



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

RAISING HER VOICE: CONFRONTING THE UNIQUE CHALLENGES FACING WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

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

Michael Levitt, Chair

Subcommittee on International Human Rights

Anita Vandenberg, Chair

JUNE 2019

42nd PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Published under the authority of the Speaker of the House of Commons

SPEAKER'S PERMISSION

The proceedings of the House of Commons and its Committees are hereby made available to provide greater public access. The parliamentary privilege of the House of Commons to control the publication and broadcast of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its Committees is nonetheless reserved. All copyrights therein are also reserved.

Reproduction of the proceedings of the House of Commons and its Committees, in whole or in part and in any medium, is hereby permitted provided that the reproduction is accurate and is not presented as official. This permission does not extend to reproduction, distribution or use for commercial purpose of financial gain. Reproduction or use outside this permission or without authorization may be treated as copyright infringement in accordance with the *Copyright Act*. Authorization may be obtained on written application to the Office of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

Reproduction in accordance with this permission does not constitute publication under the authority of the House of Commons. The absolute privilege that applies to the proceedings of the House of Commons does not extend to these permitted reproductions. Where a reproduction includes briefs to a Standing Committee of the House of Commons, authorization for reproduction may be required from the authors in accordance with the *Copyright Act*.

Nothing in this permission abrogates or derogates from the privileges, powers, immunities and rights of the House of Commons and its Committees. For greater certainty, this permission does not affect the prohibition against impeaching or questioning the proceedings of the House of Commons in courts or otherwise. The House of Commons retains the right and privilege to find users in contempt of Parliament if a reproduction or use is not in accordance with this permission.

Also available on the House of Commons website
at the following address: www.ourcommons.ca

RAISING HER VOICE: CONFRONTING THE UNIQUE CHALLENGES FACING WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

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

**Michael Levitt
Chair**

Subcommittee on International Human Rights

**Anita Vandenbeld
Chair**

JUNE 2019

42nd PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

NOTICE TO READER

Reports from committee presented to the House of Commons

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

To assist the reader:

A list of acronyms used in this report is available on page xi

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

CHAIR

Michael Levitt

VICE-CHAIRS

Hon. Erin O'Toole

Guy Caron

MEMBERS

Ziad Aboultaif

Leona Alleslev

Frank Baylis

Pamela Goldsmith-Jones (Parliamentary Secretary — Non-Voting Member)

Kamal Khera (Parliamentary Secretary — Non-Voting Member)

Robert Oliphant (Parliamentary Secretary — Non-Voting Member)

Raj Saini

Jati Sidhu

Anita Vandenberg

Borys Wrzesnewskyj

OTHER MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT WHO PARTICIPATED

Gary Anandasangaree

Garnett Genuis

CLERK OF THE COMMITTEE

Erica Pereira

LIBRARY OF PARLIAMENT

Parliamentary Information and Research Service

Brian Hermon, Analyst

Scott McTaggart, Analyst

SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS

CHAIR

Anita Vandenberg

VICE-CHAIRS

David Sweet

Cheryl Hardcastle

MEMBERS

David Anderson

Peter Fragiskatos

Iqra Khalid

Marwan Tabbara

OTHER MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT WHO PARTICIPATED

Rachel Bendayan

Francis Drouin

Scott Duvall

Rosemarie Falk

Peter Fonseca

Randall Garrison

Hon. Kent Hehr

Michel Picard

Scott Simms

Salma Zahid

CLERKS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE

Erica Pereira

Aimée Belmore

LIBRARY OF PARLIAMENT

Parliamentary Information and Research Service

Karine Azoulay, Analyst

Brendan Naef, Analyst

Julian Walker, Analyst

THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

has the honour to present its

TWENTY-NINTH REPORT

Pursuant to the motion adopted by the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development on Thursday, February 4, 2016, and the motion adopted by the Subcommittee on Thursday, May 18, 2017, the Subcommittee has studied women human rights defenders.

Your Committee has adopted the report, which reads as follows:

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ACRONYMS.....	XI
SUMMARY	1
LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS	3
RAISING HER VOICE: CONFRONTING THE UNIQUE CHALLENGES FACING WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS	5
Introduction.....	5
Risks and Threats Facing Women Human Rights Defenders	6
Gender-Specific Risks and Threats	6
Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment	7
Impact on the Families of Women Human Rights Defenders	8
Attacks on the Character of Women Human Rights Defenders.....	9
Identity and Impact	11
Changing Mindsets.....	12
Institutional Obstacles Facing Women Human Rights Defenders.....	13
Barriers to Political Participation	13
Impunity.....	15
Threats Against Civil Society.....	17
Supporting a Strong, Secure and Independent Civil Society.....	19
Protecting Women Human Rights Defenders in Peril.....	19
Funding and Capacity Building for Women’s Organizations	20
Diplomacy and Advocacy	22
A Role for Canadian Diplomatic Missions: From Guidelines to Action.....	22
Mainstreaming Support for Women Human Rights Defenders Throughout Canada’s Foreign Policy.....	23
A Coordinated Response	25

