



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES  
CANADA

# **THE RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS OF WOMEN AND GIRLS GLOBALLY, AND IN AFGHANISTAN, IRAN, AND SAUDI ARABIA**

**Report of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs  
and International Development**

**Ali Ehsassi, Chair**

**Subcommittee on International Human Rights**

**Fayçal El-Khoury, Chair**

**DECEMBER 2023  
44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION**

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## **NOTICE TO READER**

### **Reports from committees presented to the House of Commons**

Presenting a report to the House is the way a committee makes public its findings and recommendations on a particular topic. Substantive reports on a subject-matter study usually contain a synopsis of the testimony heard, the recommendations made by the committee, as well as the reasons for those recommendations.

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# **THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

has the honour to present its

## **TWENTY-SECOND REPORT**

Pursuant to the motion adopted by the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade on Monday, December 13, 2021, and the motion adopted by the Subcommittee on International Human Rights on Friday, September 23, 2022, the committee has studied the rights and freedoms of women globally and of women in Afghanistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia, and has agreed to report the following:



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## SUMMARY

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Global destabilizing factors like the COVID-19 pandemic, the outbreak of war in Europe and the increasing regularity of climate change-fuelled natural disasters, combined with a collective turn towards authoritarianism by many governments have made the situation of human rights around the world more precarious. When human rights are threatened, the impacts are more pronounced for more vulnerable populations, including women. Witness testimony from Afghanistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia is illustrative of this.

To protect those who are most marginalized, Canada and the international community must acknowledge and address these rights infringements that women in many countries are experiencing with increasing regularity and severity. With this aim, over the course of three meetings, the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development heard from human rights experts, human rights defenders, civil society leaders and government officials. Their testimony has proven invaluable in exposing some of the risks that women today are facing simply on account of their gender.

Though often addressing vastly different regions of the world, witnesses shared a common view that the recognition and protection of women's rights are declining, and, in the case of Afghanistan in particular, are dramatically plummeting. To help to address this situation, this report makes nine recommendations. Two provide the Government of Canada with strategies to help mitigate the effects of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan's restrictions on education for women and girls by supporting both alternative education in Afghanistan and pathways for studying in Canada. Another three recommendations take up the challenges faced by women human rights defenders who face urgent and unpredictable threats to their lives and livelihoods on account of their work. They focus on providing more of these individuals with protection, making that protection better suited to their need for temporary, emergency shelter in Canada and creating ways for them to be supported while they are here so that their essential work can continue. Following witness testimony regarding the situation in Iran, one recommendation responds to the specific role that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps have had in violating women's rights by designating it as a terrorist organization. The next underscores the important role that international fora have as venues for calling out human rights violating states and strengthening partnerships with like-minded countries. The next recommendation seeks to increase the level of humanitarian aid that Canada spends in an effort to support women's rights organizations globally.

The final recommendation urges the government to align its international development goals and other foreign policy goals.

Conditions for women around the world are deteriorating and this phenomenon is occurring in some places more rapidly than others. A lack of support for women's rights will only allow these trends to continue their downward spiral, threatening the overall strength of civil society. Witnesses called on Canada to be an agent for change to these women. By emphasizing the rights of women in policy and diplomacy, Canada can take the lead in improving global respect for human rights.

# LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

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*As a result of their deliberations committees may make recommendations which they include in their reports for the consideration of the House of Commons or the Government. Recommendations related to this study are listed below.*

## **Recommendation 1**

**That the Government of Canada cooperate with international organizations to end sexual violence that women and girls are subject to in conflict and in other situations..... 9**

## **Recommendation 2**

**That the Government of Canada undertake the following measures to support the education of Afghan women and girls: fund the expansion of alternative, independent education systems delivered in Afghanistan by non-governmental organizations, and fund and resource efforts to enhance the quality of these education alternatives so that they can be internationally recognized. .... 13**

## **Recommendation 3**

**That the Government of Canada fund university scholarships for female Afghan transfer students to study at Canadian post-secondary institutions either virtually or in-person and with the aid of scholarships, and expedite study permits for eligible Afghan women and girls to study in Canada..... 14**

## **Recommendation 4**

**That Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada create a new temporary resident stream that enables women human rights defenders to seek immediate and non-permanent safe haven in Canada. .... 21**

## **Recommendation 5**

**That Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada increase the number of places in the current global human rights defenders stream of its government-assisted refugees program to accommodate an increased number of applicants and their families. .... 21**

**Recommendation 6**

**That the Government of Canada fund a program to support activists arriving as part of the human rights defender refugee stream and other relevant streams. Such a program could provide fellowships, training, networking opportunities and other resources that will allow and encourage their valuable human rights advocacy work to continue from within Canada. .... 22**

**Recommendation 7**

**That the Government of Canada list the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist entity as per section 83.01 of the *Criminal Code*, ensuring that provisions are made for eliminating any unintended harm for those with involuntary links to the group, such as conscripts. .... 23**

**Recommendation 8**

**That the Government of Canada leverage its position in international fora to build alliances with like-minded partners and call out and condemn countries, regimes and individuals responsible for human rights abuses. .... 24**

**Recommendation 9**

**That the Government of Canada increase its level of humanitarian aid and ensure that this funding remains stable and is invested in long-term projects that align with its feminist international assistance policy. .... 25**

**Recommendation 10**

**That Global Affairs Canada align its international development goals and other foreign policy goals. .... 27**



# THE RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS OF WOMEN AND GIRLS GLOBALLY, AND IN AFGHANISTAN, IRAN AND SAUDI ARABIA

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## INTRODUCTION

Global destabilizing factors like the COVID-19 pandemic, the outbreak of war in Europe, the rising frequency of climate change-fuelled natural disasters, combined with a collective turn towards authoritarianism by many governments, have made the situation of human rights around the world increasingly precarious. In 2022, just over 3% of the world's population was living in a country in which civic space was rated as being "open."<sup>1</sup> As human rights around the world are threatened, the impacts are more pronounced for more vulnerable populations, including women and girls. Moreover, defenders of women's and 2SLGBTQI+ rights are experiencing rising levels of "criminalization, attacks, harassment, cyber-bullying, imprisonment and violence."<sup>2</sup>

It is in this context that the House of Commons Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development (the Subcommittee) agreed to undertake a comprehensive study of the rapidly diminishing rights and freedoms of women and girls globally, particularly in Afghanistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia.<sup>3</sup> It held three meetings on the topic and heard from 15 witnesses who included human rights experts, human rights defenders, civil society leaders and government officials.

