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Chair: Mr. Sameer Zuberi

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• (1305)

[Translation]

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

[English]

I call this meeting to order.

This is the 26th meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights. Today we're doing this in a hybrid format, in conformity with the House order of June 23, 2022.

I have some comments for the witnesses and members.

Please wait until I recognize you before speaking. The witnesses will have five minutes each to give their introductory remarks, and then we're going to have a series of questions and answers. I will give you a signal once a minute is reached and then again at 30 seconds.

[Translation]

With respect to interpretation, those who are attending the meeting using the Zoom application,

[English]

just look on the bottom of your screen, on the globe. For those witnesses who are here, you can choose English, French or the original uninterpreted language.

[Translation]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted on September 23, 2022,

[English]

right now we're studying the rights and freedoms of women in Afghanistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

As an individual, we have Kaveh Shahrooz, lawyer and senior fellow at Macdonald-Laurier Institute. We also have, from the Equality Fund, Beatriz Gonzalez Manchón, co-vice-president of global programs; and from Women Living Under Muslim Laws, Homa Hoodfar, professor of anthropology, via Zoom.

We are going to start with those in the room.

Mr. Shahrooz, please, you have five minutes.

Mr. Kaveh Shahrooz (Lawyer & Senior Fellow, Macdonald-Laurier Institute, As an Individual): Thank you very much.

I want to begin by thanking the esteemed members of the subcommittee for providing me the opportunity to meet with you today, in the wake of International Women's Day, in this session about the rights and freedoms of women in Afghanistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia. I will focus my remarks on the issue of women in Iran.

As you're well aware, Iranians are in the throes of a national uprising against the theocratic regime that has ruled their country for four decades. Sparked by the killing of a young woman for improper hijab, the protests have become revolutionary in nature, calling for “death to the dictator” and “death to the Islamic Republic”. Most importantly, the protesters have been chanting a slogan that, in its very first word, proves that the rights of women are at the forefront of this uprising. “Woman, life, freedom” serves both as a revolutionary chant and as a manifesto of what the protesters want.

In response to this revolutionary moment, Iran's regime has resorted to the only play in its playbook, unleashing brutality, often deployed on a gendered basis, to silence critics.

After attacking peaceful protesters on the streets and beating them savagely, Iran's regime detained thousands and threatened them with execution. The Iranian Justice Collective, a group of activists that I am proud to be a part of, has been able to carefully document approximately 3,600 detentions. The actual number is likely many times that. The regime has, as reported by CNN and other outlets, regularly used sexual assault as a tool to intimidate detainees.

In recent weeks, this regime or a shadowy organization closely affiliated with it has been the likely culprit behind a horrific campaign of chemically poisoning thousands of schoolgirls. Again, the Iranian Justice Collective has carefully documented 630 chemical attacks at 388 schools. The message of such poisoning is not difficult to decipher. If you stand up to their misogyny—as so many brave schoolgirls have done in recent months—they will stop at nothing to destroy you. The chemical attacks are also a reminder that the Islamic regime in Iran—much like the Taliban, who have used this tactic repeatedly—views the education of girls as a serious threat to its power.

It's important to remember, of course, that the horrific misogyny that the world has seen from Iran's regime in recent months is not a new phenomenon. It's written into the very DNA of this theocracy. Reciting the history of this regime's misogynistic policies and crimes will take more time than we have today. I will simply point out 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.

In fact, perhaps the first to stand up to the Islamic Regime were Iran's women who, in massive International Women's Day marches in 1979, opposed the erosion of their rights. Those protests and many other acts of courageous defiance by women were met with violence.

Alas, that violence ultimately succeeded in turning Iran's women into second-class citizens, both *de jure* and *de facto*.

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.

I could go on with a hundred other ways, large and small, that Iran's regime dehumanizes women on a daily basis. All of those facts point to one conclusion, about which we should not mince words. For over four decades, Iran has been a gender apartheid state.

The question, then, is this: What should Canada do?

I believe the most valuable thing our government can do is very simple, but from it will flow a host of other policies. Our government must recognize the obvious truth that I just stated a moment ago: that the Islamic Republic of Iran is an apartheid state and that we should treat it as such.

Even though the gender apartheid system in Iran is four decades old, successive Canadian governments have looked the other way for a variety of reasons. Sometimes it was for commercial reasons, but more often out of the well-entrenched—but in my opinion misguided—view that dialogue and engagement will always lead to improvements in the behaviour of rogue states.

• (1310)

I'm sorry, Mr. Chair. Does that mean my time is up?

The Chair: It means to go to concluding words.

Mr. Kaveh Shahrooz: I urge you to recognize that, just as Canada led the way in convincing our allies around the world to cut

ties with the apartheid regime in South Africa, we must lead other democracies in isolating Iran's regime. This means listing the IRGC. This means telling our allies that diplomatic agreements with this regime, like the JCPOA, are a betrayal of Iran's women.

We should open our doors to large numbers of Iranian activists, many of them women's rights activists, who are currently languishing in Iran or in nearby countries like Turkey and Iraq. We should, in turn, close our doors to officials and affiliates of the regime who wish to bring their funds and families here.

In 1998, Nelson Mandela spoke to our House of Commons and expressed his gratitude to this country, saying, "thank you...for helping us end our oppression". We deserved that gratitude then for having stood up against the racial apartheid in South Africa. We should earn similar gratitude again for standing up against gender apartheid in Iran.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Shahrooz.

Now we'll continue for five minutes with Ms. Gonzalez Manchón.

Please, go ahead.

Ms. Beatriz Gonzalez Manchón (Co-Vice President, Global Programs, Equality Fund): Hello, everyone.

As a fund created to resource women's rights organizations and human rights defenders, we hear from activists and their experiences every day. Here is but one recent example.

It says, "Dear sisters, my colleagues and I are speaking to the lawyers, and are working towards resolving the situation. We had campaigned for years to get legislation to stop trafficking of women in Iraq, and it was approved in 2012. Now, the extremists in power are using this same legislation against us, to stop us from sheltering women, and to attempt to humiliate us as criminals."

Criminalization, attacks, harassment, cyber-bullying, imprisonment and violence against women's rights and LGBTQI defenders are, unfortunately, on the rise in many parts of the world. I congratulate the subcommittee on this important and timely study, and thank you for the opportunity to appear on the heels of International Women's Day.

I represent the Equality Fund, a Canadian-based women's fund that supports women's rights organizations and feminist funds in the global south and east, like the organization from Iraq whose message I just shared. We received a \$300-million contribution from Global Affairs Canada in 2019. At present, Equality Fund resources are flowing to over 300 women's rights organizations and LGBTQI groups in about 85 countries.

In my brief time, I'd like to make two observations and leave the subcommittee with five recommendations.

First, I'd like to build on the testimony of other witnesses. Women's rights and LGBTQI activists in Afghanistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere are on the front lines pushing back against authoritarian regimes. They pay a huge price. We see this pattern of anti-gender ideologies and backlash against women's rights in many places, whether it's in the U.S. on reproductive rights or in the Philippines, Nicaragua and Sri Lanka.

Second, against this backdrop, I would like to lift up the need for networks, connections and collaborative work that was mentioned by other speakers who have testified here. Following the fall of Kabul in 2021, Equality Fund collaborated with allies to better support brave activists. In the case of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, we coordinated to resource women's funds based in Ukraine and neighbouring countries to support women and non-binary people as they fled their homes.

Here's what we've learned: Long-term support for women's rights movements is absolutely key. Strong, well-supported movements enable effective responses when crises hit and regimes crack down. The protests we are seeing in Iran, for example, are possible because of decades of organizing and resistance by the movements. This didn't just happen overnight.

Investments overall in these efforts are incredibly underfunded. This is in sharp contrast to the money being mobilized to attack the rights of women and non-binary people. According to the Global Philanthropy Project, between 2008 and 2017, 11 American organizations associated with the anti-gender movement channelled at least a billion dollars to countries across the globe.

Finally, we have to listen to activists when they say that collective care and protection are inseparable. Defenders require urgent assistance when they are in immediate danger. In addition, investments in support structures, long-term health and community-based strategies, as defined by the activists themselves, are essential.

Here are our recommendations.

First, release the long-promised feminist foreign policy paper and ensure that there are the resources and support to ensure its successful implementation.

Second, with the feminist international assistance policy, Global Affairs Canada has taken steps to resource feminist movements. As the peace and security ambassador told this committee last year, more can be done.

Third, review the effectiveness of the "Voices at Risk" guidelines. As this subcommittee has heard, these commitments are intended to guide how Canadian diplomats support human rights defenders around the world. It is time to assess whether or not the guidelines meet this urgent moment or whether bolder measures are needed.

Fourth, increase the number of human rights defenders admitted under the newly established immigration stream. At the very minimum, Canada could expand this key program so that 250 is the number of defenders alone, not counting the people and family members who arrive with them.

Fifth, increased support for women human rights defenders once they arrive in Canada is urgently needed. The vast majority want to continue their advocacy in their home country but are hindered by the absence of resources to connect, strategize and continue their important work.

We also support the numerous recommendations presented to this committee on Afghanistan, including amending Canada's anti-terrorism legislation to enable Canadian organizations to support women's rights activists in Afghanistan and other countries with similar contexts. The exemptions presented yesterday are a step in the right direction, and we are looking forward to learning more.

Thank you for the invitation to appear before you today.

• (1315)

I welcome your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Manchón.

We'll now go to Ms. Hoodfar via Zoom, please.