Conclusion	27
APPENDIX A LIST OF WITNESSES	29
REQUEST FOR GOVERNMENT RESPONSE	31

LIST OF ACRONYMS

GAC	Global Affairs Canada
HRD	Human rights defender
LGBTI	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and intersex
NGO	Non-governmental organization
WHRD	Woman human rights defender
UN	United Nations
US	United States

SUMMARY

Many human rights defenders (HRDs) risk their safety and that of their families to speak out against injustice. Women who do so face even greater risks – simply because of their gender. Many women human rights defenders (WHRDs) take up their causes knowing that their work will negatively impact their lives. They face the risk of sexual assault, threats to their family and efforts to smear their reputations, often based on gender stereotypes. They face threats and resistance not only from the targets of their activism such as the state or the private sector, but also from their own communities and families. These WHRDs are often failed by state institutions. Political institutions can be hostile to women in many respects, and impunity for crimes committed against WHRDs often prevails. In many places where civil society is under threat, women-led organizations are particularly vulnerable to state pressure. WHRDs who face intersecting forms of discrimination, such as indigenous or LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and intersex) persons, are at even greater risk.

To foster WHRDs' important work, Canada and the international community must directly acknowledge and address gender-specific obstacles to participation in human rights activism. To further that goal, over the course of six meetings in Spring 2019, the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development (the Subcommittee) heard from indigenous land rights defenders, parliamentarians, lawyers, public health workers and other advocates, working in the Americas, South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. The Subcommittee salutes their courage and thanks them for sharing their personal, and often heartbreaking, stories.

Despite their differing circumstances, witnesses shared common cause. They told the Subcommittee that the best way for Canada to support WHRDs abroad is to bolster their work and to foster a strong, secure and independent civil society. In this spirit, the Subcommittee makes four recommendations. All are founded on the idea that any support that does not account for gender-specific threats will fail WHRDs and civil society at large. The Subcommittee recommends that the Government of Canada, in conjunction with international partners, develop an action plan to mount a comprehensive effort to protect WHRDs and promote their work. The action plan should include: funding for WHRDs' organizations; establishing meaningful partnerships with Canada's diplomatic missions; meeting the needs of WHRDs in peril including through tailored immigration processes; enhancing Canada's existing guidelines for protecting HRDs by establishing indicators and benchmarks for evaluation; and empowering

diplomatic missions to proactively monitor the situations of WHRDs. GAC should promote this action plan among communities of WHRDs around the world, so they know what they can expect from Canada. The action plan should be complemented by bilateral and multilateral engagement towards combatting impunity and supporting justice reform. GAC should make every effort to ensure that Canadian businesses respect human rights, particularly through the office of the Canadian Ombudsperson for Responsible Enterprise. Finally, the Subcommittee recommends that the Government of Canada's foreign policy choices be consistent with the goals of promoting WHRDs' participation in public life and institutions.

Witnesses told the Subcommittee that previous gains made by women's movements are being reversed, threatening their own security and the strength of civil society. Overconfidence and complacency, one witness noted, had left her community ill-equipped to deal with resurgent misogyny and its consequences. Witnesses called on Canada to be vigilant. The enjoyment of human rights depends on the strength of those who stand up to defend them. WHRDs do not need more courage. They need better support.

LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

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

Recommendation 1 – Building an Action Plan to Support Women Human Rights Defenders

That the Government of Canada develop an action plan to:

- **establish processes and procedures for expediting emergency visas for women human rights defenders and their families when they are in imminent danger;**
- **ensure that infrastructure and resources are in place to be ready to assist in temporarily relocating women human rights defenders and their families into Canada or other countries;**
- **study and report on international best practices regarding the temporary or permanent relocation of women human rights defenders and their families when they are under threat or in imminent danger;**
- **enhance measures to support women human rights defenders and their organizations abroad, including through core funding and funding for locally-developed training programs;**
- **establish indicators for evaluating women-led civil society organizations' ability to operate freely, proactively monitor their status, and raise the cases of at-risk individuals or organizations with governments and other partners, as appropriate;**
- **enhance, through diplomatic missions, efforts to identify and partner with women's human rights organizations that can use Canadian support through measures such as funding or advocacy; and**

- develop an information campaign to raise international awareness about the programs and assistance that Canada offers to support women human rights defenders.