The report begins with a brief discussion of women's rights globally, highlighting various factors that are contributing to a decline of women's rights, followed by a section detailing the effects of those factors globally, with a focus on Afghanistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia. The first section concludes with a discussion of the important role that women human rights defenders play in promoting and protecting human rights. The second part of the report focuses on international responses to violations of women's rights, including the use of sanctions, international fora and policy measures. This report

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1 House of Commons Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs (SDIR), *Evidence*, 25 November 2022 (Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, International Civil Society Action Network). Cited from: Civicus, *2021/22 Annual Report*, p. 13.

2 SDIR, *Evidence*, 10 March 2023 (Beatriz Gonzalez Manchon, Co-Vice President, Global Programs, Equality Fund).

3 SDIR, *Minutes*, 23 September 2022.



summarizes the Subcommittee’s findings and provides nine recommendations that call on the Government of Canada to address violations of women’s rights and to better hold those who violate women’s rights to account.

## THE GLOBAL SITUATION OF WOMEN’S RIGHTS

### Factors Leading to a Decline in Women’s Rights

Women’s rights around the globe are being adversely affected by multiple and compounding economic, political and social factors. Lauren Ravon, the Executive Director of Oxfam Canada, summed up some of these factors, telling the Subcommittee that:

Extreme inequality, climate change, unprecedented food and energy price inflation, that have all been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, are creating this perfect storm for the most vulnerable people around the world, the majority of whom are women and girls.<sup>4</sup>

These different factors are destabilizing political, economic and social systems, with consequences that include increasing disparity and poverty, displacement, resource shortages and supply chain disruptions, and disruptions to work and education. These impacts are more severe for vulnerable and marginalized populations, including women.

Scholars are increasingly examining the growth of transnational networks that spread anti-feminist narratives, primarily in Europe but also in North America and other countries.<sup>5</sup> Ketty Nivyabandi, Secretary-General of Amnesty International Canada, outlined their approach: these networks leverage digital platforms and social media to bolster anti-gender, anti-feminist, and anti-rights movements, through “denial of the human rights framework” and “emphasis on individual rights.”<sup>6</sup>

Jacqueline O’Neill, Canada’s Ambassador for Women, Peace and Security, emphasized to the Subcommittee how authoritarian governments also work together to undermine the human rights of their citizens and affirm similar actions taken by like-minded regimes. She stated that these attacks on women’s rights can occur at institutional levels, such as at the United Nations, the Organization of Security and Co-operation in Europe and the African Union, where countries such as Russia and the People’s Republic of China collude

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4 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Lauren Ravon, Executive Director, Oxfam Canada).

5 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Ketty Nivyabandi, Secretary-General, Amnesty International Canada).

6 Ibid.

to “deliberately and often subtly try to roll back gains ... achieved” for women’s rights.<sup>7</sup> Ketty Nivyabandi also emphasized how online platforms play a role in fostering these networks, telling the Subcommittee that “[o]nline violence and the spread of transnational anti-feminist and anti-gender narratives are at an alarming high, with devastating impacts on women.”<sup>8</sup>

Lauren Ravon argued that the rise in various anti-rights movements around the world—“anti-women, anti-trans, anti-abortion, anti-feminists, anti-democratic, anti-free press” movements that are “intended to silence women and gender-diverse people and keep them from holding positions of power”—not only threaten women’s rights but also democracy itself.<sup>9</sup> These transnational networks seek to undermine democracy as a whole and to reinforce authoritarianism by reducing accountability. For example, Jacqueline O’Neill told the Subcommittee that “[a]uthoritarian leaders often perceive women who defend human rights and peace as a direct threat to their power,” while Meghan Doherty, the Director of Global Policy and Advocacy at Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights, similarly stated that advocacy for reproductive rights and gender equality is seen as “a direct challenge to autocrats and populist movements that have identified and targeted these rights as threats to their purpose.”<sup>10</sup>

## Impacts on Women’s Rights

### Global Impacts: Gender-based Violence and Reproductive Rights

The effects of phenomena such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and strengthened anti-feminist transnational networks on the rights of women globally have been profoundly negative. Witnesses highlighted that gender-based violence is on the rise globally, and that access to women’s health services is declining. Meghan Doherty reported that the pandemic caused “sharply rising rates of femicide and gender-based violence.”<sup>11</sup> Julia Tétrault-Provencher, a legal advisor with Lawyers Without Borders, reinforced this perspective. She told the Subcommittee that her organization, which advocates for those who have experienced violence as extreme as “forced sterilization, obstetric violence and forced marriage,” has seen a rise in femicide since the start of the

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7 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Jacqueline O’Neill, Ambassador for Women, Peace and Security).

8 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Nivyabandi).

9 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Ravon).

10 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Meghan Doherty, Director of Global Policy and Advocacy, Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights).

11 Ibid.



pandemic.<sup>12</sup> Jacqueline O’Neill indicated that Indigenous women who have spoken up publicly to protect the environment have been murdered for participating in the fight against climate change.<sup>13</sup>

Women are experiencing increasing violence online. Jacqueline O’Neill emphasized that “threats made against women online are more likely than threats against men to translate into physical violence.”<sup>14</sup> She also testified that five women journalists in Moldova received death threats and were victims of identity theft through digital piracy after exposing corruption within their national government.<sup>15</sup> Intersecting vulnerabilities also make some groups more susceptible to violence and rights violations than others, such as “women and girls who are vulnerable or marginalized, including those with a disability, living in rural areas or in poverty, those from a sexual or gender diverse community, as well as women from a minority group.”<sup>16</sup>

The escalation of armed conflicts in recent years has further accentuated the impacts of gender-based violence on women globally. According to Jacqueline O’Neill, acts of gender-based violence have been observed in “Ethiopia and Haiti, as well as in the context of Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine.”<sup>17</sup> Women who experience such violence are often stigmatized both socially and institutionally, and struggle to obtain effective reparation for the harms they have experienced.<sup>18</sup> Julia Tétrault-Provencher pointed to the example of women in the Democratic Republic of Congo, who cannot obtain adequate access to justice for the sexual violence committed against them, and whose court-ordered reparations remain unfulfilled.<sup>19</sup>

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12 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Julia Tétrault-Provencher, Legal Advisor, Lawyers Without Borders Canada).

13 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (O’Neill); see Global Witness, [Decade of defiance: Ten years of reporting land and environmental activism worldwide](#), September 2022.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Tétrault-Provencher).

17 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (O’Neill).

18 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Tétrault-Provencher).