Go ahead.

Dr. Homa Hoodfar (Professor of Anthropology, Emerita, Women Living Under Muslim Laws): Thank you for inviting me to appear in front of this committee.

I would like to start by saying that I am a Canadian Iranian who spent my early years of education and life in Iran. After I left, I focused and devoted my studies, education and public engagement on looking at the situation and obstacles—ideological, cultural or legal obstacles—that women face and the impact of that on their lives in the MENA region.

Today I would like to draw attention to the situation in Afghanistan and in Iran very briefly.

I'm grateful that some other presenters actually covered some of the issues that I wanted to cover. I will continue by saying that, in Afghanistan, after women lost their rights and the most basic aspects of their lives, like going to school, walking in the neighbourhood, going to work, it has really unleashed misery on the nation.

An estimated three million girls, at least, are now out of school. However, as the Taliban are banning school after primary school and have now also extended that to the universities, this number has, of course, increased.

What has happened, in effect, is that the Taliban have taken the education of girls and women as hostage in order to leverage their conversation and negotiations with the west, and that's a very important aspect that often is ignored in a lot of discussions.

The problem is that, even when we reopen the schools, society will face another set of problems, as the Taliban are increasingly using the schools and educational system as a platform to spread their extreme ideology. Under this situation, the international community has to stop issuing sympathetic statements and enter into taking actions that make a difference on the ground and counteract some of the negative impact of what the Taliban are doing.

The reality is that the Taliban are a problem not only for Afghanistan, and I want to insist on this, especially observing what is in the region. If the ideology of the Taliban is not checked, it will spill over into the neighbouring countries, and finally it will also affect the west. As we saw, the training of extremists and calling them freedom fighters finally ended up in the tragedy of 9/11. Today our worlds are not so segregated that we are not affected by what is happening elsewhere.

We are calling on Canada to adopt a foreign policy that puts human rights at the centre and makes education, in particular, a centrepiece of that policy. Having a feminist foreign policy and a feminist international assistance policy that do not actually foster and protect the basic human rights of women is like expecting a bird to fly with one wing.

There are possibilities and ways that the impact of the Taliban's attack, especially on education, can be counteracted. There are people who have done research, which I am happy to share later, on some of the strategies. While other Afghan refugees have also taken steps to support them, we really need a larger-scale strategic analysis.

I also want to now go back and draw your attention to the situation in Iran, again on the education of girls there. As was mentioned, this gas attack on schoolgirls has had a large impact. A lot of civil society has actually asked us to condemn this internationally and has asked for independent research and investigation on that by entities such as UNICEF, WHO and UNESCO. This is because there is no trust in the investigation in Iran, given that the moral compass of the Iranian regime is very doubtful.

● (1320)

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Hoodfar.

Now we're going to go to the series of questions and answers, starting with Mr. Viersen for six minutes, please.

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

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

Ms. Hoodfar, I'd like to start with you. You mentioned that basically we have to work simultaneously. You mentioned asking a bird to fly with one wing.

Could you clarify, once again, how we have to work hand in hand to defend human rights around the world?

Dr. Homa Hoodfar: For instance, looking at the feminist international assistance, a lot of times it supports women at the local level in terms of economic independence, but we don't make priorities about their human rights. Even if women are skilled and can

earn money but do not have human rights, then they can't really achieve their potential.

What I said about just flying with one wing is that we have to balance our support for human rights—basic human rights we are talking about—and support for economic development. I worry that sometimes economic development, because it's easier, because you can see the result maybe faster, gets priority. That's what I meant, that we need to really focus on human rights and economic development at the same time.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Mr. Shahrooz, I'm wondering if you can outline a bit more around the poisonings that have been happening in Iran. Do you have a clear recommendation for what the Government of Canada can do on that?

Mr. Kaveh Shahrooz: That's an excellent question. The foreign minister has already condemned it in unequivocal terms, which is great first step, but as Ms. Hoodfar was saying, I don't think we can trust the Iranian regime to investigate these chemical attacks when the regime is likely the perpetrator or a group very closely tied to the regime is the perpetrator.

It's really our role to push international agencies, the UN perhaps, to conduct an investigation. There already is a UN Human Rights Council independent investigation into the human rights situation in Iran. That's something we ought to be supporting.

As I said, this is one manifestation of a deeper misogynistic ideology in a four-decade-long gender apartheid system. I think we ought to abandon a mindset that has governed us for too long, saying that we can have a dialogue with this regime. A regime that poisons schoolgirls is not one that you can have negotiations with. We ought to abandon any illusion about negotiating with the regime that's in power in Iran and support Iran's revolution. That's really the only way in which heinous acts of this nature will ultimately end.

● (1325)

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Ms. Hoodfar, this study that we're undertaking also talks about Saudi Arabia. I'm not sure if you have any expertise in that area as well. One of the issues that comes to my attention regularly is around the participation in the realm of human trafficking that happens in Saudi Arabia. Many household staff are considered to be employees by western nations yet often are enslaved in Saudi Arabia.

Do you have any expertise, opinions or clarifications on that and what that looks like in Saudi Arabia?

Dr. Homa Hoodfar: Unfortunately, I don't have much experience in that. I know that for women living under Muslim law, on the question of trafficking, especially in the Saudi Arabian gulf, it is under the name of domestic workers. It is actually very widespread. We frequently get complaints from women who have gone there under that name, and then they find themselves in this kind of situation.

I wish I could say more, but since it is not an area of my research, I'll stop there.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Okay.

Mr. Shahrooz, do you have any comments or expertise in that as well?

Mr. Kaveh Shahrooz: Uniquely on the issue of Saudi Arabia, I don't. I apologize.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Okay.

Ms. Beatriz Gonzalez Manchón: Can I add something?

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Go ahead, Beatriz.

Ms. Beatriz Gonzalez Manchón: One organization that the Equality Fund is supporting is the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women. They have really valuable research and publications on how these patterns of trafficking in women happen in many regions of the world, how that sometimes can be for the purposes of sexual exploitation or domestic work, and how that trafficking actually intersects with labour rights.

I would be very happy to send more information to this committee on some of their research on trafficking.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Do you have—

The Chair: We just about hit six minutes right now. Thank you, Mr. Viersen.

We're going to continue with the next round with Mr. Ehsassi for six minutes, please.

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

Allow me to also thank all three of the witnesses for their excellent testimony.

Now, I will start off with Mr. Shahrooz. Your testimony was truly compelling.

The first question I have for you is about how this morning we all woke up to the news that China has now brokered a rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Could you share with us what you think the implications of this agreement will be for human rights in particular in Iran?

Mr. Kaveh Shahrooz: That's is a very good question, MP Ehsassi.

With the caveat that I've only seen very preliminary news reports and haven't had time to digest it very much yet, my instinct is that this is actually bad news for human rights in Iran for a variety of reasons, but primarily because it gives a further lifeline to the Islamic regime in Tehran. It removes a particular sort of threat. This regional rivalry with Saudi Arabia was a particular threat to the Islamic regime, so the Iranian regime will likely be empowered as a result of it.

Furthermore, Iran will be further empowered by the fact that China now seems to be fully in the camp of supporting Iran's regime. I think that anything that normalizes and stabilizes that regime further and gets it out of the moment of crisis that it's been in for the past few months is bad news for Iran's people and the human rights movement generally.

My recommendation to the subcommittee and to the government would be for us to not take our eye off the ball. Iran's regime remains an apartheid regime and we ought to continue to treat it as such, even if it creates alliances with those in its neighbourhood. We ought to remain committed to helping Iranian people and Iranian women in particular.

I urge you. Even if Iran gains allies in the region, Canada should remain steadfast in its support of Iranian people.

• (1330)

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you.

For my second question, Mr. Shahrooz, quite often I hear, here in Canada, that people labour under the illusion that the Iranian community in Canada is fragmented and that there are some who like the regime and some who don't.

Given your extensive activities in the Iranian Canadian community, what is your sense of the popularity of the regime amongst Iranian Canadians?

Also, I understand that there was a new poll of Iranians within Iran. How do Iranians within the country view this odious regime?

Mr. Kaveh Shahrooz: I think you're asking a really critical question.

The reason I say that is that, regrettably, a narrative has taken hold in the west and in the western media that there is a real divide in the community and that some people support the regime while some people are opposed to it. The truth of the matter is that I struggle to find anyone in the community—and I'm very involved in the community, as are you, MP Ehsassi—who supports this regime.

Obviously, there are going to be people who have ties to that regime. Regrettably, they have found their way to Canada, so they may have sympathies for the regime or they may even, in fact, be representatives of the regime, here in secret. By and large, the Iranian people in the diaspora despise this regime. They want it gone.

There have been protests in recent months that have drawn tens of thousands of people here in Canada. In the town of Richmond Hill, we had a protest where 50,000 people came out. That was the police estimate. You don't get 50,000 Canadians coming out for very many things, but we had 50,000 people coming out to say that they reject the Islamic Republic.

Similarly, the poll that you cited is a good poll. It points to the fact that Iranian people inside the country in very large numbers—I forget the exact number, but it's something around 80% or so, I think—want this regime gone. This regime really has no base of support inside or outside the country.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you very much for that, Mr. Shahrooz. I completely agree with you.

Now could I go to Dr. Hoodfar?

Thank you so much, Dr. Hoodfar, for being with us today.

Dr. Hoodfar, you restricted your comments to Iran and Afghanistan and how difficult it has been on women, how systematic these impediments have been for women. I am wondering if you could also comment on the regrettable brain drain that both these countries are suffering. How big a phenomenon is that? What can the world do to make sure that the human resources that are leaving these two countries are put to good use?

