almost 1,000 women are killed in honour killings, which continues to happen, and the Iraqi government does not want to address it.

Domestic violence, trafficking, and sectarian violence continue to be the rule, and there are no shelters for women to go to and to be protected in. Iraqi officials still continue to say that this is an issue that will destroy our traditional values and some officials say religious values. I don't know what values those are that allow violence against women, but we know for sure that we need legislation that allows the NGOs to function, to open the shelters at this point. We know that for the 30 to 40 women who are hiding in our shelters now, we need the legal cover to make the function acceptable in Iraq.

This is a piece of negotiation that can be done. Between the years 2016 and 2017, we have reached the point, in our work in Iraq, at which some logistical support from the Canadian government can get us to the table of negotiation. We have addressed it to the head of the women's committee in Parliament, and we also included in the project building shelters for women in the transitional zone between ISIS and Iraq, where women have been compromised between ISIS rapes and Iraqi tribes' honour killings.

We have our projects on the table. We need logistical support to be taken seriously by our government and for them to step into the 21st century. It's unbelievable that in the 21st century, almost—I will throw the number out because I'm an activist, and activists throw numbers out sometimes—5,000 are sexual slaves in western Iraq, more than 6,000 women are being trafficked in broad daylight in Iraq proper, and 1,000 women are being killed in honour killings every year, and the government does not think of it as an issue of priority. For them to believe that women are real citizens there needs to be some talk from the international community who have supported their efforts so far.

I am not really an expert on the national action plan of Canada and how it supported efforts in Iraq, but I would like to know more about it, if there is any information. I will be going back to Iraq next month, and my colleagues will be interested to know more about that.

● (1620)

The Chair: Thank you.

That's the end of the first round. Now we will go to Mr. Levitt.

Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.): Professor Percival, in October 2015 you wrote that Canada's current approach to maternal health may keep girls and women alive, but it does not promote a context that improves their life chances. The reality is that in many countries pervasive discrimination and exploitation of women and girls is the root cause of maternal mortality.

Within the women, peace, and security lens, how would you see this issue addressed in the region?

Ms. Valerie Percival: That's an interesting question.

The UN Security Council original resolution on women, peace, and security in 2000 didn't really talk about health services at all. It was only introduced I believe in 2009.

The women, peace, and security agenda has a focus on providing health services, but not using those health services to try to change the context in which women and girls live. I would say the same statement would apply to the approach in the women, peace, and security agenda. It does not go far enough in order to try to change the circumstances in which women and girls live, because it doesn't promote gender equality in an unequivocal way.

It tries to undertake gender equality by stealth, as I mentioned before.

They think If we have this antenatal care and we have these many attended births, then we'll have achieved gender equality. But in study after study there are many gender-based norms that impact on women's decisions to seek health care and on the quality of the health services that are provided when they're at that health institution. Without addressing those broader gender norms, you can't make meaningful progress on health indicators.

Mr. Michael Levitt: Thank you for that.

I have a slightly more general question, and I'll start with Ms. Mohammed.

What are the most effective means of supporting and protecting women human rights defenders and local women's organizations working in fragile and conflict-affected states? In particular, let's deal with Iraq as a starting point.

Ms. Yanar Mohammed: Women defenders do run into danger from the local militias and paramilitary forces in addition to sometimes being intimidated by officials.

I will speak from personal experience. In the year 2008, I was in danger, which made me lose my Canadian passport. When I addressed it to the Canadian embassy in the region, there was absolutely no co-operation. I was compromised. We were at the height of the sectarian war, and I was left without a home and on the streets, but the Canadian embassy did not think of it as an important issue.

What women's defenders need is access to safe places, just like the jeopardized woman under ISIS. Your work entails that you challenge the governmental provisions for women, and our governmental officials are not the nicest at some points when it comes to women's issues. You find yourself grabbing your bags and running for safety.

I've been speaking about this for a decade. Women's defenders need some sort of a diplomatic passport to be able to go to safety when needed. If Canada can create a precedent and provide access in an honorary way to women who have a reliable track record and who are defending women, that would be a great thing, but I may be speaking fiction.