19 Ibid.

As such, the Subcommittee recommends:

### **Recommendation 1**

**That the Government of Canada cooperate with international organizations to end sexual violence that women and girls are subject to in conflict and in other situations.**

The Subcommittee also heard that women in many countries around the world are facing growing restrictions on their access to sexual and reproductive health care. Such restrictions can have serious implications. Megan Doherty told the Subcommittee that limited global access to maternal health care means that “the rates of maternal mortality around the world are ... very high,” with approximately 300,000 women a year dying from complications related to pregnancy and childbirth, and that “the numbers are potentially increasing because of the pandemic.”<sup>20</sup> Julia Tétrault-Provencher expressed concern over the rising number of countries limiting legal access to abortion. She stated that this trend reflects a diminishing respect for the sexual and reproductive autonomy of women and girls and that governments aiming to criminalize abortion under all conditions are in “violation of international standards on the issue.”<sup>21</sup> Megan Doherty emphasized that restrictions on legal abortion services lead women to pursue illegal and unsafe alternatives, thereby risking severe health consequences and long-term disability.<sup>22</sup>

Megan Doherty emphasized that “anti-rights movements” are strategically targeting gender and sexuality for political gain.<sup>23</sup> She added that those who defend sexual and reproductive rights from a feminist perspective often endure significant personal risks to their well-being and the safety of their families. Furthermore, she reminded the Subcommittee that history has consistently shown women’s political participation to be a cornerstone of genuine democratic and egalitarian progress. Consequently, any erosion of women’s rights should be considered a potential threat to democracy itself.<sup>24</sup>

According to Megan Doherty, recent United States Supreme Court decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*,<sup>25</sup> which “reverted almost 40 years of federal abortion rights protection,” is

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20 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Doherty).

21 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Tétrault-Provencher).

22 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Doherty).

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 United States, Supreme Court of the United States, [19-1392 Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization](#), 24 June 2022.



demonstrative that “no country or region is immune” from the escalating repression of women’s rights.<sup>26</sup> She explained that “anti-rights movements” are taking aim at gender and sexuality for political gain.<sup>27</sup> Feminist sexual and reproductive rights defenders are on the front lines of attacks against human rights and democracy and face enormous risks to their lives, livelihoods and the safety of their families. She reminded the Subcommittee that, if history demonstrates that “women’s political participation is a precondition for genuine democratic and egalitarian progress,” the decline of women’s rights signifies that “democracy is under threat.”<sup>28</sup> Julia Tétrault-Provencher noted that the “backlash in the United States” against access to abortion was also being observed globally, and that reproductive rights were under threat in countries such as Honduras and El Salvador.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, Julia Tétrault-Provencher noted the importance of recognizing certain actions, like the alleged sterilization of Uyghur women in Xinjiang, PRC, as possible precursors to genocide as defined in international law.<sup>30</sup>

## Women’s Rights in Afghanistan

The Subcommittee heard that women in Afghanistan in particular are experiencing increasing violations to their rights, largely as a result of the return to power of the Taliban in August 2021. The restrictions placed by the Taliban on women’s lives in Afghanistan, especially women without male guardianship, are so severe that several witnesses referred to Afghan women as living under “gender apartheid.”<sup>31</sup> This crisis has been exacerbated by the country’s crumbling humanitarian situation; according to Laila Gashem Rashid, the Board Chair of Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan, “a staggering 95% of households [are] not getting enough to eat.”<sup>32</sup>

In this regard, several witnesses have raised the need to amend the *Criminal Code* to allow humanitarian organizations to provide aid to the Afghan population.

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26 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Doherty).

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Tétrault-Provencher).

30 Ibid.

31 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (O’Neill); SDIR, [Evidence](#), 3 February 2023 (Laila Gashem Rashid, Chair, Board of Directors, Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan); SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Homa Hoodfar, Women Living Under Muslim Laws).

32 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 3 February 2023 (Gashem Rashid).

Marie Malavoy, a member of the Cercle des ex-parlementaires de l'Assemblée nationale du Québec, stated that :

We acknowledge that Canada has committed to taking in 40,000 refugees and has admitted about 20,000 to date, but we are particularly concerned about the desperate situation of women and we believe that action must be taken on a range of fronts.

First, the Criminal Code provisions relating to financing of terrorist activities must be urgently amended, as discussed in the "Calls to Action" that came out of the symposium organized by Afghan/Canadian Women and held in September 2022. This barrier must be taken down.<sup>33</sup>

Witnesses reported to the Subcommittee that new legislation introduced under the Taliban's rule discriminates in numerous ways against women, establishing restrictions on their activities in public, including the way they dress, their work, and their freedom of movement. Farida Deif, Canada Director at Human Rights Watch, referred to "[a] May [2022] order [that] requires women to cover their faces whenever they're in public,"<sup>34</sup> while Ketty Nivyabandi told the Subcommittee that "[i]n December of [2022] alone, women were banned from attending university and from employment by local and foreign NGOs [non-governmental organizations]. These rules followed a ban on women entering parks and gyms, attending secondary schools, and participating in sports."<sup>35</sup>

Laila Gashem Rashid described how the effects of the ban on women working in NGOs has affected women's ability to earn during Afghanistan's economic crisis and the ability of NGOs to provide aid to Afghan women in need.<sup>36</sup> Women's health care, in many cases provided by NGOs, has been especially affected by the ban, as health services for women are most often provided by international organizations.<sup>37</sup> Horia Mosadiq, the Director of the Safety and Risk Mitigation Organization, noted that not only have women been restricted from working for NGOs, but also that "hundreds of thousands of women civil servants... lost their jobs" as a result of Taliban-imposed policies.<sup>38</sup>

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33 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 3 February 2023, Marie Malavoy (Former Member, Comité des femmes ex-parlementaires, Cercle des ex-parlementaires de l'Assemblée nationale du Québec).

34 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Farida Deif, Canada Director, Human Rights Watch). More information on this legislation can be found in Patrick Jackson, "[Taliban to force Afghan women to wear face veil](#)," *BBC News*, 7 May 2022.

35 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Nivyabandi).

36 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 3 February 2023 (Gashem Rashid).

37 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Deif).

38 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 3 February 2022 (Horia Mosadiq, Director, Safety and Risk Mitigation Organization).