Dr. Homa Hoodfar: In fact, it is very regrettable, especially in the context of Afghanistan. In the context of Iran, a large number have left, but they have kept in touch. There are also quite a few people inside the country, and that has helped. Many Iranians hope that if the regime changes, they could go back and be at the service of the country, even if they don't necessarily want to completely move back to Iran.

In the case of Afghanistan, the situation is a little bit more dire. The fact is that the whole takeover by the Taliban was a surprise. Many of the elite have left, and those who are left in the country have not yet.... They are still in shock. One of the major issues is to bring all the people, all the experts, the politicians who are outside, and bring them together to form an alliance, have a summit, have a program and really work like a nation outside the boundaries of the country.

My worry has been that there are not enough steps taken to bring people together, have those summits, make larger and smaller groups that are connected and work.... It's the same with education. We really need to establish an education system for the country outside the border of that country if we want to save Afghanistan from the ideology of the Taliban, which will spill over to neighbouring and other countries.

• (1335)

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Ms. Hoodfar and Mr. Ehsassi.

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

[*Translation*]

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

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

I'd like to thank the witnesses for participating in this extremely important study.

My colleague Mr. Ehsassi raised some interesting questions about the regime and its position.

Mr. Shahrooz, you said that most Iranians, especially in the diaspora, want to see this regime fall. On that, we tend to agree.

However, isn't opposition to the regime fragmented, I mean, aren't there different movements within it that make it more difficult for Canada to take a stand on the situation in Iran?

I'd like you to shed some light on this for me, because I've spoken with opponents of the regime who don't necessarily have the same vision of what Iran should be like in the future, after the likely fall of the regime.

[*English*]

Mr. Kaveh Shahrooz: I regret that the sound system translation seemed to cut off, so I didn't catch the end of your question. I'm sorry.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Chair, I will take back my time, if I may.

[*English*]

The Chair: Please go ahead. We're not going to penalize you for that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I therefore take back my six minutes of time.

The Chair: I believe it's only your question that the witness didn't hear. Go ahead and ask it again.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I'll start from the beginning.

Thank you to everyone for being with us today to participate in this important study.

Mr. Shahrooz, Mr. Ehsassi asked you some compelling questions about opposition to the regime in the diaspora.

I totally agree with you that the vast majority of the diaspora is opposed to the regime currently in place. However, I've spoken with representatives of various opposition movements, and I wonder if the opposition is fragmented. I get the impression that there are different visions of what Iran should be like after the regime falls. That makes it hard for a country to take a stand.

I'd like you to enlighten me on this.

[*English*]

Mr. Kaveh Shahrooz: Understood. That's really an excellent question.

There is a difference in view in the diaspora in terms of what Iran should look like and what its orientation should be. Should it be a more of a left-leaning country or a right-leaning country? Among any group of people, any nation, there will be people who have different politics, but quite frankly, I've never seen this level of unity in the diaspora on the core idea that the Islamic regime must go. This spans everything from the far left of the Iranian community to the far right. I think they are all united on that.

I would also say that the chant I cited in my testimony, "Women, life, freedom", is sort of 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; to life, and a celebration of life, and a rejection of the cult of death and executions and the degradation of life by the Islamic Republic; and to freedom, which I think speaks for itself.

I think the entire diaspora, or the vast majority of the diaspora, is united on that. That tells me that their vision of a future Iran is a democratic one. It's a pluralistic one. It's one that respects women. There will be political disputes, as there will be in any country, but I think the opposition is united on a commitment to democracy and women's rights.

• (1340)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you so much, Mr. Shahrooz.

Dr. Hoodfar, I've also been in contact with some minorities that are either part of Iran or Afghanistan. I'm thinking, for example, of the Kurds, but also the Hazaras in Afghanistan.

The situation for women is already atrocious in these countries, so isn't it even worse when they're part of an ethnic or religious minority?

The committee members would be very grateful if you could paint a picture of the situation for women in these minorities.

[*English*]

Dr. Homa Hoodfar: Thank you for this question.

This movement of “Women, life, freedom” actually started from the Kurdish area. Because it started from the margins, it brought those voices that usually are omitted from the voices in the centre. This time, this movement has brought people together. It has given a voice for the first time amongst the movement to, for instance, Baluchi women and Kurdish women. They now have the space that historically they have never had. That to me is a very major thing.

The situation of Hazaras in the context of Afghanistan, unfortunately, is not as bright. There are still lots of attacks by the Taliban, especially for Hazaras inside Afghanistan, because they are a religious minority as well as a racial minority. That really needs the attention of our international community. They live in a gender apartheid society, but they are also especially prosecuted for being Hazaras and being a Shia minority. Unfortunately, that's one of the saddest situations in Afghanistan—the Hazaras who are left behind.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

I would also like Ms. Gonzalez Manchón to tell us about the situation of Hazara women in Afghanistan, if she has the expertise.

Ms. Beatriz Gonzalez Manchón: Thank you for the question.

I don't necessarily have any expertise on the Hazara ethnic minority. However, whenever we talk about human rights, there is obviously some intersectionality.

With oppressive systems or ideologies like the ones we're talking about, obviously we're seeing various aspects of discrimination, and I guess it happens in Afghanistan as well in ethnic minorities. We're seeing it in ethnic minorities in Myanmar, Iraq and other countries.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Ms. Gonzalez Manchón.

Mr. Shahrooz, some saw what was done to the schoolgirls in Iran, which specifically targeted girls, as retaliation by the regime.

Do you agree with the theory that these girls were targeted purely out of vengeance, and to warn people of what's to come?

[*English*]

The Chair: Could you answer in about 10 or 20 seconds, please?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I'm sorry.

[*English*]

Mr. Kaveh Shahrooz: I'm sorry, but I always lose the tail end of the question, but I—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: In your opinion, was it a desire for vengeance that led the regime to target the schoolgirls?

Was it also a warning to the rest of the people of what's to come?

[*English*]

Mr. Kaveh Shahrooz: I'm sorry, but for whatever reason, it doesn't seem to be working. However, I think I understood the thrust of the question.

This does seem to be born out of a desire for vengeance, for punishing these schoolgirls. You must understand that girls as young as 10 were seen protesting in large numbers against this regime, and this regime's modus operandi has been to target precisely the people who are standing up against them.

For example, the working class rose up against the regime and two of the people this regime executed very publicly were working-class young men to send a message to the working class to go back home and stop protesting. These chemical attacks against schoolgirls also seem to be in that vein. They seem to be designed to send a message to these girls that if they come out again, if they push back against the government, if they join these protests, they will be punished, and the regime is going to target the very thing that empowers them, which is their education.

• (1345)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Shahrooz.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

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

Before we continue, I'd like us to address the interpretation issue. I let it go this time because it's an important issue, but I want to get it resolved before we move on to the next round of questions.

Thank you.

The Chair: You're welcome.

[*English*]

We're going to monitor this and fix it.

We're going to continue for the next six minutes with Ms. McPherson.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Chair, excuse me. I have a point of order.

The Chair: Is the interpretation working or not?

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: What I'd like is for us to fix the interpretation issue and then start the next round of questions, not start the next round of questions and then fix the interpretation issue.

The Chair: Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, can you keep talking for a while?

[*English*]

We're just taking care of this.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Yes, I can certainly do that. I can recite a nursery rhyme, if you like. Perhaps it will lighten the mood.

One, two, buckle my shoe
Three, four, knock at the door
Five, six, pick up sticks

Is it working now?

The Chair: It's working now.

[*English*]

Go ahead, Ms. Vandenberg.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): I just wanted to say it's been working fine on our side and for the staff as well.

The Chair: That's great. We're going to continue. I'm happy that it's been taken care of. We don't want to take away from the testimony, so let's get into it.

Go ahead, Ms. McPherson, please, for six minutes.

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

Thank you to all of our witnesses. I wish I could be with you in person today as we talk about this very important issue.

You know, obviously, we are seeing the gender apartheid happening in Iran. I represent Edmonton Strathcona where many victims from PS752 resided, but I want to start by taking a moment to just say something about the Iranian Canadians and the Iranian community outside of Iran, who have been just so incredible in fighting for the rights of Iranian women. The protests and the constant bringing of this forward, I think, are the reason we're studying this here and the reason this issue has become so important to so many people across the country. Thank you to everyone who has participated in that movement.

For us as a subcommittee of the foreign affairs committee, the goal now is to look at what things Canada can do to help the women of Iran, the people of Iran, to deal with their murderous regime.

I know, Ms. Gonzalez Mencken, you spoke about the feminist foreign policy. This is a huge issue, something I've raised many times. We've been told by the government that they in fact have in effect a feminist foreign policy but that it is not written down. It is not public. It is not something that is shared.

How important is it that this feminist foreign policy actually be articulated, actually be written down and actually be shared with Canadians and with people around the world?

Ms. Beatriz Gonzalez Manchón: Thank you for that question.

I would say that it's extremely important. In our first recommendation here, we lifted up how that feminist foreign policy has to be published and shared, and it has to have a coherence and an articulation of all of the different tools and policies that can also make a difference in its implementation. As one of the witnesses was saying here today—Professor, thank you for that comment—there has to be a coherence between what our international assistance does and what our foreign policy does. It's all part and parcel of achieving the goals that we have and supporting the groups around the world that are doing this work.

