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Chair

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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● (1300)

[*English*]

The Chair (Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.)): Welcome back, everybody, from the holiday break.

It's good to see we have Mr. Hehr here as a substitute today.

Seeing that we have quorum, we'll get started.

Today is going to be the first day of our study on women human rights defenders. We're very pleased today to have with us two people who have been working in this field for a very long time.

We have Rachel Vincent, the director of advocacy and media for the Nobel Women's Initiative, which was created in 2006 by six female winners of the Nobel Peace Prize to support women's groups around the world on justice, peace and equality.

We also have with us Beth Woroniuk, the policy lead for MATCH International Women's Fund, an NGO that funds women's rights movements and grassroots organizations around the world, especially in the global south.

We're very pleased to have the two witnesses today for this first meeting of the study on women human rights defenders that our committee will be undertaking in the coming weeks.

We'll start with Ms. Vincent. If you would like to start, you have 10 minutes for your opening remarks.

Ms. Rachel Vincent (Director, Advocacy and Media, Nobel Women's Initiative): Madam Chair and subcommittee members, thank you very much for the opportunity and invitation to appear before you today. I congratulate all of you for taking on this important study of women human rights defenders.

In the more than a decade that I have worked at Nobel Women's Initiative, I have met and had the honour to work directly with hundreds of women human rights defenders, primarily from conflict countries. I have learned from these women not only about the risks and threats they face but also about the remarkable levels of courage they possess. I wish I could say I would exhibit the same level of courage when faced with similar circumstances; however, I'm not sure I would. These are individuals who, despite even direct threats to their safety, will boldly face off against injustice and defend the rights of their communities. While we might not all have the right stuff to do what they do, it is our responsibility to support and protect those who take these risks.

A study on women human rights defenders is topical and urgently important for a number of reasons—many of which you are very familiar with. With a global resurgence in civil strife and conflict in recent years, in countries as diverse as Syria, Yemen, Burundi, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nicaragua and Venezuela, to name just a few, women human rights defenders face unique challenges.

We know from the research—some of you have heard me say this before—that women defenders are pivotal in promoting sustainable peace, and they play key roles in negotiating local ceasefires and acting as first responders in crises. Yet, as you know, they are largely excluded from peace processes and politics, are often criminalized for their work and face gender-based violence.

Second, we also know that, with the rise in authoritarianism, populism and the many different forms of fundamentalism in many parts of the world, freedom of expression and other fundamental freedoms are under attack. Space for civil society and women's organizations is closing. While globally there has been much progress on women's rights—and we need to celebrate that—the truth is that the pendulum has also swung the other way and we have to be vigilant. This trend widens the inequality gap and threatens security for all women, indeed all of us, particularly those women and women's movements on the front lines of trying to prevent the backlash.

Third and perhaps most important, the oppression of girls and women because they are girls and women is still far too common. Those who break gender and social norms and speak out against injustice face a wide range of violence, including intimidation, harassment, rape, sexual torture and of course even murder.

In this global context, I don't have to tell you that it is critically important that countries who care about human rights and obviously about their commitments and principles, which they claim to be committed to, ensure that they have a comprehensive and robust strategy for protecting women and LGBTIQ+ human rights defenders—both domestically and globally.

We are here today because we believe now is the time for Canada to take such leadership. Such leadership will be key to enabling defenders, particularly women, to carry out their legitimate and important work.

In 2013, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution on women human rights defenders. This resolution urges states to put in place specific gender laws and policies for the protection of women defenders and their families. It urges that defenders themselves be involved in the design and implementation of these measures.

Canada, indeed, is making some advances—for example, the development of guidelines on human rights defenders, which most of you are familiar with, called “Voices at risk”. It is now being revised by Global Affairs Canada to address, among other things, the unique situation of women. Frankly, if Canada is serious about human rights and women human rights defenders, we need much more than a set of guidelines.

My colleague Beth, in a few minutes, will review with you some areas we hope that your study will touch upon. We will provide you with names of individuals and organizations that we think will help shape your thinking and help build a complete story.

First, we thought it would be helpful to focus on who is a woman human rights defender and why she requires special consideration, support and protection.

● (1305)

Here I'll start with the official definition from the UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, which is that women human rights defenders are those “who engage in promotion and protection of women’s rights and gender equality”, as well as, frankly, anything to do with human rights.