Gender-based violence was common prior to the Taliban’s return, but it has risen as a result of the regime having “dismantled the system to respond to gender-based violence” and the violently abusive ways in which the Taliban enforce legislation and policies.<sup>39</sup> Ketty Nivyabandi described to the Subcommittee how the existing system of protection and support for those fleeing domestic violence has been decimated under the Taliban, at the same time that the authorities are targeting women and girls and detaining them on minor charges.<sup>40</sup>

In all of these examples, witnesses noted that the impacts were worst for minority women, particularly Hazaras. The Taliban has used violence to repress ethnic minorities, such as summary executions and forced evictions and displacements.<sup>41</sup> Homa Hoodfar said that Hazara women in Afghanistan “live in a gender apartheid society but they are also especially prosecuted for being Hazaras and being a Shia minority.”<sup>42</sup> Other extremist groups, like Islamic State, are also active in Afghanistan, and target the Hazara minority with attacks. They are suspected of carrying out a March 2022 suicide attack in Kabul that killed 53 female Hazara students who were sitting a university examination.<sup>43</sup>

## Education

One of the most significant effects on women’s rights in Afghanistan has been the erosion of access to education for women and girls. Girls have been restricted from attending school beyond grade six, with the Taliban having “imposed a de facto ban on girls’ secondary education.”<sup>44</sup> Homa Hoodfar reported that this has left an estimated three million girls out of school, a number that is likely an underestimate, as it does not include female university students affected by a more recent ban.<sup>45</sup>

Witnesses also underscored the fact that the quality of education being offered in Afghanistan has declined, leaving even those girls (and boys) who are able to attend school worse off. Homa Hoodfar told the Subcommittee that “the Taliban are increasingly using the schools and educational system as a platform to spread their

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39 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Deif).

40 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Nivyabandi).

41 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 3 February 2022 (Mosadiq).

42 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Hoodfar).

43 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Deif).

44 Ibid.

45 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Hoodfar).

extreme ideology.”<sup>46</sup> Laila Gashem Rashid shared details of these changes to the curriculum, telling the Subcommittee that:

Entire subjects are being removed. Textbooks will be stripped of all images of living things, girls doing sports, mention of democracy or human rights, or non-Islamic beliefs as they call them, like love for all humanity or any sort of encouragement of peace or women’s rights or education. The UN is referred to as an evil organization. There’s no mention of music or television or parties or birthdays. The radio is referred to as a colonial media. There’s no mention of elections, as I said, and a lot of stripping of Afghan traditions as well and historical and literary figures.

...they [the Taliban] recommend that the curriculum be used to ‘spread the seeds of hatred against Western countries’, and this ‘should be planted in students’ minds’... They even suggest prioritizing and propagating jihad [articulating] justifications for the use of violence to advance the Taliban’s goals, the rules of killing in war and justification for killing other Muslims, even.<sup>47</sup>

She emphasized that although these changes will have an immediate effect on boys, they could eventually affect girls if the Taliban complies with international demands that girls’ schools be reopened.<sup>48</sup> Both witnesses advocated for the provision of an alternative education system by internationally based NGOs to counter Taliban extremist ideology in the school curriculum.

As such, the Subcommittee recommends:

## **Recommendation 2**

**That the Government of Canada undertake the following measures to support the education of Afghan women and girls: fund the expansion of alternative, independent education systems delivered in Afghanistan by non-governmental organizations, and fund and resource efforts to enhance the quality of these education alternatives so that they can be internationally recognized.**

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46 Ibid.

47 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 3 February 2023 (Gashem Rashid).

48 Ibid.



### Recommendation 3

**That the Government of Canada fund university scholarships for female Afghan transfer students to study at Canadian post-secondary institutions either virtually or in-person and with the aid of scholarships, and expedite study permits for eligible Afghan women and girls to study in Canada.**

### Women’s Rights in Iran

Women’s rights in Iran have been endangered for decades, dating back to the military coup in 1979 that instated a theocratic regime. Kaveh Shahrooz, a Senior Fellow at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, told the Subcommittee that “among the first actions of the Islamic Republic were to remove women from many professions, segregate many parts of public life along gender lines and impose the hijab on women—often at gunpoint or by throwing acid in the faces of women who did not comply.”<sup>49</sup> This targeting of women’s rights has continued and intensified with time.

Government restrictions on the way that women dress, in the form of strict hijab laws, are one of the most visible infringements of women’s rights in Iran. Ketty Nivyabandi told the Subcommittee that these restrictions deny women access to public services such as hospitals, schools, government offices and airports if they have their hair uncovered.<sup>50</sup> Farida Deif told the Subcommittee that as recently as August 2022, “a new presidential decree sanctioned women for showing their hair on social media, with female government employees facing dismissal from their jobs if they have profile pictures without their hijabs.”<sup>51</sup> Both witnesses emphasized that the government was using invasive surveillance methods to enforce these laws.<sup>52</sup>

However, witnesses were also clear that many violations of women’s rights stem from restrictions that are less visible than the mandatory hijab laws. Ketty Nivyabandi drew the Subcommittee’s attention to discriminatory legislation that allows women to be detained, arrested and prosecuted for the broad charge of committing acts deemed offensive to public decency.<sup>53</sup> Kaveh Shahrooz listed a host of other ways in which the Iranian regime violates women’s rights, saying:

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49 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Kaveh Shahrooz, Senior Fellow, Macdonald-Laurier Institute).

50 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Nivyabandi).

51 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Deif).

52 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Deif); SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Nivyabandi).

53 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Nivyabandi).

An Iranian woman is not permitted to travel without permission from her father or husband. In Iran, polygamy for men is permitted, as is the marriage of very young girls. According to IranWire—which is an investigative news site—Iran’s National Organization for Civil Registration’s 2021 annual report showed that in the previous eight years, over 13,000 marriages of girls under the age of 13 had been registered.

In Iran, a woman is not permitted to sing a solo or ride a bike in public. Women cannot enter stadiums to watch the national soccer team play. A daughter’s share of inheritance is half that of her brother’s. A woman’s testimony in court is worth half that of a man’s. When it comes to restitution for murder, a woman’s life is literally valued at half that of a man in Iran’s criminal code.<sup>54</sup>

The resulting situation for women in Iran led some witnesses to also refer to Iranian women, like Afghan women, as living under “gender apartheid.”<sup>55</sup>

In September 2022, countrywide protests and civil unrest broke out across Iran in response to the death in police custody of Mahsa “Jina” Amini, a young Kurdish woman who had been detained for incorrectly wearing her hijab.<sup>56</sup> Though these are far from the only anti-government protests that have occurred in Iran, many witnesses highlighted that this is the first time that the Iranian people are uniting behind women and their rights.<sup>57</sup> Kaveh Shahrooz told the Subcommittee that the slogan being chanted by protesters—“Woman, life, freedom”—marks women’s rights as primary among all of the other problems with the government. He stated that the chant is the “glue that holds the different views of the diaspora together. This is a commitment to women’s rights and a rejection of the patriarchy of the Islamic Republic.”<sup>58</sup>

Notably, since the protests began in a Kurdish region of Iran, women from historically marginalized communities are playing a strong role in the protest movement. Homa Hoodfar emphasized that “[b]ecause it started from the margins, it brought those voices that usually are omitted from the voices in the centre... It has given a voice for the first time among the movement to, for instance, Baluchi women and Kurdish women.”<sup>59</sup>

The response from the authorities to the protesters has raised alarms in the international community. Police have used “excessive and lethal force” against

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54 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Shahrooz).