It's extremely important that it be published, that it be shared and that it have all of the tools that can bring that coherence and action.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

Also what it does is it provides leadership for other countries, for them to consider having a feminist foreign policy.

I really appreciate what you said about the idea that our development and our foreign policy must be aligned. In fact, I think our international development is a fundamental pillar of our foreign policy that needs to be used when we look at our defence, our peace and security, and our diplomacy.

Ms. Hoodfar, could you please comment on that as well? Perhaps talk a little about the need for the support, the funding and whatnot, to align with the feminist foreign policy. What does it mean to actually have predictable, long-term, flexible funding included in that?

• (1350)

Dr. Homa Hoodfar: That is quite important. Thank you for bringing that to the discussion.

A lot of times you get a project where its two years, three years or four years. These four-year projects are not going to deliver very much in terms of human rights. You have to have at least a 20-year policy that you dish out in a smaller but coherent way, so that we see the results at the end.

Those are very important. Also, there's combining economic supports with human rights issues, especially the rights of minorities, whether they're sexual minorities, religious minorities or racial minorities. Those are very important issues. In different countries those tend to be the most excluded groups of people. If you can protect their human rights, you can basically protect everybody else's human rights.

Often, not just in Canada but elsewhere, in the development project we separate human rights as politics and development as economic development, while these two should be hand in hand. They work together better if they are combined and in coherence with one another.

That's what we really wish to see in Canada to set an example for the rest of the feminist governments.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you. I would like to follow up on that.

You talked about the difference between having our human rights in one bowl and our development in another bowl. What I found is that we also have our trade in a different bowl. Unfortunately, we often prioritize trade over these other things like human rights and international development.

Perhaps you could comment on that.

The Chair: Comment within 30 seconds, please.

Dr. Homa Hoodfar: As I said, the combination of these all together, and I used the example of the bird, unless we get them together, we won't reach the results we want to have.

I hope we can come together and coordinate this policy. Thank you.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you very much.

I admire you very much for all of the work that you do.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. McPherson.

[*English*]

We will now continue to our final round of two minutes each.

We will start with Ms. Vandenbeld.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to direct my question to the Equality Fund.

I know that you have a unique mechanism, particularly because of how directly you support women on the ground—activists, human rights defenders—around the world. That gives you a unique perspective and also intel that's coming back to you.

One of the things you mentioned in your remarks was our human rights defenders stream. I'm very proud that came out of a recommendation, a report from this committee, to have a stream of immigration specifically for human rights defenders. I'm wondering if you could elaborate on how you would see that being expanded, not just in numbers—I would be so bold as to say I'd go even further than the numbers you were suggesting; we need to do this at scale—but also in the mechanism.

We know that human rights defenders often are not like other asylum seekers. They want to stay in their country. They want to return the moment it's safe, but they also have more urgency. When they need to get out, they need to get out now.

Is there a mechanism that you would see where, rather than being part of the asylum program, this would be a separate stream that

would specifically target human rights defenders? What would that look like?

Ms. Beatriz Gonzalez Manchón: Thank you so much for your question.

What we hear from human rights defenders is that they need that protection quickly when they need to leave, but that in itself is not sustainable. A mechanism as we recommended would also look at what supports are in place when those human rights defenders are part of, in the case of Iran for example, the diaspora. Can they continue doing their human rights defence? Can they continue to be in connection with others doing this work?

If those supports are not in place and that networking is not happening, then those who wanted them silenced and out of the country in the first place almost win. That's really important to take into account.

• (1355)

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to continue to our next round with Mr. Aboultaif for two minutes, please.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC): Thanks to the witnesses.

Mr. Shahrooz, thanks for appearing, among others.

The world's changing around us quite a bit. Everything we believe in is happening now, and we never thought it would happen, especially when it comes to Iran, Afghanistan and other places. There's China, for example, and so forth.

Are we up to the task in Canada to deal with such a human rights violation, especially against women and girls?

What can we do? If we are to set priorities, what can we do to make sure that we will be effective, rather than continuing to make those studies without any action plan that we know is going to make a difference?

Mr. Kaveh Shahrooz: That's an excellent question, sir.

I think there is a lot we can do. We are a middle power, but we're an important one and we have played this role before. I alluded to the really important role Canada played with respect to apartheid in South Africa. I think we ought to adopt the same plays from the same playbook.

Iran's apartheid regime needs to be isolated diplomatically, and we need to provide maximum support to the Iranian people to help overthrow their regime. That means many things. It means that we have to use our relationships with our like-minded countries, with our allies, to bring pressure to bear on the Iranian regime. It means we must, here in Canada, list the IRGC as a terrorist group, carving out people who were forced to serve as conscripts.

Just a minute ago, there was discussion about the human rights defenders stream. We really need to open our doors to human rights defenders who are languishing. In the last few days, I've been hearing many really troubling stories from human rights defenders who are stranded in Turkey and Iraq and want to come to this country.

These are actual, tangible ways we can help the revolution in Iran.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Yes, there's no unified front on Iran, as far as the western world is concerned. Canada is not at the same level as our allies.

Would any of the witnesses like to comment on that?

The Chair: Give a very brief remark.

Mr. Kaveh Shahrooz: If I may....

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Yes, either of you can comment.

Mr. Kaveh Shahrooz: If I may quickly say, there was no unified front against apartheid in South Africa either. It was then prime minister Mulroney who unified the west against apartheid in South Africa. It will take that kind of moral leadership for Canada to again be at the forefront of this battle against apartheid.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to continue on with Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe.

I'll ask all the witnesses to keep their earpieces. There's a slight delay in translation. It might be five to 10 seconds, so keep that in mind as you're listening in.

[*Translation*]

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

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

I did note Mr. Shahrooz's analogy to what happened under the apartheid regime. After Montreal mayor Jean Doré took action, Brian Mulroney took the lead. He called the Americans and the British and convinced them to follow suit. However, they were reluctant at the time. He took the lead and Nelson Mandela visited Canada first to recognize what he had done.

That's exactly what's happening right now, it's an apartheid in both Afghanistan and Iraq, but also in Saudi Arabia. Just recently we've seen that relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran seem to be warming up.

Won't that possibly put a damper on Canada's leadership?

The fact that relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran are warming up adds a much more complex dimension to what we're experiencing right now.

Do you agree with me?

[*English*]

The Chair: Answer within 40 seconds.

Mr. Kaveh Shahrooz: Was that question directed at me, sir?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Yes.

[*English*]

Mr. Kaveh Shahrooz: Absolutely, it is. That warming relationship is a barrier. MP Ehsassi alluded to it as well.

Anything that normalizes Iran's regime and creates greater alliances for it in the region is a barrier for Canada, and it's an obstacle for Iran's revolutionaries and human rights defenders. As I told

MP Ehsassi—and I wish to reiterate it here—our role in Canada is to stay focused on the things that matter. Here, the rights of women and girls matter a great deal.

It doesn't matter if Iran is normalizing its relationship with another authoritarian state and that deal is brokered by yet another authoritarian state in China. Our focus should remain on promoting the rights of women and girls. We should not get distracted by these regional alliances that are forming.

• (1400)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I'd very much like to thank all the witnesses.

[*English*]

The Chair: We're going to go to Ms. McPherson.

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

Again, thank you to all the witnesses.

Mr. Shahrooz, I have one very quick question for you. Many of the members of all parties have sponsored women activists or protesters who are in prison in Iran. Is that an effective strategy? Are there other strategies similar to this that Canada can use?

Mr. Kaveh Shahrooz: It is a very effective strategy. An organization I referred to, the Iranian Justice Collective.... We've been keeping a database of this. What we've found is that the prisoners who have had sponsorship are actually more likely to be released. I've been doing this human rights work focused on Iran for many years. What former prisoners always tell me is that their situation always improves. Their interrogators treat them a little bit better, and they're more likely to be released when there are well-known western figures—western politicians, celebrities and so on—willing to speak out for them and keep their issues alive.

The Iranian regime ignores a lot of human rights obligations that they have, but they do care a great deal about what's being said about them in the west, so steps like that are incredibly effective. I would urge you and all your colleagues to continue with this really important work.

Ms. Heather McPherson: I had the great joy of the person I sponsored, the first young woman I sponsored, being released. It was a very nice day to hear that news.

Mr. Kaveh Shahrooz: I thank you. It's really the difference between life and death for a lot of people, so thank you very much.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Ms. Heather McPherson: I still have 30 seconds—goodness. I thought that I would only get one second.

I guess what I would do is just give this back to Ms. Gonzalez Manchón.

Is there anything, a last statement you'd like to make, with regard to what Canada can do to aid women in Afghanistan, in Iran and in Saudi Arabia?

Ms. Beatriz Gonzalez Manchón: Thank you so much.

I would really pick up on your last point and emphasize that the “Voices at Risk” guidelines that we have to support human rights defenders all around the world precisely have, for example, guidance to Canadian missions to attend trials of human rights defenders and hearings, to visit human rights defenders in prison. This is just validating that what works in Iran also works in other places.

Can we please assess how those guidelines are working, how they're being used and what we're learning from them as a way to improve what Canada is doing?

Ms. Heather McPherson: A recommendation for this committee could be, in fact, that we, as a committee, bring forward sponsorship or raise the plight of certain individuals.

The Chair: Is it yes or no on that?

Ms. Beatriz Gonzalez Manchón: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you.

We want to thank all the witnesses for being here today, for coming in person and by Zoom.