In concrete and human terms, based on my decade of documenting women human rights defenders, I think what's probably an easier way to remember it is that defenders are really hard to describe and come from all walks of life. They come from a range of backgrounds. They include activists, journalists, lawyers, health professionals, doctors, farmers, politicians and leaders of social movements. Many, like Yazidi activist Nadia Murad, who of course won the Nobel Peace Prize last year, become human rights defenders because of lived experience and an overwhelming sense that somebody has to take up this work. Because they understand what's at stake, they need to be the ones to take up that work, and they want to prevent future human rights abuses from happening to others.

For this work, of course, they face huge risks. In 2017, front-line defenders recorded the killings of 44 women human rights defenders, which was an increase from the previous two years. However, we know that this statistic is only the tip of the iceberg and that a lot of abuse is not documented. Attacks against women who stand up to demand their human rights are widespread, and often designed to put women in their place. Not surprisingly, as in the case of Nadia Murad, who experienced sexual slavery and rape, sexual violence is often the weapon of choice. Sexual violence is used by states, and this includes military as well as police, but also by a wide range of other actors, including armies, militias, paramilitary, those working in the drug trade and private security firms working for resource companies. It is used as a way to silence women human rights defenders.

Attacks against women are often distinguished from those against men because they are more personal in nature. I'm sure as politicians, some of you in the room can attest to this. For example, women often experience threats from family members and communities, in addition to threats from state security forces and non-state actors. Family members sometimes disapprove of the defender's speaking out and violating social expectations, and react with threats and even violence. Imagine honour killings, for example. Religious extremists also attack women defenders as being sluts and as threats to the society's moral code. As well, and this is a growing area of concern, digital and online harassment often takes different forms for women defenders, with much more explicit attacks on a woman's sexuality, her alleged failure as a mother, a wife, a daughter; and her credibility and legitimacy is frequently attacked. Women human rights defenders are increasingly reporting hypersexualized smear campaigns and defamation that aim to limit their activism and erode their support.

Who among women human rights defenders are most at risk? Well, the research shows that marginalized women defenders are among those most at risk. I'll go quickly through who those women are. They include the women working on sexual and reproductive rights; younger activists, who are often more attacked; poor women; indigenous women; those women working in rural and remote locations with fewer connections to the women's movement; and, of course, those working on land grabs and resource exploitation, as Global Witness has documented,. Displaced defenders, including those women who end up in neighbouring countries or internally displaced, are also at great risk and struggle to maintain their work while also meeting the very basic needs of their families.

I'll end by saying that last November, just two months ago, I spent a week in Istanbul with a group of Yemeni women activists, many of whom were young journalists. Most of them were under the age of 30, and most of them had directly experienced the war, having brothers or sons who had been recruited as child soldiers or teen soldiers by the Houthis primarily. These were women were traumatized and had high levels of PTSD—and none of them, by the way, are paid activists. They spent a week with me learning how they could better advocate for themselves with the global community to bring attention to the women who are seeking peace and to bolster the analysis and response of women on the ground. They are the first responders, but we need to bolster the funding and resources going to these women so they can do the work they need to do.

● (1310)

I hope that through these comments I've built a picture of how they are a variety and these Yemeni women are typical of what it takes to take on a war but are chronically under-supported and underfunded.

Thank you, again, for taking on this study.

I'll hand off to my colleague Beth.

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

Now we will hear from Beth Woroniuk.

Ms. Beth Woroniuk (Policy Lead, MATCH International Women's Fund): Madam Chair and subcommittee members, thank you for the invitation to appear before you today.

I join with my fellow witness and with other Canadian organizations in congratulating you on taking on this important study on women human rights defenders. We also hope that you will include attention to LGBTIQ defenders in your deliberations.

My colleague Rachel, from the Nobel Women's Initiative, has presented an excellent introduction outlining the specific challenges faced by women human rights defenders. This gives a context for the study and reinforces why it is important to hear from and understand the specific challenges these women human rights defenders face.

The MATCH International Women's Fund works with women human rights defenders and LGBTIQ defenders in a number of countries, providing core support to their organizations and accompanying them in their brave work.

In my time, I'd like to scope out briefly three key areas that we hope you will explore in your study. First is global good practice so that Canada can learn from what other governments are doing and build on these successes. Second are the good practices and gaps in Canada's current approach to women human rights defenders, and third are the concrete steps Canada can take to better support women human rights defenders.