55 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Hoodfar); SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Shahrooz).

56 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022, Sayeh Hassan (As an individual).

57 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Hassan); SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Naraghi-Anderlini); SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Hoodfar); SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Shahrooz).

58 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Shahrooz).

59 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Hoodfar).



protesters in a violent and severe crackdown.<sup>60</sup> The Iranian Justice Collective has documented nearly 3,600 protesters who have been detained, though Kaveh Shahrooz cautioned that this is likely just a fraction of the real number.<sup>61</sup>

Women have been uniquely and specifically targeted in this crackdown. Kaveh Shahrooz told the Subcommittee how the regime has “regularly used sexual assault as a tool to intimidate detainees.”<sup>62</sup> And, though it has yet to claim responsibility or to be proven guilty, he added that the regime is the “likely culprit behind a horrific campaign of chemically poisoning thousands of schoolgirls.”<sup>63</sup> The mysterious poisonings began in November 2022 and have targeted schoolgirls across the country, resulting in hundreds of hospitalizations and some parents choosing to remove their children from school entirely. These same schoolgirls, according to Sayeh Hassan, actively participated in the protests by “taking off their mandatory hijabs, taking down the picture of Khamenei in their classrooms and saying no to oppression.”<sup>64</sup> Ketty Nivyabandi commented that these attacks have been “targeted at silencing women and girls” and form “part of that desire to crush any dissent at a moment when the Iranian authorities feel very vulnerable.”<sup>65</sup>

## Women’s Rights in Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, as in both Afghanistan and Iran, the government has been using legislation to target women and their rights. Ketty Nivyabandi explained to the Subcommittee that it has been one year since the *Personal Status Law* was passed, touted by Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman as a “step towards progress and equality.”<sup>66</sup> The law did introduce some positive reforms, like a minimum age for marriage. However, she stated that it has “codified some of the informal and the very problematic practices of the male guardianship system,” that it “fails to protect women from domestic violence,” and “entrenches a system of gender-based discrimination in

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60 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Deif).

61 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023, 1305 (Shahrooz).

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

64 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Hassan).

65 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Nivyabandi).

66 Ibid.

marriage, divorce, custody and inheritance.”<sup>67</sup> Farida Deif stated that the law “essentially renders them [women] permanent legal minors.”<sup>68</sup>

## **Women’s Rights in Yemen: A Proxy Conflict Between Iran and Saudi Arabia**

In Yemen, women’s rights have experienced numerous setbacks since the beginning of the armed conflict eight years ago. Gender-based violence has risen by 66% in the country, and harmful practices such as child marriage have become more frequent, exacerbated by an ensuing economic crisis.<sup>69</sup> Women’s political participation has sharply declined, with no female chosen as part of the cabinet in the most recent Yemeni government for the first time in over 20 years. In sum, the conflict in Yemen has led to “one of the worst displacement crises in the world,” putting displaced households at risk, and causing even further vulnerabilities for the one-third of families that are headed by women.<sup>70</sup>

Léa Pelletier-Marcotte, a policy analyst with Oxfam-Quebec, stated that the conflict in Yemen was “internationalized since 2015,” and is considered a “proxy conflict between world powers” with “interplay from Iran and Saudi Arabia.”<sup>71</sup> As the conflict persists, “the humanitarian situation becomes dire, especially for women and girls.”<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, women in Yemen must be escorted in public by a male guardian, limiting the activities of humanitarian aid organizations that rely on female workers, thus compromising their work.<sup>73</sup> Lauren Ravon suggested that accentuated pressure on Yemeni authorities and regional actors, paired with increased support to local civil society, was effective in relaxing restrictions on women’s rights.<sup>74</sup>

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67 Ibid.

68 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Deif).

69 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Ravon).

70 Ibid.

71 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023, Léa Pelletier-Marcotte (Policy Analyst, Oxfam Quebec).

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Ravon).



## The Role of Women Human Rights Defenders

In the face of these violations, individuals have stepped up at great personal risk to defend the rights of women. Beatriz Gonzalez Manchon, the Co-Vice President of Global Programs at the Equality Fund, emphasized the importance of the work of women human rights defenders (WHRDs) globally, stating that “women’s rights and LGBTI activists in Afghanistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere are on the front lines pushing back against authoritarian regimes.”<sup>75</sup>

Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini explained that during international emergencies, the resilience of women working towards peace and capacity-building inside their communities crucially is reliant on the “global solidarity and connectivity” of their networks, especially in countries facing acute poverty issues.<sup>76</sup> For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, women from Cameroon, Somalia and Yemen used these networks to share sanitary information amongst themselves in order to prevent further viral infections within their communities.

The risks that WHRDs face are increasing, according to Jacqueline O’Neill,<sup>77</sup> including risks to their lives, their livelihoods and the safety of their families.<sup>78</sup> For example, human rights defenders are targeted by actions such as criminalization of their activities, attacks on their physical integrity or lives, defamation and public attacks.<sup>79</sup> Julia Tétrault-Provencher told the Subcommittee that these types of attacks disproportionately affect women.<sup>80</sup> Jacqueline O’Neill pointed to attacks against WHRDs peacefully protesting in countries such as Iran and Sudan; in Myanmar, “the army has killed hundreds of protestors.”<sup>81</sup>

## Afghan Women Human Rights Defenders

The Taliban regime has shown no tolerance for human rights activists. Horia Mosadiq told the Subcommittee that since its return to power,

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75 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Gonzalez Manchon).

76 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Naraghi-Anderlini).

77 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (O’Neill).

78 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Doherty).

79 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Tétrault-Provencher).

80 Ibid.

81 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (O’Neill).

hundreds of Afghan human rights defenders, members of civil society, human rights activists, civil rights activists, journalists, lawyers, entrepreneurs, sports personalities, musicians, and public figures were abducted, arrested, detained, tortured, threatened while scores were killed, injured or disappeared in violent attacks by the Taliban and their associates.<sup>82</sup>

This constant threat has left WHRDs with very little manoeuvring space to work in the country. However, many are continuing to advocate for women’s rights outside of Afghanistan. Meghan Doherty drew the Subcommittee’s attention to the Afghan WHRDs who addressed the United Nations Human Rights Council to “demand that the international community act on women’s complete erasure from all aspects of public life since the Taliban took over.”<sup>83</sup>

### Iranian Women Human Rights Defenders

In Iran, thousands of women are leading and participating in the protests against the rights-violating regime. However, they are also being joined and supported by many others from outside of the country. One witness referred to a solidarity protest held in Richmond Hill, Ontario that drew a crowd of 50,000 people.<sup>84</sup>

However, the Subcommittee heard how even WHRDs working outside of Iran are not spared from some of the risks faced by those inside the country. Sayeh Hassan, a Canadian activist, spoke about the harassment and threats that she has experienced, reporting that the majority occurs online, though she has also been physically followed after attending protests.<sup>85</sup> Kaveh Shahrooz told the Subcommittee that such harassment is often conducted by those in Canada who are sympathetic to the Iranian regime, or sometimes, by “representatives of the regime here in secret.”<sup>86</sup>

### Saudi Arabian Women Human Rights Defenders

In Saudi Arabia, witnesses told the Subcommittee how WHRDs are met with increasingly harsh responses from the Saudi authorities, particularly for making statements online

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82 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 3 February 2022 (Mosadiq).