Ms. Hoodfar, Mr. Shahrooz and Ms. Manchón, thank you for being here today. We thank you for your testimony, for your advocacy and for raising the profile of these issues.

We're going to suspend for a moment while our next witnesses come in.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I'm not sure if this is a point of order or a point of privilege, but one of the things that's interesting about our committee and that's different from other committees is that we have not passed a motion that allows each party's whip staff to gain access to the digital binders, so I'm just wondering if we can get the consent of our committee to allow our whip staff to have access to the digital binders.

I have a motion, if we want to go in that direction. I move:

That the clerk of the committee be authorized to grant access to the committee's digital binder to the offices of the whips of each recognized party.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

Did we receive notice of this?

• (1405)

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Ariane Gagné-Frégeau): No.

The Chair: We did not receive notice of this, so please give notice—unless the committee gives leave for this to be voted on right now.

Is that correct?

The Clerk: You can have unanimous consent to vote on it now.

The Chair: Is there unanimous consent for this?

There isn't in the room.

What's the procedure here?

Mr. Arnold Viersen: If there's no unanimous consent, I'll move the motion at a later date.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Viersen.

I encourage the members to speak with each other, given that there's not unanimous consent.

As you mentioned, Mr. Viersen, this is a committee that operates differently with unanimous consent. We are going to have a conversation around that if possible.

Let us now suspend for a moment while we get ready for the second panel.

• (1405)

(Pause)

• (1410)

The Chair: We'll resume.

We're going, now, into our second panel. I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here in person and by Zoom.

We have, from Amnesty International Canada, Ketty Niyabandi, secretary general; from Oxfam Canada, Lauren Ravon, executive director, via Zoom; and also Léa Pelletier-Marcotte from Oxfam-Québec, policy analyst.

We'll have five minutes for introductory remarks from each of the two organizations. We'll start with Amnesty for five minutes, please.

Ms. Ketty Niyabandi (Secretary General, Amnesty International Canada): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, for the invitation to appear before the subcommittee.

I would like to start by noting how timely your study is. Decades of progress and hard-earned wins for women's rights are under attack across the globe, and it really feels like we are swimming against the tide. I know that this committee has heard extensively on the state of women's rights in Iran, Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia, so I will focus my remarks on brief updates and recommendations for action.

First, in Saudi Arabia, you may recall that the Personal Status Law, which was passed just a year ago and was framed by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman as a step towards progress and equality, has just marked a year now. In reality, although the law did introduce some positive reforms such as setting a minimum age for marriage, for instance, it really has codified some of the informal and very problematic practices of the male guardianship system. The law fails to protect women from domestic violence, and it entrenches a system of gender-based discrimination in marriage, divorce, custody and inheritance.

It is therefore key for the Government of Canada to press Saudi authorities to act on their CEDAW commitments, which they ratified in 2000, and to end the male guardianship system in full.

Also crucial is ending the imposition of travel bans against women human rights defenders and releasing the women who are unjustly imprisoned for their peaceful expression in support of women's rights. This would include the release of women's rights activist, Salma al-Shehab, who was sentenced last year to 34 years in prison based on tweets in support of human and women's rights.

Canada, in partnership with its G7 allies, can and must sustain international pressure on the Saudi authorities to respect women's rights and freedoms.

In Iran, the penal code, as you know, enables security and administrative bodies to arbitrarily arrest, detain and punish women. To put this in real terms, the punishment for women's acts that are deemed offensive to public decency includes 10 days to two months of imprisonment or 74 lashes under article 638 of the Islamic Penal Code.

Canada must condemn these laws and regulations that deny women access to public institutions, and here I mean hospitals, schools, government offices and airports, if they do not cover their hair, as well as the ongoing surveillance and harassment to implement the forced veiling laws. Also critical are independent investigations of the torture and ill treatment of Iranian women human rights defenders.

Canada should not be deceived by claims of disbanding the morality police, but instead call for immediate transformative change that will transition Iran to a political and legal system that respects women's basic human rights.

In Afghanistan, as you know, the situation is disastrous. In December of last year alone, women were banned from attending university and from employment by local and foreign NGOs. These rules followed a ban on women entering parks and gyms, attending secondary schools and participating in sports.

The Taliban have decimated the system of protection and support for those who are fleeing domestic violence. They have detained women and girls on minor violations, and we are now seeing a surge in the rates of child, early and forced marriage. Last November, three prominent women human rights defenders were arrested with their colleagues for their peaceful activism.

Canada must call not only for the Taliban to urgently lift their restrictions on women and girls but also for an end to their crackdown on anyone who dares to protest these constraints. Again, sustained international pressure is the only hope to reverse the stifling ban on human rights and women's rights.

Mr. Chair, as tragic as the situation in these three countries is, I wish to note that the rise of attacks on women and gender rights is global, and I encourage you to investigate these trends as well as situations in other countries. Online violence and the spread of transnational anti-feminist and anti-gender narratives are at an alarming high, with devastating impacts on women, particularly here in Canada as well.

Last, I will just highlight the need to support women human rights defenders in peril, particularly when they arrive on Canadian soil, because existing systems are inadequate, and we need practical solutions to support them.

I'll stop here now, and I'll be happy to expand on these further in the question period.

Thank you.

• (1415)

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

Now we're going to continue to Oxfam.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Ravon, you have the floor for five minutes.

[*English*]

Please, go ahead.

Ms. Lauren Ravon (Executive Director, Oxfam Canada): Thank you.

Thank you very much for inviting us at Oxfam to appear before the subcommittee. It's fantastic to be appearing with Ketty and the analysis of amnesty.

My name is Lauren Ravon. I'm the executive director of Oxfam Canada. I'm here with my colleague, Léa Pelletier-Marcotte, from Oxfam-Québec.

We are both joining you, unfortunately, virtually from the traditional territory of the Mohawk peoples and are grateful to our host nation for the privilege of living on their lands.

As I speak to you today, we know the world is experiencing a time of crisis. Extreme inequality, climate change and unprecedented food and energy price inflation, which 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.

According to the UN, 339 million people are in urgent need of humanitarian aid, which is the largest number in history, and acute food insecurity is escalating, with 45 million people at risk of starvation.

All of these crises we're facing have profound implications for women, from restricting their access to sexual and reproductive health services, to exacerbating gender-based violence and increasing their unpaid care work. The progress we've made to achieve gender equality has been set back by generations. It's now estimated that it will take close to 300 years to close the global gender gap.

For example, in Yemen, where Saudi Arabia and other external actors have been fuelling armed conflict for close to eight years now, women's rights have faced setback after setback. We see that gender-based violence has increased by at least 66% since the beginning of the conflict, and we know that physical and emotional abuse and domestic violence are intrinsically linked to the deep economic crisis that households are experiencing, and that families are resorting to harmful coping strategies, like child marriage, to survive.

The conflict in Yemen has created one of the worst displacement crises in the world. One in three households that have been forced to flee is headed by a woman, which puts them at an increased risk of violence. Despite the critical role that Yemeni women have been playing to respond to the crisis, their political participation has declined sharply, especially since 2015. In fact, there are now no women in the cabinet of the recently formed Yemeni government, which is a sad first in over 20 years.

Women are also facing risks of arbitrary detention and forced disappearance. We know that many women activists and artists are currently jailed.

In the north of Yemen, women are required by the authorities to be accompanied by a male guardian when travelling. This restriction primarily targets female humanitarian workers, including our Oxfam colleagues and our colleagues in the Yemeni organizations we work with. This not only hampers our ability to deliver life-saving humanitarian aid, but it actually threatens the very existence of many women-led organizations in the country.

Pressure on Yemeni authorities and regional actors by donor countries like Canada can be effective. We saw this result in a relaxing of restrictions last year. However, it's crucial that external pressure be paired with increased support to local civil society, including women's rights organizations.

Looking beyond Yemen, as Ketty said, we're witnessing the rise of interconnected anti-rights movements around the world: anti-women, anti-trans, anti-abortion, anti-feminist, anti-democratic, anti-free press. Attacks on women's rights defenders and LGBTQ activists are on the rises around the world. Women politicians and journalists are being harassed, threatened and attacked both in person and online.

This violence and intimidation is clearly a form of backlash against women's rights. It's intended to silence women and gender-diverse people and keep them from holding positions of power. This is not only a threat to women's rights. It's also a threat to democracy and to all of our freedom.

I just want to end by sharing five of Oxfam's recommendations for the committee's consideration.

First, the government should finally launch Canada's feminist foreign policy, speak up for women's rights in multilateral spaces and use diplomatic channels to protect women's rights and women human rights' defenders.

Second, Canada should increase humanitarian aid to meet record needs, building up to \$1.8 billion of new and additional funding by 2025, starting with a \$600 million increase in international assistance in this upcoming budget.

Third, Global Affairs Canada should launch the second phase of the women's voice and leadership program. In countries like Yemen, Canada should provide women-led organizations with flexible humanitarian funding and invest in strengthening their capacity to engage in peacebuilding and conflict resolution.

• (1420)

Fourth, Canada should implement a refugee protection and resettlement system that is based on equity and fair access for all and that would allow more people to seek safety in Canada more quickly, no matter where they are coming from.

Finally, as was discussed in the previous session, it should establish an emergency evacuation program and an accelerated visa process for human rights defenders and prioritize those facing heightened risk, including women activists, journalists and LGBTQ defenders.

I'm looking forward to questions. Thank you for the opportunity to appear on behalf of Oxfam.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Ravon.

We are now going to go into our first round.

Mr. Aboultaif, go ahead for five minutes.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Thanks to the witnesses for appearing today.