Let me look at each of these in turn. First, we suggest you investigate cutting-edge practices by other governments that Canada can learn from. If we are to be a leader in this field, then we must not only know what others are doing but also go beyond and do better. One practice that merits greater understanding is swift assistance to support emergency visas and temporary shelter for human rights defenders. This is an element in the European Union's guidelines on human rights defenders at risk. For example, the Netherlands action plan for human rights defenders commits to facilitating the temporary relocation of defenders at risk. In addition, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs has established a network of shelter cities where human rights defenders can stay for three months.

Second, we urge you to investigate what Canada is currently doing well and where there are gaps. For example, what can we learn from the support given to the Canadian organization Rainbow Railroad, which helped gay and bisexual men and women leave Chechnya in mid-2017? Awareness is growing on the specific needs and situations of women human rights defenders, but clearly, much more needs to be done to make our diplomats and policy-makers aware of the wide range of issues Rachel has outlined. As Rachel mentioned, Global Affairs Canada is currently updating its guidelines for human rights defenders, entitled “Voices at risk”. We're told that the new guidelines will be released this spring. During this revision process, Canadian civil society organizations have urged that greater and more specific attention be paid to women human rights defenders as well as LGBTIQ defenders. We have urged Global Affairs Canada to hear directly from front-line defenders.

Once the new guidelines are released, the subcommittee could hear from witnesses on how the updated guidelines will be rolled out and how they will be supported by training and funding. It would also be interesting to ask how women human rights defenders will be made aware of these guidelines so they know what support they can ask for and expect from Canada. We also hope the subcommittee will hear from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada to better understand how emergency visas can be issued to women human rights defenders at risk and can include their families.

The third area we hope the subcommittee will look at is to investigate concrete recommendations on how Canada can better respond to the situation and needs of women human rights defenders and LGBTIQ defenders. We have a number of issues that we suggest you look at.

First is raising awareness of the specific challenges faced by women human rights defenders. We congratulate the committee on its intention to listen directly to women human rights defenders and LGBTIQ defenders as it will be clear that they face particular challenges that deserve more attention. It is crucial that Canadian diplomats and policy-makers become more familiar with the diverse situations of different groups of human rights defenders. General policies, initiatives and guidelines that do not highlight the specific situations of women human rights defenders will actually fail these defenders. In order for Canada to support women human rights defenders, their work and their challenges must be visible and understood.

● (1315)

A second set of recommendations could look at the whole-of-government approach. Strategies to support women human rights defenders go beyond Global Affairs Canada. In particular, we urge the subcommittee to look at how Canada can develop temporary and permanent relocation mechanisms for women human rights defenders at risk and their families.

The first choice of many defenders is not to leave their country and their home. However, there are times when it is just too dangerous to stay. This is where Canada could play a role with a rapid process to get women human rights defenders out of their countries and into Canada for either a respite stay or permanent relocation.

The third area for recommendations is funding for women's rights organizations and feminist movements. We have heard over and over again from front-line defenders that their best protection is a strong movement behind them. Long-term predictable core funding for women rights organizations and feminist movements is key. When they are part of strong organizations, women human rights defenders have support, they can develop and implement self-care strategies, they can incubate leaders, they develop effective strategies and they work with others to hold governments accountable.

Women human rights defenders around the world have developed integrated feminist protection strategies. These strategies highlight the importance of organizational resilience, collective models of self-care and integrated approaches to security. Key to this model is funding and support for their organizations, yet the data shows that very little of Canada's international assistance finds its way to the brave organizations working on the ground on issues related to the human rights of women and girls. The latest figure we have is that in 2013-14 only 0.3% of Canada's gender-focused aid going to civil society—not of our total aid budget, but just of this one subset—ended up in the hands of women rights organizations. We know this percentage will increase once two new funding initiatives get on track: the women's voice and leadership initiative and the gender equality partnership. However, still more can be done to fund these organizations.

In addition, it is important to develop mechanisms to support displaced defenders. Many women human rights defenders have fled their homes and countries. It is important that we find ways to support them as well, even though they are no longer eligible for funding via traditional development channels.

The fourth area for recommendations is policy consistency and coherence. In order to be effective, specific approaches to women human rights defenders will work best when these are part of a broad overall strategy to make it safer for women activists to organize and speak out.