In developing and implementing this action plan, the Government of Canada should continually consult and coordinate with the international community, including but not limited to, the United Nations, regional organizations, like-minded states and other partners. 25

Recommendation 2—Combatting Impunity

That Global Affairs Canada engage bilaterally and multilaterally to combat impunity for human rights violations against women human rights defenders. 26

Recommendation 3—Promoting Respect for Human Rights in the Private Sector

That Global Affairs Canada act decisively to ensure that Canadian businesses respect human rights abroad, particularly through the office of the Canadian Ombudsperson for Responsible Enterprise. 27

Recommendation 4—Seizing All Opportunities to Support Women Human Rights Defenders through Canadian Diplomacy

That the Government of Canada ensure that all foreign policy choices are consistent with the goal of facilitating women human rights defenders’ participation in public discourse, political processes including conflict resolution, as well as national and international institutions. 27



RAISING HER VOICE: CONFRONTING THE UNIQUE CHALLENGES FACING WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

INTRODUCTION

Respect for human rights is owed to the courage of human rights defenders (HRDs), who face formidable challenges as they carry out their work. Among those HRDs are women who have overcome significant barriers to speak out in defense of human rights, and who face elevated risks because of their gender.

Women human rights defenders (WHRDs) come from all walks of life and include “activists, journalists, lawyers, health professionals, doctors, farmers, politicians and leaders of social movements.”¹ Not all WHRDs are paid professionals. Many have assumed their roles due to their lived experiences, a sense of obligation, or a desire to “prevent future human rights abuses from happening to others.”² WHRDs defend a wide array of human rights and are not limited to causes that might be perceived to be of specific interest to women.³ The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights considers anyone, regardless of gender, “who engage[s] in promotion and protection of women’s rights and gender equality,” to be a WHRD.⁴ However, it is clear that a woman’s gender, along with other aspects of her identity, can create a wide array of barriers and heightened risks. When women who challenge discriminatory social norms are shunned, harassed or harmed, it may seem impossible for them to affect change at all. These types of threats and barriers must be identified and removed in order for WHRDs to be able to achieve their goals and build a strong civil society.

For this reason, the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development (the Subcommittee) examined the gender-specific challenges affecting WHRDs and their ability to advocate for rights. The Subcommittee heard from representatives from

1 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1305 (Rachel Vincent, Director, Advocacy and Media, Nobel Women's Initiative).

2 Ibid.

3 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 2 April 2019, 1310 (Sara Hossain, Honorary Executive Director, Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust).

4 Ibid.



Canadian civil society, as well as politicians, grass-roots defenders, and community organizers who have worked in Bolivia, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, the Philippines, and Tunisia. Despite their unique experiences and the deeply personal nature of their stories, witnesses shared similar lessons about the challenges of overcoming discrimination, threats and harassment. Some spoke of how intersecting forms of discrimination, such as those facing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) persons or indigenous persons, can increase their risks and place additional barriers in their paths to equality.⁵

While a full review of all the challenges facing WHRDs is beyond the scope of this study, understanding their lived experiences is a key first step towards offering valuable support. This report begins with an overview of the gender-specific risks taken on by WHRDs, including the threat of sexual violence, threats to their families, and misogynistic harassment. Discussion then turns to institutional-level barriers to participation in public life: hostile political environments, the prospect of impunity for crimes committed against WHRDs, and threats against civil society in general. The final section of the report relays the ways in which the WHRDs who appeared before the Subcommittee hope to be supported: through protection for WHRDs and their families, support to civil society and women-led organizations, and diplomacy and advocacy at the national and international levels. The Subcommittee makes four recommendations on this basis, including the implementation of a comprehensive action plan, with the knowledge that this study should mark only the beginning of a sustained commitment to promoting women's participation in public life.

RISKS AND THREATS FACING WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Gender-Specific Risks and Threats

Simply stated:

The oppression of girls and women because they are girls and women is still far too common. Those who break gender and social norms and speak out against injustice face a wide range of violence, including intimidation, harassment, rape, sexual torture and of course even murder.⁶

5 The Subcommittee recognizes the importance of inclusivity. The Subcommittee has chosen the acronym LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) to reflect the Government of Canada's practice in international affairs. The Government of Canada also uses the acronym LGBTQ2 (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, two-spirit) in domestic matters.

6 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1300 (Vincent).

Often, the work of WHRDs, or the fact that a woman or girl is taking up human rights work at all, violates social expectations.⁷ In the words of Asiya Nasir, former member of the National Assembly of Pakistan, WHRDs “face challenges across the board and have to fight the status quo on all fronts: their families, the communities they work in and even fellow human rights defenders.”⁸ Furthermore, WHRDs face threats from state actors such as members of the military or police, and “a wide range of other actors,” including militias, paramilitary groups, narco-traffickers as well as employees of private security firms working for resource extraction companies.⁹

These threats have real consequences on WHRDs’ work—for example, women might have to protect themselves from physical aggression by not working after dusk.¹⁰ Fear can also create a chilling effect on entire communities of WHRDs. Threats have led WHRDs in the Philippines to be far more circumspect in their efforts:

There is a feeling that to do too much is to catch attention, and to catch attention at this time may be counterproductive and even dangerous, which is why many people are resorting to more subtle forms of protest, if you may call them that, such as simply refusing to laugh at [President Duterte’s] jokes.¹¹

Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment

Sexual violence and sexual harassment are “often the weapon of choice” used against WHRDs to “put women in their place.”¹² Witnesses described sexual violence as a “medium for torture specifically directed against women.”¹³ For example, in Saudi Arabia, sexual violence has been used along with other forms of torture against prominent WHRDs.¹⁴ Joshua Cooper, Deputy Director, ALQST, cited the emergence of reports in October 2018 that female detainees had been sexually assaulted and left

7 Ibid., 1305 (Vincent).

8 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 2 April 2019, 1320 (Asiya Nasir, Former Parliamentarian and Human Rights Defender, National Assembly of Pakistan).