If I may call you Ketty, there are chemical attacks on girls at schools in Iran that are happening as we speak. How do you read this? Do you have any details to share with us on how widespread these are? What's behind them? Is there any hope that these are going to stop?

Ms. Ketty Nivyabandi: I can't share the details now. All our analysis around this is based on first-hand research that we conduct and, therefore, we first go on the ground as much as possible or collect first-hand accounts before we can make any pronouncement so that it will be really factual. I would be happy to report back to the committee on these recent actions.

What I would note, though, is that this is really part of a war on women and girls in Iran overall. We have seen various forms of attacks that are targeted at silencing women and girls, particularly at this moment when we're seeing unprecedented protests and challenge of the Iranian authorities. I think it's important to read that as part of that desire to crush any dissent at a moment when the Iranian authorities feel very vulnerable.

I will close here.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: I know we have policies we use to enhance and improve the conditions, the livelihoods and the human rights of women, but it seems as though the challenge we have here is that we're dealing with different agendas on different fronts.

For example, what works for Iran and Afghanistan might not work for Saudi Arabia and Yemen. What works for any part of the world might not work in another part. Therefore, we are in need of more creative ways to look into different areas so that we are most effective rather than having a broad policy of "one size fits all".

How do you see Canada's readiness in leading the way in at least some areas to make the needed improvements, specifically now in Iran, which, in my opinion, should be number one in terms of attention, and then in Afghanistan and other places?

Ms. Ketty Nivyabandi: That's a broad question. It's very much both a foreign policy question and also a tactical question as well.

I will say that, first and foremost, you are right in the sense that you can't apply the same strategy overall, but you do have to apply the same values and standards across the board. That needs to be really clarified. When we speak up on human rights in Iran, we must also do so wherever else these rights are at risk.

I think it requires considerable investment in really identifying strategies that work for each country, working with civil society, working with defenders who are on the ground and who understand the challenges in their countries better than anyone else does, and devising strategies that are informed rather than employing the same tactic across the board.

It's clear from what we're seeing around the world that these attacks are unique. They are also sophisticated. They are becoming more and more professional, and they need Canada and other countries that are standing up for human rights to do that with as much capacity as possible as well.

I hope that assists.

• (1425)

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: The question again is how ready we are in Canada to take leadership, if not on all fronts then at least on some initiatives, to be able to be effective and to make a difference.

Ms. Ketty Nivyabandi: I think Canada has the potential to do that. It's a question of political will as well, but the potential is there and the leadership is needed certainly. There's a global vacuum in leadership on human rights, and there's a role that Canada can play.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: In your message to the Canadian government, was there a specific message on the leadership? What are you doing to lobby further and to push the government—or actually to direct the government—into probably a better approach that is more effective?

Ms. Ketty Nivyabandi: It's the work that we do daily. We advise the Canadian government to take strategic approaches. I would add to this that the world craves a Canada that is bolder on human rights, more articulate, not afraid and able to uphold the rights of all across the globe. I think I'd like to emphasize that. If we're going to be credible on human rights, we have to do so across all countries and not necessarily prioritize some over others, or some human rights crises over others.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for that.

Now we are going to continue to our next round.

Mr. Sidhu, you have five minutes.

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

I'd like to thank our witnesses for joining us here today to share your insights. It was International Women's Day a couple of days

ago, so thank you for your work and your inspiration. I know my daughters are very inspired by the work you guys do.

My question to you is this. We heard in your opening remarks, Secretary General, about the importance of protecting human rights defenders and the need to do more. We heard from Ms. Ravon as well. She mentioned maybe expediting visa processing.

Secretary General Nivyabandi, do you have any thoughts in terms of what more we can do, or any further insights you can provide on what we can do?

Ms. Ketty Nivyabandi: Absolutely.

Yes, women human rights defenders, when they are risking their lives to protect human rights, justice or freedoms, find themselves in incredible danger. These things often happen within 24 hours or 48 hours. I'll give you the case of a human rights defender in Nicaragua just a couple of weeks ago when over 200 Nicaraguans were stripped of their citizenship, and we needed to find a solution for her urgently. We needed to get her out of the country, and we needed the support of a country to do that.

Here is where I think Canada falls short, and there's a lot of opportunity. First and foremost, we absolutely need an emergency visa system that is specifically designed for human rights defenders at risk. Right now, there's a gap in our immigration system. You can apply for a tourist visa or you can come as part of a refugee stream, but if you're in the country and need to leave, you will be denied a visa precisely because you are considered to be at risk of not returning to the country. You're penalized. Human rights defenders are penalized for their status.

We do need a stream for that. Some countries, particularly in Europe, have models that I think Canada can follow, including Ireland. That's the first thing.

Also, once they get here, they need support. We need to be able to fund a program for activists at risk that enables them to have the assistance. It could be in the form of fellowships or programs for activists at risk here in Canada that support them, so they're able to continue their work while they're temporarily relocated.

Lastly, I would say that we need a "Voices at Risk" guidelines equivalent for those who have left their countries and are here in exile. They're exiled in Canada. The "Voices at Risk" are very explicit for people who are outside, but once they've relocated and they've made it onto Canadian soil, these women human rights defenders find themselves lost in the system. We need clear guidelines to support them.

• (1430)

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you for that.

Ms. Ravon, I'll turn next to you. You mentioned difficulties and challenges in many countries around the world. I wanted to hear more about the work your organization does in some of these countries, projects that you think stand out that need to be amplified. I'd like to give you a moment to talk about some of those programs, if you don't mind.

Ms. Lauren Ravon: Thanks for the opportunity.

Maybe, if you don't mind, I would start, also, by following up on what Ketty just said on human rights defenders. There are three things I want to add. One is this issue of having to have left the country. That's a major barrier and something we have seen with activists we have worked with. Many, within a 24-hour crisis, won't have a UNHCR referral to be applying for asylum, so changing that is crucial.

The second one is around nurturing civil society in exile in Canada through supports. We know that WAGE and other government departments have built up more support for the women's movement in Canada over the years, and this is fantastic. However, looking at exiled activists as part of an ecosystem of civil society in Canada is crucial, and it connects the dots between local civil-society strengthening and our international development assistance.

Then a third point I would say on that relates more to Global Affairs and Global Affairs funding. At Oxfam, we support women's rights organizations and feminist movements in many countries around the world, in part through programs like the women's voice and leadership program but also in areas like gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive rights in challenging countries from Yemen to Pakistan to Central America.

One gap we have identified that I want to mention is the difficulty of funding activists in exile, so not only those who make it to Canada but, if you think of the context, for example, of Afghanistan, activists or Afghan politicians who may have fled the border into neighbouring countries, whether it's Pakistan or elsewhere. It's very hard to support those activists in exile through Global Affairs programs that are intended to build up human rights programs and women's rights organizations because of that fluidity of having gone elsewhere. However, we know that those are the voices that keep hope alive for many people who are back in the country and who keep up resistance when it's unsafe to be in the country. These are the women and the activists who usually will then return to their country and be key leaders in democratic movements.

I just want to put that on the table.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Sidhu.

We're going to continue to our next round of five minutes with Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Witnesses, keep your earpieces in if you need them.

[*Translation*]

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

Thanks to everyone for being here with us today for this important study.

You all talked a great deal about Yemen in your opening remarks. We know that an indirect war between Iran and Saudi Arabia is being fought on its territory.

Ms. Pelletier-Marcotte, I'm going to ask you a two-part question.

Canada is currently sending humanitarian aid to Yemen, but I think we can all agree that it's not enough. It's still far below what the United Nations (UN) is asking for, and that's 0.7% of the gross domestic product (GDP), or the average among Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, which is 0.42% of GDP. We're contributing even less than the Harper government was.

That said, we are sending some humanitarian aid to Yemen, and I'd like to know if the Canadian government is sending enough.

If so, what action should be supported or not supported in Yemen?

Ms. Léa Pelletier-Marcotte (Policy Analyst, Oxfam-Québec): Thank you very much for the question. I'll try to answer it as best I can.

The Yemen issue is indeed quite complex. 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. Many of us have said so here. 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.

That includes ensuring that the policies under which women work are respectful of them and promoting policies and a judicial system that build the country's confidence.

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.

● (1435)

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Isn't it a little counterproductive to fund humanitarian aid organizations on the one hand, and sell arms to Saudi Arabia on the other?

It doesn't really make sense, does it?

Ms. Léa Pelletier-Marcotte: Yes, it's important that measures be consistent.

It's a leadership issue. In the past, some countries have made decisions and stopped sending arms to countries participating indirectly in the Yemen conflict.

We're still waiting for Canada to show similar leadership on this issue.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I believe Oxfam-Quebec is active on the ground in Yemen. Therefore, you have experience on the ground.

Can you explain to the committee how it's going for women right now?

What's the situation in Yemen as far as women's rights go?

Ms. Léa Pelletier-Marcotte: Yes, we are on the ground.

Generally speaking, Oxfam is working with local partners. We never arrive somewhere in our big shoes telling people how they should do things. We work with the partners.

Oxfam-Quebec supports Oxfam projects with local partners in Yemen, particularly with respect to sanitation services and access to safe drinking water. We're striving to provide better access to water and reinforce hygiene measures.

The Yemen conflict is very complex, and I won't go into detail. Nevertheless, I can say that women face many challenges, especially those working in the organizations we deal with. Female aid workers and female workers in our member organizations are somewhat limited in their ability to act, particularly because of the policy that women must be accompanied by a *mahram*, which means guard, as they move around.