It is important to ensure that all lines of Canadian policy and all international actions create and expand the space for civil society activists to operate. This includes building attention to human rights, including women's rights, into our trade deals. It includes speaking out for civil society spaces, including urging governments to lift restrictions on funding, respect political and civil rights and promote gender equality. It involves ensuring Canadian businesses respect human rights and environmental standards.

Last September, I had the honour to meet Anielle Franco, from Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. Anielle's sister, Marielle Franco, was an outspoken advocate for young people, poor black communities and LGBTIQ people. She also spoke out against police violence. She was murdered last year, yet Anielle continues to speak out for the same causes as her sister and push for justice. When I listen to brave women like Anielle, I know that Canada can and should do more.

We thank the subcommittee for taking up this theme and for inviting us here today. There is a community of Canadian organizations eager to see Canada take a more effective and determined stand to support women human rights defenders and LGBTIQ defenders. In a world of increasing uncertainty and danger for women and sexual minorities who speak out, Canada's leadership is needed now more than ever.

We welcome the questions from the subcommittee members and remain willing to support this critical study and positive steps to support women human rights defenders in any way possible.

Thank you.

● (1320)

The Chair: Thank you very much for those very informative presentations.

We will start our questions with Mr. Anderson.

You have seven minutes.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for being with us here today.

I was just looking through some of the briefing material we got. Ms. Woroniuk, it talks about MATCH being Canada's only global fund for women, girls and transgendered individuals.

What is your budget from the Canadian government?

Ms. Beth Woroniuk: Currently it's zero.

We were awarded a project in the fall, but we have not yet signed an agreement. To date, since 2012, we have received no money from the Canadian government.

Mr. David Anderson: So this is not accurate. It's anticipatory, I guess.

Ms. Beth Woroniuk: Yes.

Mr. David Anderson: What do both of you see as the core units of social stability as you're moving ahead with your work? As you are working on this, what provides stability? What do you see the role of government or activist communities or families to be in achieving the goals you're working towards. What would you identify?

Things change, but on what are you hanging your notion of stability and achieving rights?

Ms. Beth Woroniuk: That's an interesting question.

We know that the rule of law and that space for civil society organizations to speak out freely without intimidation are very important. We know that strong and diverse social movements are important, to hold governments accountable for their policies and action.

I haven't thought about it in that way, but maybe you have other things to add, Rachel.

Ms. Rachel Vincent: I think those are excellent starting points. From a women human rights defender perspective, it's a complicated question, but the rule of law and justice come up time and time again. For example, Canada's support for the CICIG, an anti-corruption, anti-impunity body in Guatemala, is seen by many women human rights defenders and organizations as an important way for a donor country to support ongoing justice efforts in a situation where there is a failed state and failure to respond to the very real justice needs of local communities.

That's just one example of providing stability for women human rights defenders, long-term core funding and stability for women's movements, which are often the backbone and are responding when individual defenders are at risk. The trend now is toward regional networks, which provide safety and relocation for individual women defenders when they are at risk. Say somebody is at risk in Nicaragua. They might be relocated to Mexico for relief to get out of immediate danger and are provided some support and then brought back to the country when necessary.

For other defenders, for example in conflict countries—as you know, the average conflict is now seven to 15 years long—temporary relocation is no longer an option. Permanent relocation is much more necessary. Obviously, donor countries and countries like Canada can be helpful in looking at women human rights defenders as a category of refugees. The issue is, how are we providing and supporting defenders who essentially need permanent relocation?

● (1325)

Mr. David Anderson: So you need those stable places where they can go.

Okay.

Ms. Rachel Vincent: Yes, and networks that support them.

Mr. David Anderson: I'd like you to talk a little more about impunity. I know it's a big subject. We tend to narrow it down to individual examples. You mentioned it in your presentation.

Ms. Rachel Vincent: I've worked particularly on sexual violence for a number of years. There's about a 98% impunity rate for sexual violence in many conflict countries like the DRC. Imagine: 98%. It means that almost no cases move forward. Almost no survivors of sexual violence get their day in court. When they do, rarely do they see true justice as a result of that judicial process.

There are high levels of impunity in general for those attacking women across the board who are working as human rights defenders. For intersectional reasons, to use some of the parlance, many of them are poor and indigenous, and have limited access to their own judicial systems, and so the rates of impunity for attacks against them are very high.