9 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1305 (Vincent).

10 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 2 April 2019, 1320 (Nasir).

11 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 4 April 2019, 1315 (Teresita Quintos Deles, Chairperson of the Board of Trustees, International Center for Innovation, Transformation and Excellence in Governance (INCITEGov)).

12 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1305 (Vincent).

13 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 19 March 2019, 1315 and 1325 (Ana Quirós Viquez, Director, Center of Information and Advisory Services in Health (CISAS)).

14 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 9 April 2019, 1315 (Joshua Cooper, Deputy Director, ALQST).



“unable to walk or stand properly and [...] at least one of them attempted suicide.”¹⁵ Gloria Chicaiza, Mining Justice Coordinator, Acción Ecológica, maintained that rates of sexual violence, as well as physical violence and harassment, are elevated where the mining industry is present.¹⁶

WHRDs must also contend with sexual harassment within their workplaces. Sara Hossain, Honorary Executive Director, Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust, recounted the story of “serial sexual harassment” by a male colleague. Victims remained silent because “they were afraid that if they spoke out, they would be stigmatized, because most of them were single women, unmarried or divorced.”¹⁷ Ms. Hossain explained that:

[t]his incident illustrated well for us how women human rights defenders are impacted upon by prevailing social norms and attitudes, including moral judgments based on sexuality and the enormous emphasis on marriage as a mark of respectability and worth.¹⁸

Impact on the Families of Women Human Rights Defenders

Those wishing to silence WHRDs target their families to a greater extent than those of male HRDs.¹⁹ Aura Lolita Chavez Ixcaquic, Council of K'iche Peoples for the Defense of Life, Mother Nature, Land and Territory (CPK) in Guatemala described such threats as “permanent psychological torture.”²⁰ She told the Subcommittee: individuals threatened “to rape my daughter in front of me.”²¹ Ana Quirós Víquez, Director of the Center of Information and Advisory Services in Health in Nicaragua told the Subcommittee that “[p]aramilitary groups went to the school and the university where my children studied to ask for them and to ask if I was going to be there to pick them up.”²² For others, threats have been realized, such as the case of Rizwana Hasan, a Bangladeshi

15 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 9 April 2019, 1315 (Cooper).

16 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 30 April 2019, 1350 (Gloria Chicaiza, Mining Justice Coordinator, Acción Ecológica).

17 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 2 April 2019, 1315 (Hossain).

18 Ibid., 1320 (Hossain).

19 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 19 March 2019, 1325 (Quirós Víquez).

20 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 19 March 2019, 1325 (Aura Lolita Chavez Ixcaquic, Council of K'iche Peoples for the Defense of Life, Mother Nature, Land and Territory (CPK)).

21 Ibid.

22 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 19 March 2019, 1310 (Quirós Víquez).

environmental lawyer whose husband was abducted over a period of two days before being found alive by police.²³

Whether threats against family are realized or not, WHRDs must contend with the reality that their personal lives can be altered beyond recognition. Ms. Quirós Viquez had to withdraw her children from their school.²⁴ Ms. Chavez Ixcaquic has fled the country and has limited contact with her children.²⁵ Stigmatization and criminalization have left Ms. Chavez Ixcaquic unable to find work as a teacher, and therefore unable to care for her family.²⁶ Likewise, Arbia Jebali, President, Free Sight Association was disciplined by her employer—the Tunisian public service—for her activism.²⁷

Attacks on the Character of Women Human Rights Defenders

A common refrain heard by the Subcommittee was that witnesses endured attacks on their reputation based on pejorative gender stereotypes. Stigmatization takes various forms and has many sources—including individuals, local leaders, private sector actors and the government.²⁸ Ms. Hossain’s female staff, for example, face “continuous commentary about themselves—about their clothing, their appearance.”²⁹ They are also confronted with questions about their own personal lives. Ms. Hossain noted:

They're interrogated about their own personal situations: whether they're married; if they're not married, why they're not married; how many children they have and so on. They are generally made to feel that their marital state is more relevant than their capacities and abilities to work.³⁰

Ms. Chicaiza observed that women are stigmatized by local leaders either for working at home, or conversely, outside the home. She noted that indigenous and rural women are particularly exposed to harassment when they bring their children to participate in protests.³¹

23 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 2 April 2019, 1310 (Hossain).