I feel that some of us with dual citizenship are privileged. We can go back and forth. We have seen the world at its best, and we live in places where it's at its worst. We can do a lot to alleviate women's pains in both countries, but we need to be given more privileges and more ability to move.

I think this is about women's defenders, but I don't want to make it just about women's defenders at this point. Was the other part of your question about women in general?

● (1625)

Mr. Michael Levitt: Yes, about women's organizations, local women's organizations.

Ms. Yanar Mohammed: In our 13 years' experience in Iraq, we witnessed the funding going to women's organizations who were very close to the government and who did not work toward meaningful change. The women's organizations who were challenging, who were protecting and empowering all those pillars that are in resolution 1325, lost their funding. Some of them were dismantled and got boiled down to individuals.

I would say that funding is an immense tool for survival in addition to access to safety.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Clement.

Hon. Tony Clement: Thank you, Madam Mohammed. Thanks for being here.

Maybe I'll start with a general question. In terms of what is necessary to be done, obviously a lot of the context in Iraq is sectarian in nature. I'm wondering whether you have any thoughts on the role of women to bridge the sectarian divide, which creates a lot of the conflict. It's an open-ended question, but maybe you have some thoughts on it.

Ms. Yanar Mohammed: It's a main interest of women to stop violence against women in Iraq. From our experience with more than 40 organizations in the network for anti-trafficking of Iraqi women, we rarely ran into sectarian differences at meetings. The ones who brought up the sectarian differences were singled out and were told on the spot that this was not the future we were shaping for Iraq. Most women's organizations that we have run into and that we work with have a consensus on ending sectarian differences.

I would like to make the scope of the question larger. You would be surprised at how, in society, the sectarian differences and the conflict are usually politically driven. In 2003 we were told that we should represent ourselves according to our religious identifications. I remember, while in a meeting with a U.S. and a U.K. gender expert when I was speaking about women's issues, she told me to go to the mullah of my group, the cleric, the religious head of my group, and to talk to.... It was clear throughout the years that the religious political parties were the ones who were empowered and pushed toward the Parliament.

It was political planning for Iraq that imposed the sectarian differences. If the Parliament formula changes, and it becomes more open for groups from the grassroots to be candidates, without all the restrictions being put on the elections, you'll be surprised. Society doesn't want sectarianism, but the political parties, especially those who are supported by the Islamic Republic of Iran, are the bigger winners in this game. Those who have a sectarian agenda, who caused half of the country to split, also caused ISIS to have nice social support for them.

Women will definitely stand against the sectarian differences, and so will the civil society institutions. It's the political parties who are supported by the Islamic Republic of Iran or by Saudi Arabia who are to the detriment of the Iraqi people. They are the ones we are learning tactics to stand against. It's a tough fight in Iraq, especially when you want to see a secular, egalitarian future. You have to be very careful. You are walking over land mines. You have to be very nice and gentle to killers, to those who have perpetrated massacres, but we feel we stand a chance as civil society institutions.

● (1630)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Clement.

Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you to both of you for appearing today.

Professor Percival, among your areas of expertise is global health care. You've written about the connection between health care and gender equality. In your testimony you said that it's important to engage and include the health sector in post-conflict settings.

I think you've hinted at this answer with respect to the comments on decentralization, but could you look at that? Could you offer advice to the international community, to Canada, on ways to include the health sector in post-conflict settings? I think of states that are emerging from conflict and finding ways to rebuild society. The economy is focused on, as is rebuilding or transitioning to democracy and the political makeup of the country. That's always given attention, but could you speak specifically about the health care sector?

Ms. Valerie Percival: In terms of the health care sector, there's a lot of financial information and resources that are provided to the health sector in particular areas—and they reflect the millennium development goals—maternal health, HIV, tuberculosis, malaria, etc.

What tends to happen is that donor engagement focusing on those particular areas results in fragmented health care delivery. You have NGOs coming in and providing some services, and you have the government providing other services. It's not a comprehensive integrated health care system.

That's why continuing to support the government through sector budget support, such as with Mozambique, is important. You need to build the capacity of the health system in order to provide those services, and the provision of health services is an important component of the social contract between the government and its citizens.