Mr. David Anderson: This turns into something we've talked quite a bit about, ISIS and the Nineveh Plains and the Yazidi and Christian communities who were decimated by that conflict.

How do we re-establish some sort of system so that people can get justice? I'm interested in your perspectives. Do you think those systems typically need to be established from outside, or can they come from inside? We've had that discussion here numerous times.

I'm interested in your perspective on how we bring about justice for people who have found themselves in those situations. Can it be done from inside, or does it have to come from outside?

Ms. Rachel Vincent: I think I understand now where your question is coming from, and thank you for that clarification. Beth will, no doubt, will have some follow-up to this.

Justice has to be built, in my view, from within countries. One of the best ways to build strong systems is to support civil society and, within that, women's movements and social movements, because as it happens here in Canada so it happens everywhere that really you need civil society pushing governments for, among other things, strong and functioning judicial systems.

I think that the international community has a strong role to play, but I think that—again from our perspective, and you heard Beth talk about funding—women's organizations and civil society in general can do a lot of the pushing of their own national governments and advocating with the international community. The solutions have to be based on the ground where the problems are happening and where the violence and human rights abuses are occurring.

The Chair: That's the end of our time for that question.

We will turn to Ms. Khalid for seven minutes.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for your wonderful testimony today and for your hard work on this very important issue.

We had the opportunity to go to New York and meet with some United Nations officials and heads of agencies there. One thing that was brought up—in terms of providing training for mediators in conflict areas between state and non-state actors—was that they're providing training for mediators on how sexual violence is used as a tool and how to include that consideration in parts of the negotiations for peace between and within regions.

It really got me to thinking. When we talk about human rights defenders and about how women are treated, especially in conflict areas, and about peace and security, in our opinion, in a larger systemic way, what kinds of training can people on the ground be provided when it comes to providing support for women human rights defenders, as well as including them in the conversation of any peace negotiations?

● (1330)

Ms. Beth Woroniuk: I think that's a very, very important issue and I believe that training is possible on a number of different levels. First is just the issue of awareness and alerting people to the issues, because even though we've had, as your chair knows, the Security Council resolution on women, peace and security, which will turn 20 years old next year, we still have a long way to go just to put issues on the table in terms of how conflict affects women and men, boys and girls differently and why this is important, and also to work through the different taboos that exist around addressing sexual violence. This includes sexual violence against men, which is also a generalized part of conflict but not talked about to the extent it should be. So there are capacity needs around that.

Then there are other kinds of capacity. How do you put forth a survivor-centred approach to sexual violence so that the survivor is in charge of or leading the process around what happens, rather than things happening to her and retraumatizing her. There's training that's developed for health care providers and judicial support workers for trying to provide integrated support on that.

Then there's also training in terms of legal redress. As Rachel was saying, impunity for sexual violence is so high. How do we improve the legal/judicial ways we operate on that? How do we help to make different people working in different fields aware of the issues and the responsibilities they have to deal with this?

Then, in terms of people understanding the role that the security of women plays in building peace, we often see this as a sideline, yet the research that's coming out is really clear that state security is tied to women's security. This is not an issue where we first find peace and then deal with these women afterwards. This is something that has to be integrated into our approaches to conflict prevention and conflict rebuilding, or else we won't actually have sustainable peace going forward.

There's lots more, but those are just a few ideas in response to your question.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: I have two more questions. One, more generally, deals with a problem that I feel we face a lot as human rights defenders across the world. We had a number of international women human rights defenders from KAIROS come before us to share their experiences. They are doing phenomenal work, and I think the government just recently announced funding for them as well. That said, how do we build male allies in providing that support for women human rights defenders on the ground?

Second, we obviously have experience in the past of UN peacekeepers and their tendency towards sexual violence in conflict areas. As well, there's Canada's new initiative with respect to having more women peacekeepers.

How would those two basically impact women human rights defenders?

Ms. Rachel Vincent: On male allies, I think the conversation that we're having here is part of it.

I was at the human rights defenders world summit in Paris in the fall. Even in those spaces, which are really focused on human rights defenders—that's the name of the summit—you really have to advocate and work within those spaces to raise the particular issues of women and LGBTQ defenders. It's an awareness and an education process.

Luckily, there is a growing body of research and growing awareness of the particular and unique needs of people with disabilities and people, women and others, who are all in that basket of human rights defenders. Building male allies is part of that ongoing education process, because while they face sexual violence, they certainly don't face the same levels of sexual violence, and so on.