24 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 19 March 2019, 1310 (Quirós Viquez).

25 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 19 March 2019, 1300 (Chavez Ixcaquic).

26 Ibid., 1335 (Chavez Ixcaquic).

27 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 30 April 2019, 1340 (Arbia Jebali, President, Free Sight Association).

28 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 30 April 2019, 1330 (Chicaiza).

29 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 2 April 2019, 1315 (Hossain).

30 Ibid.

31 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 30 April 2019, 1330 (Chicaiza).



Detractors often accuse WHRDs of being prostitutes, and refer to their sexual preferences—something that almost never happens to their male colleagues.³² As one example, Teresita Quintos Deles, Chairperson of the Board of Trustees, International Center for Innovation, Transformation and Excellence in Governance (INCITEGov), told the Subcommittee that in the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte has labelled supporters of Senator Leila De Lima, a female political opposition figure, as “bitter,” “dried up” “old hags.”³³

Harassment is amplified online. Rachel Vincent, Director, Advocacy and Media, Nobel Women's Initiative, stated that, online, WHRDs face “hypersexualized smear campaigns and defamation that aim to limit their activism and erode their support.”³⁴ The internet fosters “more explicit attacks on a woman's sexuality, her alleged failure as a mother, a wife, a daughter.”³⁵ In Saudi Arabia, the trolling of WHRDs is “particularly intense,” spiking when pro-government media publish unflattering news coverage.³⁶ Ms. Hossain explained that Bangladeshi WHRDs face “cyber-threats again in relation to their sexuality, their behaviour and their dress.”³⁷ With respect to the Philippines, Ms. Deles, noted, “the trolling is terrible.”³⁸ She recounted how quickly a fake pornographic video of Senator Leila De Lima was circulated online, permanently damaging her reputation.³⁹

Ms. Chavez Ixcaquic highlighted the severe psychological repercussions of constant harassment:

It completely affects the work, because it creates a lot of fear, a lot of terror among our other female colleagues, and it revictimizes them. We've had to go through healing processes, because all of this has psychological repercussions on our day-to-day activities. There are deep effects when it comes to our work—our political work, our social work, our economic well-being, our cultural well-being.⁴⁰

32 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 19 March 2019, 1325 (Quirós Viquez).

33 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 4 April 2019, 1300 and 1320 (Deles).

34 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1305 (Vincent).

35 Ibid.

36 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 9 April 2019, 1310 (Cooper).

37 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 2 April 2019, 1315 (Hossain).

38 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 4 April 2019, 1315 and 1330 (Deles).

39 Ibid., 1300 and 1320 (Deles).

40 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 19 March 2019, 1335 (Chavez Ixcaquic).

Identity and Impact

Just as WHRDs face additional obstacles based on their gender, other elements of a women's identity can put them at further risk. Indigenous women, women working in rural areas, poor women, young women and displaced women all face additional barriers to their human rights work. WHRDs working on certain sensitive social issues, such as land rights or sexual and reproductive rights, are also at risk of facing additional resistance and harassment.⁴¹

According to Ms. Hossain, in Bangladesh, WHRDs who work on LGBTI rights face “a particularly severe” threat of violence, regardless of their identity. She noted that, as in many former colonies, in Bangladesh, “there are very few safe spaces to talk about LGBT[I] issues.”⁴² In Nicaragua, LGBTI groups are particularly targeted when they participate in protests. Ms. Quirós Viquez noted that three transgender colleagues have been detained in the men's jail, where they have been ordered to undress or do humiliating exercises in front of men.⁴³

According to Ms. Chavez Ixcaquic, a Mayan anti-deforestation activist from Guatemala, land rights defenders face “the most significant attacks” because they work against the interests of powerful transnational firms who are supported by government actors.⁴⁴ Indigenous communities, whose way of life is strongly linked to the environment, are the most prominent group of land rights defenders.⁴⁵ Ms. Chavez Ixcaquic told the Subcommittee, an “atmosphere of racism, discrimination, violence, impunity and human rights violations has put at risk my integrity and my ability to defend human rights.”⁴⁶ Her gender attracts racism that her male indigenous counterparts do not face. She noted, “I have been stigmatized as a witch, as a prostitute, as someone who is crazy, as a stupid Indian—none of which they call my male counterparts.”⁴⁷ She observed that indigenous women “have a link or a connection with Mother Earth,”⁴⁸ and that “[their

41 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1305 (Vincent).

42 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 2 April 2019, 1315 (Hossain).

43 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 19 March 2019, 1325 (Quirós Viquez).

44 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 19 March 2019, 1345 (Chavez Ixcaquic).

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid., 1300 (Chavez Ixcaquic).