We've seen that leadership from Canada and donor countries can bring about change. That policy has been relaxed. It's more open and, on certain days, women can walk around unaccompanied in some directorates. However, things remain limited. Still, we've seen that things can change.

It's also important to remember that women have been politically engaged, politically active for a long time. Since the conflict, we've really seen a decline in terms of that engagement. That's why it's important to enforce the UN resolution "Women, Peace and Security" to ensure that women are fully included in peace process negotiations. Right now, they are excluded. Leadership is needed to make sure they're part of it.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Is my time already up?

The Chair: Unfortunately, it is.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Okay.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe and Ms. Pelletier-Marcotte.

[English]

We will continue with Ms. McPherson for five minutes, please.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here with us and for sharing your expertise with us.

I am glad that my colleague Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe asked about the arms being sent to Saudi Arabia. I think that's the exact indication of why we need a written-down, public, feminist foreign policy. There was 118 million dollars' worth of armoured vehicles sent to Saudi Arabia in January alone. It is the opposite of action on a feminist foreign policy.

One of the things I want to make very clear is that we often hear, with regard to international development, that there needs to be more support from Canadians. I can tell you that there is huge support across Canada to stop sending arms to Saudi Arabia, yet the Canadian government doesn't act on it. That is a big issue for me, so you can probably hear me being quite frustrated in my language.

Ms. Nivyabandi, you talked a bit about how Canada cannot be credible unless we apply human rights lenses equitably across the world. We can't pick and choose.

Could you talk about some of the places where you have seen that Canada has not done that? Where have we not stood up for human rights when we should have?

Ms. Ketty Nivyabandi: Yes. I think there's a degree of variation. There are instances where we do speak up on human rights, but perhaps not with the vigour that is needed.

I would mention countries... Even as recently as Peru, which just experienced a serious crisis. Here, I would highlight, sometimes, the conflict between trade interests and human rights. I think that's a very real conflict that needs to be resolved in terms of foreign policy. We need to be clear about what supersedes what—whether human rights actually supersede trade interests—and follow through.

Definitely in Latin America there were a number of cases. There was Peru, and also Colombia and elsewhere. Another example would be the situation of women in Palestine, for instance, which we don't hear about sufficiently because of Canada's position in relation to Israel. You can uphold the rights of both Israeli women and Palestinian women. It is very much possible and that's the lens that needs to be used across the board.

I'm a little bit concerned about the rapprochement with India and with Modi's government as well. I think we need to be very mindful of what is happening in India and ensure that our relationships do not, again, hinder our ability to speak up on human rights globally.

Egypt is another case that needs very strong and sustained positions.

As much as Canada has to manoeuvre its relationship with these countries in order to be a credible partner and sometimes a trade partner, it will only benefit Canada to be consistent across the board on its policies on human rights. That's the beauty of diplomacy. There's a way of being able to do both—to uphold trade interests while also prioritizing human rights across the board.

● (1440)

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you for raising that issue.

For me, it's always been a little bit like you can't have one without the other. Ultimately, those trade relationships will fail if we don't have good diplomacy and if we don't have good development relationships with other countries. I've framed it sometimes as the dessert you get when you actually do the hard work of development, human rights support and diplomacy.

Ms. Ravon, I have a question for you as well.

You talked about the need for Canada to invest more in humanitarian aid. You won't be surprised to hear me say that I agree. Our ODA is woefully low in Canada. It's embarrassing, when I am in the international sphere, to have to say that we are still at 0.3% for ODA.

I also would like you to talk a little bit about how that money should be spent. It's not just increasing the amount of money. It's ensuring that it is being done properly and that it is going to the right organizations. Could you share your thoughts on that?

Ms. Lauren Ravon: Thank you for the question.

There are a couple of things.

One is that the way we spend our money is just as important as how much we spend. The way we spend money needs to be in line with the feminist international assistance policy. We can't support feminist programming in ways that are very rigid, that transfer risk onto local partners, that are compliance-obsessed or that are inflexible.

There is a lot that can be done with the current budget to move our international aid funding to ways that are more flexible and that not only allow organizations to adapt to changing contexts, but enable organizations to adapt from long-term development programs to emergency response when there are humanitarian disasters.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to continue now for quick four-minute rounds.

We'll have Ms. Vandenbeld, please, for four minutes.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you very much.

I really want to thank our witnesses. I think there's a lot of information here that we can put into our recommendations, largely because of your direct connections with human rights defenders and women human rights activists.

I was very interested, Ms. Nivyabandi, when you talked about the sophisticated transnational anti-feminist narratives. I do believe, Ms. Ravon, that you mentioned that the backlash against women's rights is interconnected. We know that this is happening globally and that means Canada's not immune.

I'd like to direct this question first to Ms. Nivyabandi.

You spoke in your remarks about some of the needs that human rights defenders have once they get here. You touched on the need for protection and the threats that they continue to face once they're here. I wonder if you could elaborate a little bit on that, and then I'll ask Ms. Ravon to comment as well.

● (1445)

Ms. Ketty Nivyabandi: Yes, very quickly, I think there is work to be done to study further the rise of anti-rights, anti-gender and anti-feminist narratives. They are indeed transnational. They are interconnected. Just yesterday, I came back from Halifax and a round table with other scholars where they are actually studying exactly what this trend looks like. They are moving from country to country. It's more of networks that are rising. It's a mix of both a denial of the human rights framework and an emphasis on individual rights that we're seeing rising primarily in Europe but also in North America and various other countries as well.

One of the most effective ways for them to spread is through digital platforms and social media in particular. This is why the movement is becoming transnational. One of the major threats for defenders who are here in Canada comes through these platforms. The levels of online violence that human rights defenders in Canada are facing, as I said, are alarming. They receive threats, but beyond the online piece, they also receive physical threats. Some of them, particularly those from China, have reported receiving calls, being followed, and overt surveillance from their governments and actors that are close to their governments and who have a presence here on Canadian soil.

I would really like to highlight the need to better support women from online violence. We have just seen that the Governor General herself receives these levels of violence. Women journalists in particular are at risk here in Canada, as are a variety of other women human rights defenders.

There's an emboldening of the anti-gender, anti-feminist and anti-rights movements. It is spreading. It is organized. It is sophisticated. It is resourced. It needs an adequate response from the Canadian government. I'm quite concerned about where we're going to be in five years if we don't take concrete action today.

I'll stop here and give Lauren an opportunity to respond as well.

Ms. Lauren Ravon: Thanks, Ketty.

I totally agree. I think we need to be aware that the attacks against the most marginalized communities and human rights defenders are usually a canary in the coal mine that indicates a broader crackdown on democratic space and on civic space.

Right now, for example, there are the attacks on trans communities, LGBTQ organizing and the organizing of trans women in particular. The huge attacks that we see on them is a sign of what's to come in terms of broader attacks on women's rights, on human rights and on civic space. Seeing these as isolated incidents is dangerous, not only for their rights but also for the health of our democracies.

I just want to say, this week alone around International Women's Day, we've seen huge attacks, tens of thousands of people attacking one of our Oxfam Canada board members, an incredible trans woman activist. This is a sign that is incredibly concerning because it's also happening here in Canada.

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to continue to the next round for four minutes.

Go ahead, Mr. Viersen, please.

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

I want to thank our witnesses for being here today. This is an important topic to be discussing.

One of the witnesses was talking about Yemen. I'm wondering, given that it's not one of the countries listed in this study, how that's connected to either Iran or Saudi Arabia. I'm sure it is. I'm just wondering how they—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Is it that the interpretation isn't working?

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: That's not it.

I'd just like to remind my colleague that the study is about women's rights and freedoms around the world, including women in Afghanistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia. To my knowledge, Yemen is part of the world.

The Chair: Thank you.

That's a very significant observation.

[*English*]

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Obviously, there is a translation problem because I'm not suggesting that we shouldn't be talking about Yemen. I'm just wondering if the witness can clarify. I am aware, but for the general public, what is the interplay between the countries we have listed in our study and the situation that's happening in Yemen?

Ms. Léa Pelletier-Marcotte: Yes, I will clarify.

The topic was not limited in terms of how it was phrased. It was the decline of rights of women worldwide, including in Iran, Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia. As we know, many witnesses will talk about these other countries. We chose to focus on one country in the same region that was also affected. That covered all of the

other areas mentioned, including the involvement in peacebuilding, cyber-intimidation and politics.

We chose Yemen as a case study because we have boots on the ground there.

• (1450)

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Yes, I know. I'm not concerned about your including Yemen, but I'm just wondering if you can comment a little bit about the interplays. I think particularly with Iran and Saudi Arabia, there's an interesting interplay with Yemen.

Ms. Léa Pelletier-Marcotte: Absolutely.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: If you can explain that a little bit better... I'm somewhat familiar with it. All of these things are interconnected. I think I want to get that a little more on the record, the interconnectivity and perhaps how Canada can address that, because sometimes I feel we isolate these: "This is a Yemen problem. This is an Afghanistan problem. This is an Iran problem. This is a Saudi Arabia problem."

Do you have a specific recommendation on how can Canada address the interplay?

Ms. Léa Pelletier-Marcotte: Thank you for the question.

The conflict in Yemen has been internationalized since 2015 and many consider it a proxy conflict between different world powers, with different governments backing different coalitions or parties to the Yemen conflict. Of course there is an interplay there, especially with Iran and Saudi Arabia.