83 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Doherty). For more information on the statement of Mahbooba Seraj to the Human Rights Council, see: United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “[We are erased.](#)” 10 October 2022.

84 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Shahrooz).

85 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Hassan).

86 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Shahrooz).



that are critical of the government. In many cases, women are charged under the country's terrorism laws and given prison sentences that are decades long.<sup>87</sup>

Ketty Nivyabandi highlighted the case of doctoral student Salma al-Shehab, who was sentenced to 34 years in prison for her Twitter activity in support of women's rights.<sup>88</sup> This is the longest known sentence ever given to a Saudi woman.<sup>89</sup>

As a means of furthering its control over WHRDs, the state frequently imposes travel bans following a release from custody. Farida Deif told the Subcommittee that this is the case of a WHRD recognized in 2021 by SDIR for her defense of human rights, Loujain al-Hathloul,<sup>90</sup> who was released from prison in 2021 but remains subject to a travel ban. Three other WHRDs are in the same position, subject to both travel bans as well as suspended sentences, "allowing the authorities to return them to prison for any perceived criminal activity."<sup>91</sup>

## International Protections for Women Human Rights Defenders

The risks faced by WHRDs highlights their need for increased protection and support from the international community, including Canada. The risks that they face are often acute and occur in response to their work, meaning that threats can arise suddenly.<sup>92</sup> Lauren Ravon explained that WHRDs may not be able to access traditional routes of refugee protection in other countries because "within a 24-hour crisis, [they] won't have a [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] referral to be applying for asylum."<sup>93</sup> Ketty Nivyabandi noted that imminent threats to WHRDs are often realized within 24 or 48 hours, providing the example of dissenting activists being systematically stripped of their Nicaraguan citizenship in February 2023 after sudden pushback from the current authoritarian regime.<sup>94</sup> Additionally, because their priority is to continue their advocacy work within their home country, Jacqueline O'Neill told the Subcommittee that current

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87 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Doherty).

88 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Nivyabandi).

89 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Deif). More information on the sentence length can be found in the following statement: European Saudi Organization for Human Rights, "[Saudi Arabia: 34 years sentence against the women's rights activist Salma al-Shehab](#)", 16 August 2022.

90 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 8 March 2021.

91 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Deif).

92 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Nivyabandi).

93 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Ravon).

94 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Nivyabandi); Ala Yuhas, "[Nicaragua Strips Citizenship From Hundreds Days After Prisoner Release](#)," *The New York Times*, 17 February 2023.

models of refugee protection, which are slow and offer permanent status in another country, are not well-suited to the needs of most WHRDs. Instead, WHRDs “need to be able to escape while they manage the risks and then their ultimate goal... is to go back.”<sup>95</sup>

With this in mind, the Subcommittee recommends:

#### **Recommendation 4**

**That Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada create a new temporary resident stream that enables women human rights defenders to seek immediate and non-permanent safe haven in Canada.**

Canada’s newly established global human rights defenders stream of the Government-Assisted Refugees Program is available to WHRDs and was lauded by witnesses.<sup>96</sup> However, several emphasized that demand for this program far outweighs its 250 allocated places. Beatriz Gonzalez Manchon observed that the number of human rights defenders accepted can in reality be far less than 250, since the places allocated currently include family members as well.<sup>97</sup> Kaveh Shahrooz emphasized the plight of Iranian WHRDs in particular, whom he said are “languishing in Iran or in nearby countries like Turkey and Iraq” due to insufficient space in the Canadian stream.<sup>98</sup>

Given this situation, the Subcommittee recommends:

#### **Recommendation 5**

**That Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada increase the number of places in the current global human rights defenders stream of its government-assisted refugees program to accommodate an increased number of applicants and their families.**

Witnesses also drew the Subcommittee’s attention to the unique needs of WHRDs upon their arrival into Canada. Activists who arrive without the support that they need can “find themselves lost in the system.”<sup>99</sup> In these cases, their advocacy work cannot continue from outside of their home country, and Beatriz Gonzalez Manchon warned the

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95 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (O’Neill).

96 Government of Canada, “[Global human rights defenders stream](#).”

97 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Gonzalez Manchon).

98 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Shahrooz).

99 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Nivyabandi).



Subcommittee that “those who wanted them silenced and out of the country in the first place almost win.”<sup>100</sup> Lauren Ravon told the Subcommittee that instead, WHRDs in exile in Canada need to be seen “as part of an ecosystem of civil society” who can form an important link between local civil society and international development assistance.<sup>101</sup>

As such, the Subcommittee recommends:

### **Recommendation 6**

**That the Government of Canada fund a program to support activists arriving as part of the human rights defender refugee stream and other relevant streams. Such a program could provide fellowships, training, networking opportunities and other resources that will allow and encourage their valuable human rights advocacy work to continue from within Canada.**

## **INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES TO VIOLATIONS AND ABUSES OF WOMEN’S RIGHTS**

### **Sanctions and Legislation**

Sanctions are among the strategies that the international community has taken to respond to violations and abuses of women’s rights. The Subcommittee heard about the various impacts that they have had. Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini, the founder and Chief Executive Officer of the International Civil Society Action Network, expressed concerns about what she called “blanket sanctions” that have been imposed on Iran and Syria that “affect a large swath of the population” and “have a tremendously detrimental impact on civil society and ordinary civilians.”<sup>102</sup> Farida Deif also recommended that states consult with experts “who can help ascertain the potential unintended harm on civil society” when issuing sanctions that extend beyond those issued against individuals.<sup>103</sup>

Both Kaveh Shahrooz and Sayeh Hassan were outspoken about the need for states like Canada to designate the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organization under section 83.01 of the *Criminal Code*, effectively sanctioning this large group of people. Sayeh Hassan argued that “a lot of them are here [in Canada] and they have assets that are not necessarily under their own names, but in their families’

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100 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Gonzalez Manchon).