I think that public awareness, education, and governments taking up this study and really focusing on women is a key part of that kind of public education, but it is also sending a strong message that there's a recognition of the legitimacy and credibility of women defenders and a need to focus on them, in particular, for protection and support.

● (1335)

Ms. Beth Woroniuk: On peacekeepers, yes, the move to get more women deployed as UN peacekeepers is very important. Canada has an initiative called the Elsie initiative seeking to support other countries to do that.

Also, there are targets within DND on deploying more women. However, one of the keys to this is that the onus to deal with sexual violence should not just be on the women deployed, but on all peacekeepers to have the skills to do this.

The Chair: We will now move to Ms. Hardcastle for seven minutes.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

In the interest of time, instead of eloquently leading into this, I'm just going to be blunt, and hopefully it will be a shortcut for you to understand my point.

We were talking earlier about fostering the idea of gender equality within a male-dominated society as we move forward. We have men in a lot of decision-making positions right now. In order to get women into these decision-making positions, we still have to have these men enlightened.

You were talking about training and how important that is. I think, just as an example, there were gender equity awards, or something like that, awarded by the United Arab Emirates, all of which went to men. Some people are rolling their eyes, but you can see a situation where this is so male dominated. At what point do we say that's our priority, to train men as well, and not just women?

Yes, you're nodding your head, so you get what I mean.

Ms. Beth Woroniuk: I think that's a really good point, and thank you for the question.

The thing we've learned is that working towards gender equality is not just about fixing women. It is important that women have more skills, more education, and more access to credit to build their own businesses, but we know that we have to look at that relationship between women and men. That's where these discussions are so important.

I think we've learned that change happens over generations. Some of the most interesting discussions I've had on gender roles and inequalities have been with my two sons. I think this is the kind of discussion that happens inside families, inside different organizations, inside religious organizations. It's the changing of these social norms that happens over time.

That's why it's often the women's organizations that are the key players doing this. They know their local situation best. They know what kinds of arguments work in their communities. They can approach this issue in a very concrete and specific way and share strategies internally about what works. One of the best levers to move on changing social norms and social attitudes is a stronger support for women's rights organizations working at grassroots levels.

Ms. Rachel Vincent: I was just going to add that one of the global challenges is fundamentalisms, and I say it with an “s” because there are multiple forms of fundamentalism.

When I was working and researching a book a couple of years ago that included and documented stories of women human rights defenders, one of the stories was about a woman defender of Moroccan origin living in France, who was trying to tackle an issue or trend that we're seeing globally of young men being more reactionary on women's rights than some of the older men. She had lost a son who had been recruited as a terrorist and she was going to schools in France and speaking to young people not only about her loss, but also about the role of young men and what masculinity should be. She was very powerful because she was speaking from a place of loss, from having lost her son and using that personal experience to reach out to others. Again, it's because she understands the context and the vulnerability, the poverty, that they come from, the vulnerability that these young men experience. She is from those communities where young men are being targeted for such activity.

Again, to reinforce Beth's point with that example, just today I read that two-thirds of Afghan men oppose women's rights, but if you look at the trend, it's the older men who are more flexible on that point and more willing to consider women's rights to be something of value, as opposed to the younger men in Afghanistan.

Again, I think those are the kinds of things that women's rights organizations on the ground would know better than we would of where the pressure points are to address those issues.

● (1340)

The Chair: You have two more minutes.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Canada is funding a couple of initiatives right now and targeting training for human rights defenders. Should we be finessing this? Should this be finessed more towards the local level, or do you think what we're doing right now is the right approach and that it just needs to build momentum?

Ms. Beth Woroniuk: I think one of the key elements to this is that there's not one right training approach. Local organizations of defenders usually know what they need, the skills they're lacking and where to get them, and are often best placed to design their own training. Supporting these organizations is the best way to go, rather than our designing a made-in-Canada training program that we think people should take.

You can sense a theme here, that we really think local women's organizations are best placed and suited to this and know the solutions, but what they often lack is the resources to put their plans into action.

Ms. Rachel Vincent: Perhaps I could add another example. At the end of my presentation, I was stumbling in trying to talk to you about these Yemeni women. I was invited to provide some media training to them because, obviously, they want to access more western media to explain their analysis of how to end the war in Yemen.