As I mentioned earlier, everything Canada does in terms of financing, but also whom we are supporting in terms of the arms trade especially, has a great impact on the humanitarian situation in Yemen and on the conflict itself. As the conflict progresses and just lasts, the humanitarian situation becomes dire, especially for women and girls. It was very opportune to address the topic of Yemen, seeing that it interrelates with these two countries that are specifically mentioned.

The Chair: Thank you for that, Mr. Viersen.

We'll continue to the next round.

[*Translation*]

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

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

My next questions are a bit off topic, and there are no wrong answers. I myself don't have any thoughts on this; I really need the insights of our witnesses.

For a year now, we've been pressing the executive branch of government to amend the Criminal Code to allow our humanitarian organizations to do their work in Afghanistan.

Yesterday, the government introduced Bill C-41. We know that the devil is in the details.

Have you had time to look at Bill C-41?

If you have, do you have any first impressions of the bill to share with us?

I don't know who the best person to answer my question would be.

Ms. Lauren Ravon: I can provide a very brief answer to your question.

Thank you for the question, it's a really important one.

The problem is getting worse and worse. We're going to see more and more conflict in the countries where we're trying to provide humanitarian aid. This is not an exception. I feel that on the face of it, at Oxfam, we're very happy to see that the issue is evolving.

The devil is always in the details. I believe it's going to be a work in progress, but it's a great example of international cooperation within civil society and of government listening to move an issue forward.

I wouldn't say it's all over and won, but we're certainly happy to see the issue moving forward.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Okay.

As soon as the committee starts considering the bill, you can contact us and we can talk about it again.

Ms. Ravon, I'm going to ask you my second question. As I told you, there are no right or wrong answers. I need your insight.

In your opinion, it's absolutely necessary that we go through diplomatic channels to improve women's rights abroad.

However, we have no embassy in Saudi Arabia. We have severed our diplomatic ties.

Are there more pros than cons to not having an embassy in a country?

I understand that it sent a message. However, if we want to fight for women's rights in Saudi Arabia, we have to get involved through consulates, if only to provide consular services.

So wouldn't it be better if we had an embassy?

Ms. Lauren Ravon: I'd be hard pressed to comment specifically on the benefits of having an embassy. I would instead go back to what I said earlier about connecting with communities in exile, to obtain intelligence, and connecting with communities in the actual countries.

Canada has a role to play in supporting human rights defenders once they are out, sometimes just across the border. For example, in Central America, there are a lot of activists in Costa Rica right now. They are doing their work from there. We don't yet have the mechanisms to properly support, equip and communicate with these activists in exile.

Therefore, I would encourage Global Affairs Canada to look at ways to develop trans-border programs. Right now, most programs are launched based on a country's specific needs.

There are offices overseeing bilateral cooperation, and we have a long-term program there. We don't have that flexibility, and I feel it's a way to not only support the movements, but also to obtain intelligence on what's going on inside through these activists.

• (1455)

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

We saw what happened to the former female Afghan parliamentarians. We're part of a small group fighting for these women and their families. Unfortunately, we lost one of these women.

Doesn't Canada have a duty to help out? Canada has clearly supported Afghan women's leadership through some programs to help them take their place in the public space.

Because we've helped them become empowered, don't we have a duty to help in a situation where the Taliban is taking over again and persecuting them, no matter where they are in the world right now?

Ms. Lauren Ravon: Yes, that's absolutely true.

As far as Afghanistan is concerned, promises have been made to support these people in exile, but it's not enough. They have not only helped their country, but they've also worked with Canada on democracy and human rights initiatives. Too little has been done, that's for sure.

We're talking about women in politics, but Ms. Pelletier-Marcotte and I see that our Oxfam colleagues in Afghanistan are putting themselves at very high risk, and they have no access to the programs Canada has set up. Some are still trapped in Afghanistan, while others have crossed the border and are in Pakistan but don't yet have Canada's support to ensure their safety.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: So we're talking about action to help aid workers and secure their visas.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe. Your time is up.

Thank you, Ms. Ravon.

[English]

We're going to continue now for four minutes with Ms. McPherson, please.

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

It's always a challenge to go after Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, because I often have the exact same questions as him.

I would like to just get a little bit more information about the response that people have to the new humanitarian carve-out. Obviously, many of us within the House of Commons were happy to see it come forward. We've been pushing for it for 18 months, but yesterday we did hear from some organizations that do not think this is sufficient.

It comes onto a bigger conversation that I want to have. Perhaps I'll ask each of you to comment on this idea that we don't have a diplomatic relationship with Iran and we don't have, obviously, a diplomatic relationship with the Taliban, but we do want to support women in those countries.

I get your point, Ms. Ravon, that we want to make sure that we are supporting them outside of the country to get them to safety.

On the role that Canada can play with regard to diplomacy, I don't want to be in a situation where we have to wait 18 months for a humanitarian carve-out in another circumstance. What can we do now? What needed to be done better with regard to the humanitarian carve-out? What does Canada's role with regard to diplomacy look like?

Perhaps I could start with you, Ms. Nivyabandi.

Ms. Ketty Nivyabandi: I'll actually let Oxfam respond. They're much more in depth in the humanitarian work. I can comment on what Canada can do when it comes to the multilateral systems and organizations.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Okay.

Ms. Lauren Ravon: The way Canada basically funds programming where there's humanitarian development needs a major shift and rethink. It's not only about carving out exceptions in certain conflict situations. It's that our aid is so compartmentalized.

I'll give you one example. We've received money from the Canadian government to support building the capacity of women's rights organizations in Pakistan. It's fantastic and much-needed work, but then we haven't had the flexibility to use those funds to support those same women's rights organizations to respond to the flooding in Pakistan that happened last fall. It's to be able to shift and say we're building up capacity, but then capacity is built and we can't use the same funds when circumstances change. This goes for humanitarian response for conflict.

It's rethinking the dividing lines between peacebuilding funds, humanitarian response funds, long-term development funding and democratic institution strengthening. The world doesn't work in those boxes. It certainly never has, but definitely doesn't now. It's rethinking channels of funding that allow for adaptive programming.

• (1500)

[Translation]

Ms. Léa Pelletier-Marcotte: I'm going to make a brief comment, if I may.

Even if we don't have actual diplomatic ties, we can still use our clout and influence in existing international forums, such as those at the UN, to try to get policies changed and other countries to change their attitude about this.

[English]

Ms. Heather McPherson: That's an excellent point.

Ketty, could I pass it to you?

Ms. Ketty Nivyabandi: Yes, I was going to comment on the same thing.

In terms of how to exercise pressure, I think international multilateral organizations—particularly the United Nations Human Rights Council and various other fora—are really critical spaces to make Canada's voice heard but also to build alliances with other countries. I really think that's where Canada has an opportunity to create groups and alliances 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. We hear that it's becoming increasingly difficult to even have gender-based language in those multilateral institutions. There's a lot of work that needs to be done to push back on the push-back. Really, there's an opportunity for Canada to do more there.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. McPherson.

That concludes our time for the second panel. We have very brief business afterwards, but I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here.

Thank you to Ms. Ketty Nivyabandi from Amnesty, Ms. Ravon from Oxfam Canada, and Ms. Pelletier-Marcotte from Oxfam-Québec.

Thank you for being with us by Zoom and in person.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I'd like to thank everyone.

[English]

The Chair: We're going to continue very briefly. First off, the second meeting on March 24 is going to be cancelled because of a House order related to President Biden's address, so our next meeting will not be happening, unfortunately, on that date. On the 31st of this month, we will be looking at the report on Haiti and also giving drafting instructions around this study that just concluded on women in Afghanistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

For the members, we went last time through the recommendations on Haiti. Please go through the rest of the text. Let's get that concluded for the next meeting so that we can continue what we set on the agenda.

At the same time, I'd ask that, given that there's a difference of opinion in the room and that we have always worked on consensus, there be conversation around what was brought forth by Mr. Viersen on this today, which represents an important change in the way our committee operates.

The next item is an announcement. Madame Clerk will send out information to all the members around the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the universal periodic review. There will be a meeting that everyone's invited to on Thursday, March 23, at 10 a.m. We'll be sending out an email to everyone on that point. You're invited to be there, but it's not obligatory.

I'll take you in a moment, Mr. Viersen.

Finally, let us pass the budget for the witnesses who appeared last time on Tibet. Everyone received that.

[*Translation*]

It's a request for \$7,225.

[*English*]

Can we approve that?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you.

For everybody's awareness, we have a second meeting on Tibet with respect to the residential schools that we discussed and looked at last time. The next set of witnesses, which will be in the next month, in April, will be experts.

This is all for today. Some of the members in the room really need to leave, and we will now adjourn.

Mr. Viersen, you're holding your friend back, though. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: You did say....

The Chair: Yes, you're correct. Go ahead.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: I was wondering. I seem to have caused some controversy with my motion, and you said that this is something to do with this committee's operating differently. I'm aware of some of the differences. Is it not the norm that whips' staff get access to the binders? Is that something that's been different in the past?

• (1505)

The Chair: In this committee, that's never happened before. It'll be a new precedent through what you're suggesting.

Mr. Arnold Viersen: Okay. We have a significant turnover in whips' staff. I was not aware that's not been the case in this committee. I'll continue to have discussions.

The Chair: Yes, that sounds like a good idea, and I think we all agree to that. Thank you, though, for that, Mr. Viersen.

I'm going to adjourn for the members in the room.

Thank you, everybody. Stay well.

[*Translation*]

This meeting is adjourned.

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