47 Ibid., 1325 (Chavez Ixcaquic).

48 Ibid.



oppressors] don't believe in the collective wisdom that women have."⁴⁹ She noted that her traditional dress also made her a target.⁵⁰

Changing Mindsets

In the words of Ms. Nasir, the task at hand is "to change the mindset of the people."⁵¹ According to Beth Woroniuk, Policy Lead, MATCH International Women's Fund, the type of change required to empower WHRDs goes beyond more skills training or access to credit for women and WHRDs. It calls for reflection on the relationship between men and women.⁵² It also calls for public education initiatives to further develop the pool of "male allies."⁵³ This type of change, Ms. Woroniuk stated, happens "over generations."⁵⁴

Even within the world of HRDs, raising issues specific to WHRDs or HRDs from marginalized groups requires "an education process."⁵⁵ Ms. Vincent told the Subcommittee that even the United Nations (UN) "can be a hostile environment" for WHRDs.⁵⁶ Ms. Nasir described being discriminated against by fellow WHRDs because of how she expressed her religion.⁵⁷ In Bolivia, men have contributed to making "qualitative advancements in women's rights,"⁵⁸ but ultimately, Fernanda Elena San Martin Carrasco, Deputy, Chamber of Deputies, Bolivia, said, "it really is a masculine enclave. There is patriarchy that comes with masculine values, and that is throughout society."⁵⁹

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 2 April 2019, 1325 (Nasir).

52 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1335 (Beth Woroniuk, Policy Lead, MATCH International Women's Fund).

53 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1330 (Vincent).

54 Ibid., 1335 (Woroniuk).

55 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1330 (Vincent).

56 Ibid., 1355 (Vincent).

57 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 2 April 2019, 1325 (Nasir).

58 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 9 April 2019, 1345 (Fernanda Elena San Martin Carrasco, Deputy, Chamber of Deputies, Bolivia).

59 Ibid., 1320 (San Martin Carrasco).

INSTITUTIONAL OBSTACLES FACING WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Some of the most enduring obstacles facing WHRDs permeate the law, politics and state institutions, silencing WHRDs and dissuading aspiring WHRDs from participating in public life. WHRDs in many locations have reason to believe that acts committed against them will be met with impunity, particularly if they come from marginalized groups. Furthermore, many civil society organizations, and particularly those led by WHRDs, face increasing persecution from the state.

Barriers to Political Participation

The Subcommittee heard from several WHRDs who hold or who have held public office. Their testimony leads to the conclusion that even where legal protections and formal equality exist, WHRDs often continue to struggle for substantive equality in public life. Furthermore, in the political arena, misogyny can be weaponized to diminish a perceived opponent without engaging in the substance of debate.

Over 53% of parliamentarians in Bolivia's lower house of parliament are women, due, at least in part, to electoral quotas established during the 1990s.⁶⁰ Despite this high degree of representation, female parliamentarians "are relegated to secondary status."⁶¹ Ms. San Martin Carrasco estimated that only about one quarter of female parliamentarians have genuine decision-making authority. No national political parties are led by women.⁶² She believes that female parliamentarians face the same patriarchal culture facing women in the private sphere, where violence against women is prevalent.⁶³ Ms. Nasir, a former parliamentarian in Pakistan's National Assembly also described a culture of "non-acceptance." She noted:

When I joined politics, it was an environment where it was very hard for men to accept women leaders. They always objected, asking why they should appease a woman political leader, or why they should follow a woman leader.⁶⁴

60 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 9 April 2019, 1320 (San Martin Carrasco).

61 Ibid. As of January 2019, Bolivia's Chamber of Deputies has the third highest level of female representation of any national legislature. See: Inter-Parliamentary Union, [Women in national parliaments](#), 1 January 2019.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid., 1325 (San Martin Carrasco).

64 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 2 April 2019, 1325 (Nasir).



This statement was echoed by Ms. Jebali and by Ms. Hend Bouziri, Vice-President, Tounissiet Association, of Tunisia. Though legislation is in place to promote female political participation, women face an “aggressive” political climate.⁶⁵ Elected women do not hold decision-making roles within government or their parties, and receive less positive media coverage than male politicians.⁶⁶ Ms. Bouziri called for gender parity at the executive level and for more female participation in union leadership.⁶⁷ Women are similarly excluded from decision-making roles during the course of negotiations leading to national peace processes, despite their involvement in negotiating local ceasefires, their roles as first responders in conflict, and research indicating that WHRDs are pivotal to achieving and sustaining peace.⁶⁸

Ms. Deles spoke with a “sense of urgency,” stating that the Philippine government “has weaponized the degradation of women to delegitimize their [agenda].”⁶⁹ Past advances in women’s rights—including broader political and economic participation⁷⁰ and “a very strong architecture of legal protection”⁷¹—gave WHRDs a sense of “confidence, even complacency,” that left them “unprepared for and still unable to understand” a resurgence of misogynistic attacks.⁷² “The law is important,” Ms. Deles stated, “but the dilemma is that we now have leaders...who seem to think they can get away with it, and we do allow them to for a while.”⁷³

Ms. Deles provided examples of President Duterte’s use of gendered slurs against female political opposition figures and trivialization of sexual violence,⁷⁴ as well as the orchestrated “slut-shaming” of several members of congress.⁷⁵ Several politically-

65 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 30 April 2019, 1345 (Hend Bouziri, Vice-President, Tounissiet Association).