What they asked for as a follow-up—meaning that I'll probably be going back to them—is training on UN Security Council Resolution 1325 as a framework, because they're trying to.... Going back to your point about mediators, they're interested in that. Indeed, one of the things we hear over and over again at the UN is that there aren't enough qualified women to sit around the peace table. Well, there are, and these women are very aware of this critique about there not being enough women and have been training themselves to be mediators, to actually know the 1325 framework and how to do peace negotiations. That's the kind of training they're asking from us. Again, it's coming from them; we are not telling them.

The Chair: Thank you.

I will ask members to keep this round to four minutes so we don't run out of time.

We'll start with Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you for being here today. I've had the pleasure of hearing both of you testify in other committee settings.

On the topic of UN resolution 1325, I think it's apropos that it has come up here today. It sounds that having women human rights defenders defending their interests is a moral good in and of itself, but beyond that, we also know if we're trying to champion the idea of peace in our foreign policy and in our international development policy, there is very good empirical evidence that when women are involved in negotiating peace after conflict those societies remain much more stable. When women human rights defenders are involved in a peace process, it sounds as if they might be your best bet because they have so much experience and understanding of the politics and political situation in their society, understanding what is necessary for restoring that society, its legal system, its political system, its socioeconomic situation.

Would that be a good guess?

● (1345)

Ms. Beth Woroniuk: Thank you for that observation. That point is right on target.

One of the elements of the research that people sometimes overlook is that it's not just a matter of involving women, any women, in peace processes. It's when women have support behind them from civil society connections and have a meaningful space to operate in those peace negotiations. That's exactly the role that women human rights defenders can play, because they have those connections and that experience. They often come out of a particular area where they have knowledge of judicial issues or how things operate in a particular geographic context, or they may have strong relationships with community and religious leaders. That then helps them knit communities together and build peace.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I think it's quite important. As you say, it's not just about adding women to the peace process and then, as a result, having a much more promising opening towards a peaceful path. It's about recognizing that particular lived experiences stand out, and when we're talking about women human rights defenders, they have a unique experience that ought to be recognized. So when Canada and other democracies wish to advocate for peace, we ought to be championing the cause of women human rights defenders if we're interested in finding a sustainable path towards peace in various conflicts.

I very much support everything you're doing, but I worry sometimes when politicians in western countries say that they ought to get behind cause X, Y, or Z in a particular country, because that can then be spun by opponents of peace defenders in the target country by saying that these women human rights defenders, for example, are backed by the Canadians and Americans and Europeans and are advocating for outside interests. It can make their situation on the ground even worse because they're then seen as not being of the society, if you know where I'm going with this.

I think there are ways around this. What would you counsel in this situation?

The Chair: Unfortunately, we don't have time for the answer, but you may be able to refer back to it in one of the future questions.

We will go to Mr. Sweet for four minutes.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Really, from the bottom of my heart, I just want to say thank you for your great work, your courage, and for being available to women who are in desperate situations, such as women from Yemen or the Yazidi women who have been mentioned. I want to thank you very much for the good work you do.

You mentioned, and I agree with you totally, that one of the most important work is to support and fund local women's organizations, to make sure they're building bench strength—to use a sports metaphor—in the local area, to have change happen.

You know, the worldwide web is a great tool for good and a great tool for evil, and there are all kinds of demeaning material on the web. I don't need to go through the litany of it, but I find that some of the disturbing discussions I have with young men result from material they've seen on the web from which they come up with presuppositions about how women should be treated.

Whether in your group or others, is there a strategy to address this? Of course, for anything criminal, obviously, it's a matter of raising awareness of that with law enforcement, but is there a strategy to monitor it, name and shame, or re-educate, so that these things don't have the power that the worldwide web can give them?

● (1350)

Ms. Beth Woroniuk: I think there are numerous strategies and organizations working to try to address this issue. We do hear from women human rights defenders that digital security is of prime importance.

As Rachel said, a lot of young women get targeted. We know a lot about trolls, but they are often very hard to counteract. Some groups do security training. Some of it even revolves around how to keep your phone safe. There's digital security in another area as well, in terms of what you have on your phone if you're an activist, and how that could work.

I think it's not an easy issue to address, but if digital security is something the committee would like to take up, we'd be happy to recommend groups working in that area to come before you to explore that issue more.