101 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Ravon).

102 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Naraghi-Anderlini).

103 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Deif).

names” and recommended that Canada also sanction the families and associates of IRGC current and former members.<sup>104</sup> Kaveh Shahrooz emphasized that listing the IRGC as a terrorist entity in Canada would be a means of leading other democracies in isolating the regime. A terrorist designation would make individual IRGC members inadmissible to Canada, allow banks to freeze any IRGC assets held in Canada and allow police to charge anyone who financially or materially supports the organization.<sup>105</sup> Describing Iran as a “gender apartheid” state, he likened the move to the coordinated action taken internationally to isolate South Africa’s former apartheid regime.<sup>106</sup>

Therefore, mindful of the complexities involved in sanctioning entities, as well as the urgency of responding to the human rights violations being perpetrated against women in Iran, the Subcommittee recommends:

### **Recommendation 7**

**That the Government of Canada list the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist entity as per section 83.01 of the *Criminal Code*, ensuring that provisions are made for eliminating any unintended harm for those with involuntary links to the group, such as conscripts.**

## **International Fora**

With respect to responding to human rights violations around the world, witnesses emphasized the important role that international fora can play in voicing concerns, forming alliances with like-minded states and pressuring bad actors. Ketty Nivyabandi singled out the United Nations Human Rights Council in particular as being one of several international bodies where alliances can be created around human rights priorities “to be able to advance and counter this anti-rights movement that is coming from particular countries and is infiltrating these multilateral organizations.”<sup>107</sup>

Léa Pelletier-Marcotte pointed out that even if a state does not maintain official diplomatic ties with a rights-violating state, it can use international fora as a means for influencing the policies and attitudes of such states.<sup>108</sup> Witnesses also noted that making public statements in international fora is a means of preventing the “normalization” of

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104 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Hassan).

105 Government of Canada, “[Government of Canada lists four new terrorist entities](#),” 21 June 2022.

106 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Shahrooz).

107 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Nivyabandi).

108 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Pelletier-Marcotte).



human rights violations, and for providing WHRDs themselves with visibility and a platform.<sup>109</sup>

Julia Tétrault-Provencher told the Subcommittee that for women and girls to have their rights respected in countries where Lawyers without Borders Canada is active, such as Colombia, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Mali, Benin, Burkina Faso and the Democratic Republic of Congo, it is important to have “an international legal framework that is upheld at the national level” inside these countries.<sup>110</sup> She emphasized that active international cooperation can counteract rising socio-cultural, economic, and political challenges that are eroding women’s rights and limiting their access to justice and sexual health and reproductive services. She also stressed the need to use international fora to hold signatory states like Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala accountable to the United Nations *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*, and to pressure non-compliant states, such as Iran, to ratify the convention.

With this in mind, the Subcommittee recommends:

### **Recommendation 8**

**That the Government of Canada leverage its position in international fora to build alliances with like-minded partners and call out and condemn countries, regimes and individuals responsible for human rights abuses.**

## **International Aid and Policy**

Testimony emphasized the need for increased long-term and predictable development funding levels for international assistance projects. While many witnesses recognized the value of Canada’s existing feminist international assistance policy as a means of accelerating overall development by prioritizing the needs of women, they were clear that advancing human rights takes a considerable amount of time and financial resources. Homa Hoodfar argued that the typical three-to-four-year duration of most aid projects is insufficient for achieving the long-term goals of many human rights initiatives, suggesting that closer to 20-year commitments are needed.<sup>111</sup>

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109 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Deif); SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (O’Neill).

110 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Tétrault-Provencher).

111 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Hoodfar).

Beatriz Gonzalez Manchon drew the Subcommittee’s attention to the women’s movement in Iran, stating that it was capable of mounting and sustaining an “effective response” to the regime’s crackdown on women’s rights because of “decades” of grassroots organization and resistance, despite being “incredibly underfunded.”<sup>112</sup> Lauren Ravon told the Subcommittee that to be even more effective, funding and support needs to be increased, delivered more flexibly and over longer periods of time.<sup>113</sup> For example, Meghan Doherty indicated that the lives of hundreds of thousands of women each year hinged on Canada effectively delivering on its commitment to invest \$700 million for sexual and reproductive health and rights over the next 10 years, with \$500 million allocated specifically to worldwide organizations that provide support for abortion, contraception, adolescent sexual and reproductive health, and advocacy.<sup>114</sup>

Through Oxfam Canada’s work on women’s leadership programs, and projects related to gender-based violence and reproductive rights in Yemen, Pakistan and Central America, Lauren Ravon uncovered an important gap in funding at Global Affairs Canada: support to activists in exile.<sup>115</sup> According to her, the department should provide adapted financing consistent with the unpredictability many activists face as they are often required to flee temporarily to neighbouring countries. These exiled women “keep hope alive for many people who are back in the country and keep up the resistance when it’s unsafe to be in the country,” and “will then return to their country and be key leaders in democratic movements.”<sup>116</sup>

With this in mind, the Subcommittee recommends:

### **Recommendation 9**

**That the Government of Canada increase its level of humanitarian aid and ensure that this funding remains stable and is invested in long-term projects that align with its feminist international assistance policy.**

However, witnesses discussed not just the amount of funding available, but also the potential risk of objectives and outcomes to be hampered or invalidated because of a misalignment between Canada’s development policy and its wider foreign policy.

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112 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Gonzalez Manchon).

113 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Ravon).

114 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Doherty).

115 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Ravon).

116 Ibid.



Homa Hoodfar told the Subcommittee that many international development initiatives, including those financed and/or coordinated by Canada, tend to separate human rights from economic development goals. However, she commented that “[e]ven if women are skilled and can earn money but do not have human rights, then they can’t really achieve their potential.”<sup>117</sup> Léa Pelletier-Marcotte referred to the Yemen crisis to illuminate the potential for contradictions, saying:

It’s important to know that it’s not only about funding humanitarian aid to Yemen, even if it’s not necessarily sufficient. The aid must be accompanied by meaningful policy and political leadership... That will take other measures, in particular to avoid fuelling the current conflict in Yemen. It’s being fuelled by the sale of arms to some of the countries involved in it, among other things. So that has to stop.