That's a reflection on how important the health system is in post-conflict settings. If the government can show it can provide good-quality health care services free for the most essential needs, and at low cost for other needs, that can increase the population's confidence in the government and engagement in society.

In terms of gender, the health sector has been underutilized and under-examined in the effort to promote gender equality in post-conflict settings. It's ironic that the institution individuals interface with most throughout their lifespan, which is the health sector, was completely ignored in the women, peace, and security agenda.

The women, peace, and security agenda said we need to encourage women to be integrated into the armed forces and into the police. We need to encourage participation of women in peace processes, and also encourage in places like Iraq, using a quota system, 30% women parliamentarians. The organization individuals have the most contact with was left out of this effort to promote gender equality.

One of the things the research I'm doing with the University of Liverpool recommends is to look at human resource strategies in the health system. You think about how to promote women as leaders within health institutions, and also to use the health system as a way to promote changing gender norms and social norms in society so that women and girls are better valued.

It's an interesting question. It's a very underutilized institution in post-conflict settings as a way to build the capacity of the state, to build the public's confidence in the state and their participation in civic life, and also to promote gender equality.

● (1635)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much for that.

In your testimony you made a comment about men and boys being included in, I think you said, sensitization programs. Can you point to specific examples of success stories where you've seen that, or relative success stories, if I can put it that way? Or is it a comment in the abstract?

Ms. Valerie Percival: There has been small-scale research that has looked at including men and boys in efforts to reduce the incidence and prevalence of gender-based violence. It was research that was undertaken in Côte d'Ivoire. It was spearheaded by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

I don't know the precise details off the top of my head, but it was successful. It was a successful strategy. I think there are efforts to study this in other settings.

I know the provision of antiretroviral drugs to women in Africa.... As you know, more women than men are HIV-positive. One of the challenges is that women will stay on antiretrovirals.... They're often discovered to be HIV-positive when they're pregnant. They stay on antiretrovirals throughout the pregnancy. After they give birth, they no longer go to the health clinic to access the antiretrovirals. There are a variety of reasons for this, but one is that often they're prevented from doing so by male members of their family and their community.

In Malawi, there's a project that looks at community engagement as a way to break down those beliefs about women, and promote their need and their right to access health care, and it has been found to be successful. There are efforts to learn lessons from that and replicate it in places like Mozambique. I have a friend who works for the CBC here. They're exploring if and how they can implement a similar program here.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much. Throughout this study, we have clearly examined women, peace, and security in a very broad way—and in a very specific way, looking at post-conflict settings, but in broad terms. If we are going to speak about that subject and deal with it, I don't think we can ignore the need for including men. The sensitization programs you mentioned are very interesting. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much to all the committee members.

I want to take this time to thank both our witnesses, and of course, Ms. Percival has been up all night waiting for us patiently—a big thank you to you.

Ms. Mohammed, I was very interested in the conversation you were having with the committee members about how to protect women's groups on the ground. That is a very important discussion that we have just started, and we have had other presenters talk about that. As you know, we are trying to put a report together that will deal with some issues on the ground like that because, if it is true that organizations, and the women on the ground trying to work with women who are in crisis, are running in fear for their lives, it would be to our benefit to find a way to deal with that particular dilemma. I very much appreciate your sharing this with us. You have given the committee something to think about, for sure.

Last, you asked about countries of focus. As you know, Mozambique is a country of focus. We are going to be starting the discussion about countries of focus and giving the government some advice about not only countries of focus but the partnership countries, and whether that should be expanded or, as has been discussed here, whether we should expand some of the areas, such as health and the like.

I want to take this opportunity to thank you both on behalf of the committee and I look forward to further discussion. Feel free to give us information—or if there are any other papers you think we should have a look at, we would appreciate that. Again, on behalf of the committee, thank you very much.

Now, colleagues, we are going to take a five-minute break. Then, we are going to go in camera and start dealing with drafting instructions for this particular study.

I will take this opportunity to take a short break. Those who shouldn't be here should leave; those who have to be here, please come back in five minutes. The meeting will be suspended for five minutes.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]