Ms. Rachel Vincent: I would say that one of the young women we brought to Canada for six weeks a few years ago is an expert on digital security. She works in Guatemala with community organizations on training in digital security. She's a young indigenous activist and is fabulous. It would be great to hear from people on the ground about how they're dealing with this.

Women's organizations are highly creative in dealing with digital threats, from Iran to Guatemala and everywhere in-between. One of the things I have learned from them is that they have a lot to teach us.

Mr. David Sweet: There are both aspects. I understand the need for individual digital security, but there's also the broader false education trying to posit women in a very terrible light so that mistreatment is perpetuated.

Ms. Rachel Vincent: It's a problem globally for all of us.

Mr. David Sweet: Yes, it sure is.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: I wish we had more time because I think there's a lot of information here.

We will go to Mr. Hehr for four minutes.

Hon. Kent Hehr (Calgary Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much for your very enlightening presentation. I note that you indicated earlier that one of the things you're most concerned about for women human rights defenders and human rights defenders in general is that safe passage to other jurisdictions in times of conflict, in times of strife, with climate change and conflict around.

Would you comment on whether or not being involved in things like the global compact for migration and other things like that are important for the Government of Canada, and whether these types of institutions through the United Nations help women defenders of human rights?

Ms. Rachel Vincent: I can speak for myself. I'm not an expert on migration per se, and I think that's an important element to address in your study. That's why one of our recommendations focuses on both the permanent and the temporary relocation needs of women human rights defenders, and the need to be speaking to IRCC as well as to human rights defenders and others on the list that we submitted.

Global migration is at an all-time high, and defenders are among those who need relocation, so it is increasingly a reality that we are all living. Canada, as a country that has brought in Syrians, for example, is one that human rights defenders look to, so I think that's a role that we need to look at and take seriously. That's why we hope that you'll cover it in your study.

Ms. Beth Woroniuk: Of course, with Canada's being part of the United Nations systems, we do rely heavily on UN institutions. IRCC relies heavily on UNHCR, the refugee organization, for the identification of women at risk and other refugees. Certainly it's part of the global system that we operate in, and a strong multilateral system can serve Canada well.

Hon. Kent Hehr: I think this will probably be the last question.

Give a best practices that you think we need to take note of at this time and that you would ask us to follow up on or hear about. Are there any best practices out there in the field that were not touched on here at this time?

● (1355)

Ms. Beth Woroniuk: I mentioned some, including for example how different European countries offer respite and quick visas to get defenders out of emergency situations. That's something that Canada could take another look at. It would be interesting. The Government of Sweden has piloted an emergency bracelet program, Project Natalia, where defenders have a bracelet they can activate if they are picked up by authorities. That might be something to look at. Certainly the way different governments fund organizations through their aid programs, or other ways, that support defenders would be something that would be really important to look at as well. Given the importance that these networks of women human rights defenders and LGBTIQ defenders, how we can best support those movements is really important as well.

Ms. Rachel Vincent: I just want to respond to your last question. Very quickly, I think that countries like Canada have a huge role to play within the UN system in advocating for women's inclusion in peace processes. The UN can be a hostile environment for women human rights defenders and Canada has played a good behind-the-scenes role in the past. That's just a short answer.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will go to our last question.

Ms. Hardcastle, for four minutes.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Thank you, Ms. Vincent, for that last comment. I think it's important that Canada understands its role and purpose above and beyond the UN as well.

We discussed earlier some of the training that Canada is putting funding into right now. Do you see some synergies that we should be leveraging right now not just for the human rights defenders, but also, as you mentioned, for the challenges of LGBTQ2 community members, and possibly even men who are in vulnerable populations? What are some of the synergies in training, or the low-hanging fruit, if you will?

Ms. Beth Woroniuk: If I can answer that, in terms of not just training but overall support, it is one of the items in our current international assistance policy to funnel money to and support local women's rights organizations as drivers of change. We think this is a very positive and admirable goal. One of the challenges is that there are still many bureaucratic obstacles standing in the way of reaching those organizations with our development assistance funding. That would be important to look at. How can we ensure that the groups on the ground are actually getting some of the support they need? That's one really crucial part, that we make sure that our practice matches our policy and our rhetoric on these issues.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: That's good.

The Chair: Then in that case, I want to thank our witnesses for a very good first meeting on this topic to introduce us to the topic, and to thank the members.

With that we are adjourned.