It’s also going to take a feminist foreign policy—not necessarily a feminist international aid policy—which would support women’s rights organizations in a comprehensive way and strengthen their leadership in peace processes... So it’s not just a question of funding. It’s also about our approach, our leadership and the way we use our voice and our influence, at the UN, for example, to do something more than give money. It’s also a question of international trade and foreign policy.<sup>118</sup>

Witnesses emphasized the strategic importance for Canada to adopt a coherent approach to international human rights when intervening diplomatically on the international scene. Ketty Nivyabandi indicated that Canada should “be consistent across the board on human rights,” in order to be perceived as a credible partner that can both “uphold trade interests while also prioritizing human rights.”<sup>119</sup> According to her, the Government of Canada should structure its foreign policy in ways that affirm that human rights “supersede trade interests” when responding to crises.<sup>120</sup>

Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini also commented that Canada should eliminate any “double standards” when upholding international human rights, and apply the same level of scrutiny to all countries, including allied states such as Saudi Arabia and India.<sup>121</sup> In the context of the 2022 FIFA World Cup, then Minister of International Development Harjit S. Sajjan had “expressed a commitment to raising difficult issues,” such as women’s rights, while on a diplomatic mission to Qatar, but was later criticized for not making any

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117 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Hoodfar).

118 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Pelletier-Marcotte).

119 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 10 March 2023 (Nivyabandi).

120 Ibid.

121 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 25 November 2022 (Naraghi-Anderlini).

public declaration on human rights during his visit.<sup>122</sup> To ensure accountability, Farida Deif suggested that the Government of Canada review how often and actively ambassadors posted in missions abroad apply the Voices at Risk guidelines,<sup>123</sup> in order to support WHRDs who are being tried and imprisoned abroad, especially in countries with which Canada has strong bilateral trade relationships, such as Egypt and Israel.<sup>124</sup>

Finally, according to Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini, a feminist foreign policy in Canada could help align policies with diplomatic efforts, strengthen Canada's positions by putting "principles into practice," prevent women's-rights-related issues from being stonewalled out of multilateral spaces, and complement the current feminist assistance policy in order to effectively protect women in countries such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Ukraine, and Afghanistan.<sup>125</sup>

As such, the Subcommittee recommends:

#### **Recommendation 10**

**That Global Affairs Canada align its international development goals and other foreign policy goals.**

### **CONCLUSION**

Women's rights around the world are under threat, affected by factors like the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, climate change, and shifting political landscapes. Women are often those most vulnerable to abuses and violations of their rights when conditions in any country become precarious and they can be targeted by governments in a multiplicity of ways.

Witnesses appearing before the Subcommittee underscored that worldwide, women are experiencing increasing rates of gender-based violence as well as decreasing access to sexual and reproductive health services. Women in Afghanistan face major violations of their rights under the Taliban regime restricting nearly every part of their public life, such as paid work, education, dress and movement. The Subcommittee heard how these violations were especially severe for marginalized women like the Hazaras. In Iran,

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122 SDIR, *Evidence*, 25 November 2022 (O'Neill); Dylan Robertson, "[Sajjan mum on human rights during World Cup visit to Qatar](#)," *The Globe and Mail*, 18 July 2023.

123 Government of Canada, [Voices at risk: Canada's guidelines on supporting human rights defenders](#).

124 SDIR, *Evidence*, 25 November 2022 (Deif).

125 SDIR, *Evidence*, 25 November 2022 (Naraghi-Anderlini).



violations to women’s rights include discriminatory legislation and restrictions on their dress. The current protests against the Iranian regime taking place throughout Iran are advocating for greater recognition of women’s rights. These protests are being met by a violent crackdown, with authorities targeting women in specific, and sometimes violent, ways. Saudi Arabian women face violations of their rights through policies and laws such as male guardianship legislation, and the government is issuing harsher sentences for those who speak out in support of women’s rights. The Subcommittee also heard about the effectiveness of various responses to these violations from the international community, as well as the gaps that remain.

Witnesses who appeared before the Subcommittee made clear that Canada has a strong role to play in defending and promoting their rights and those of women globally. By centralizing the rights of women in policy and diplomacy, Canada can take the lead in improving global respect for human rights.

## APPENDIX A LIST OF WITNESSES

The following table lists the witnesses who appeared before the committee at its meetings related to this report. Transcripts of all public meetings related to this report are available on the committee’s [webpage for this study](#).

Organizations and Individuals	Date	Meeting
<b>Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights</b> Meghan Doherty, Director of Global Policy and Advocacy	2022/11/25	20
<b>As an individual</b> Sayeh Hassan, Lawyer	2022/11/25	20
<b>Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development</b> Jacqueline O'Neill, Ambassador for Women, Peace and Security	2022/11/25	20
<b>Human Rights Watch Canada</b> Farida Deif, Canada Director	2022/11/25	20
<b>International Civil Society Action Network</b> Sanam Naraghi-Anderlini, Founder and Chief Executive Officer	2022/11/25	20
<b>Lawyers Without Borders Canada</b> Julia Tétrault-Provencher, Legal Advisor	2022/11/25	20
<b>Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan</b> Laila Ghasem Rashid, Chair, Board of Directors, Barrister and Solicitor	2023/02/03	23
<b>Cercle des ex-parlementaires de l'Assemblée nationale du Québec</b> Marie Malavoy, Former Member, Comité des femmes ex-parlementaires David Payne, Former Member, Comité sur le parlementarisme et la démocratie	2023/02/03	23
<b>Safety and Risk Mitigation Organization</b> Horia Mosadiq, Director	2023/02/03	23

<b>Organizations and Individuals</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Meeting</b>
<b>Amnesty International Canada</b> Ketty Nivyabandi, Secretary General	2023/03/10	26
<b>As an individual</b> Kaveh Shahrooz, Lawyer & Senior Fellow, Macdonald-Laurier Institute	2023/03/10	26
<b>Equality Fund</b> Beatriz Gonzalez Manchón, Co-Vice-President, Global Programs	2023/03/10	26
<b>Oxfam Canada</b> Lauren Ravon, Executive Director	2023/03/10	26
<b>Oxfam-Québec</b> Léa Pelletier-Marcotte, Policy Analyst	2023/03/10	26
<b>Women Living Under Muslim Laws</b> Homa Hoodfar, Professor of Anthropology, Emerita	2023/03/10	26

## APPENDIX B LIST OF BRIEFS

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The following is an alphabetical list of organizations and individuals who submitted briefs to the committee related to this report. For more information, please consult the committee's [webpage for this study](#).

**Canadian Hazara Advocacy Group**

**Cercle des ex-parlementaires de l'Assemblée nationale du Québec**

**Oxfam-Québec**



## REQUEST FOR GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Pursuant to Standing Order 109, the committee requests that the government table a comprehensive response to this report.

A copy of the relevant *Minutes of Proceedings* of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development ([Meeting No. 82](#)) is tabled, and a copy of the relevant *Minutes of Proceedings* of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights ([Meetings Nos. 20, 23, 26, 27 and 30](#)) is tabled.

Respectfully submitted,

Ali Ehsassi  
Chair