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid., 1310 (Bouziri).

68 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1300 (Vincent).

69 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 4 April 2019, 1300 (Deles).

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid., 1325 (Deles).

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid., 1300 (Deles).

75 Ibid., 1340 (Deles).

motivated attacks against high profile female leaders, including judges, senators, UN officials and media leaders have occurred.⁷⁶

Ms. Deles asked the Subcommittee to consider a question that no doubt runs through the minds of all WHRDs or aspiring WHRDs:

If this can be done to powerful and prominent women who already have a platform, resources and political and legal acumen, not just to defend others but also themselves, then can it be done to others with greater ease?⁷⁷

Impunity

The rule of law, justice and enforcement “come up time and time again” as key factors enabling WHRDs to claim rights.⁷⁸ High levels of impunity prevail, silencing and demotivating WHRDs, while strengthening perpetrators.⁷⁹ Witnesses from the Americas were particularly emphatic on this point.⁸⁰ Ms. Chavez Ixcaquic and Ms. Quirós Viquez are both beneficiaries of “precautionary measures,” which are decisions of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to urgently request that governments take steps to prevent irreparable harm to the people in question. Neither feel that their governments have respected these requests.⁸¹

Ms. Bouziri observed that the most common forms of violence against women—harassment and sexual violence— are difficult to prove in court, particularly when there are no witnesses. Sometimes procedural rules add additional hurdles, either implicitly or explicitly.⁸² Ms. Vincent agreed, stating:

Almost no survivors of sexual violence get their day in court. When they do, rarely do they see true justice as a result of that judicial process.⁸³

76 Ibid., 1300 (Deles).

77 Ibid., 1305 (Deles).

78 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1320 (Vincent).

79 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 19 March 2019, 1335 (Chavez Ixcaquic).

80 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 19 March 2019, 1335 (Quirós Viquez); SDIR, [Evidence](#), 9 April 2019, 1325 (San Martin Carrasco); SDIR, [Evidence](#), 30 April 2019, 1325 (Chicaiza).

81 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 19 March 2019, 1300 (Chavez Ixcaquic); SDIR, [Evidence](#), 19 March 2019, 1315 (Quirós Viquez).

82 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 30 April 2019, 1325 (Bouziri).

83 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1325 (Vincent).



In a similar vein, Ms. Bouziri shared that Tunisia’s transitional justice mechanisms, which had made strides to recognize the differentiated impact of past human rights violations against women, ultimately failed to sufficiently capture the extent of sexual violence or make recommendations for rehabilitation.⁸⁴

Witnesses resoundingly called for greater enforcement of existing laws, remarking that legislation ostensibly meant to protect women from gender-based violence or to protect their rights was often not implemented, in the absence of political will.⁸⁵ Ms. Bouziri remarked that a large proportion of Tunisian women do not benefit from the country’s relatively progressive laws.⁸⁶

Ms. San Martin Carrasco illustrated this phenomenon using the example of Bolivian legislation criminalizing political violence against women. This law, laudable as it may be, is simply not enforced. She cited a study stating that 75% of women in the Bolivian legislative assembly—herself included—have suffered harassment or violence. They do not come forward, she observed, due to fear of reprisals and politicization of their accusations, and because of a general perception that the judiciary does not sufficiently protect victims.⁸⁷ She concluded that legislation protecting women can “end up as dead letters on paper without enforcement.”⁸⁸ Ms. Quirós Viquez highlighted that in Nicaragua, legislation pertaining to violence against women was in fact being used to distract from the reality that “[p]olice departments dedicated exclusively to preventing violence against women were actually closed.”⁸⁹

When WHRDs face intersecting forms of discrimination, those who threaten them benefit from “very high” rates of impunity.⁹⁰ The Subcommittee heard that, from Guatemala to Bangladesh, impunity is particularly rampant for crimes against indigenous

84 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 30 April 2019, 1325 (Bouziri).

85 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 9 April 2019, 1325, 1330 and 1345 (San Martin Carrasco); SDIR, [Evidence](#), 2 April 2019, 1345 (Hossain); SDIR, [Evidence](#), 30 April 2018, 1305 (Bouziri).

86 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 30 April 2018, 1305 (Bouziri).

87 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 9 April 2019, 1325 (San Martin Carrasco).

88 Ibid., 1320 (San Martin Carrasco).

89 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 19 March 2019, 1335 (Quirós Viquez).

90 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1325 (Vincent).

WHRDs,⁹¹ an example being the unsolved case of a 1996 abduction of a leading indigenous WHRD from Bangladesh, Kalpana Chakma.⁹² Ms. Hossain explained that:

Now, more than 20 years later, the case remains under investigation. A third investigation has begun, and sees no sign of ending. It is a clear, demonstrable example of total impunity, in a particularly egregious case, and it's had a very chilling effect on women activists in that region, as well as across the country.⁹³

Further, the 2016 murder of two prominent LGBTI activists remains unsolved, while authorities continue to assert that same-sex relationships are “against Bangladesh culture.”⁹⁴ Ms. Hossain explained, that the LGBTI community “can’t claim its rights under the law,” because they themselves are criminalized.⁹⁵

Ms. Chicaiza highlighted the role of other countries in promoting access to justice, singling out countries “from which the mining companies come” and adding that:

Canada's laws need to be stricter on the compliance with human rights and ensure that companies that are operating in our territories will respect human rights and not carry out these violations due to their mining interventions, for example, by Canada, in our territory.⁹⁶

She stated that, “without a doubt,” effective intervention is needed to put an end to the sexual and physical violence related to the presence of the mining industry.⁹⁷

Threats Against Civil Society

In Ms. Vincent and Ms. Woroniuk’s assessment, one of the best ways to establish strong, functional judicial systems—and to combat impunity—is to support civil society. Local organizations are best placed to address their own governments, to propose solutions, and to ensure justice for human rights violations.⁹⁸ Unfortunately, “space for civil society and women’s organizations is closing,” threatening gains achieved by WHRDs as well as

91 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 19 March 2019, 1305 (Chavez Ixcaquic); SDIR, [Evidence](#), 2 April 2019, 1310 (Hossain).

92 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 2 April 2019, 1310 (Hossain).

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid., 1315 (Hossain).

95 Ibid.

96 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 30 April 2019, 1325 (Chicaiza).

97 Ibid.

98 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1320 (Vincent).



their own security.⁹⁹ Ms. Vincent believes this is due to rising authoritarianism, populism, and fundamentalism around the world, as well as civil strife and conflict.¹⁰⁰ The Subcommittee heard that threats to civil society come in many forms—hostile rhetoric, restrictions on the rights of free speech and free assembly, as well as legal and administrative obstacles. Ms. San Martin Carrasco echoed the assessment of Ms. Vincent and Ms. Woroniuk in her support for a strengthened civil society:

I think the most important thing to do is to strengthen civil society and to have a truly independent civil society. This requires mechanisms to monitor state bodies and those who carry out justice. This is very important. I think that what Canada can do is to help strengthen civil society and generate monitoring and information generating mechanisms. That will strengthen leadership by women and defenders of women's human rights who work on the ground.¹⁰¹

In the case of Saudi Arabia, since 2017, a crackdown on dissent has escalated, mainly targeting prominent WHRDs. Space for WHRDs is “at an all-time low.”¹⁰² In Pakistan, human rights organizations “have been silenced and have been asked to leave” the country.¹⁰³ In Nicaragua, a “systematic persecution of organizations, particularly women’s organizations” is underfoot.¹⁰⁴ Ms. Chicaiza described two attempts to close her organization—Ecuador’s oldest environmental defense organization— through administrative measures.¹⁰⁵ Human rights defenders in Bangladesh contend with laws restricting foreign donations to non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as overly-broad laws that criminalize speech deemed to criticize the national image or offend religious sentiment.¹⁰⁶

Often, restrictive laws are accompanied by official harassment and hostile rhetoric. Ms. Quirós Viquez described an online campaign qualifying her public health advocacy NGO as a terrorist organization backed by the United States (US).¹⁰⁷ Pro-government Saudi media also portray WHRDs as traitors.¹⁰⁸ Witnesses also experienced measures

99 Ibid., 1300 (Vincent).

100 Ibid.

101 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 9 April 2019, 1345 (San Martin Carrasco).

102 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 9 April 2019, 1335 and 1340 (Cooper).

103 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 2 April 2019, 1345 (Nasir).

104 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 19 March 2019, 1310 and 1325 (Quirós Viquez).

105 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 30 April 2019, 1330 (Chicaiza).

106 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 2 April 2019, 1350 (Hossain).

107 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 19 March 2019, 1310 (Quirós Viquez).

108 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 9 April 2019, 1315 (Cooper).

designed to increase levels of stigmatization and harassment, such as displaying their faces on public billboards,¹⁰⁹ or being directly named and criticized by politicians.¹¹⁰

SUPPORTING A STRONG, SECURE AND INDEPENDENT CIVIL SOCIETY

It is essential to enable all WHRDs and women-led civil society organizations to act from a position of strength, security and independence.¹¹¹ Given the social attitudes and structural barriers that combine to create heightened risks for WHRDs, supporting their participation in public life is a complex, multi-layered endeavor. Witnesses considered how to protect individual WHRDs, how to support civil society organizations through funding, which diplomatic initiatives would be beneficial, and how the conduct of states such as Canada on the world stage impacts WHRDs' ability to participate in public life. Each of these interconnected issues are discussed in turn below.

Protecting Women Human Rights Defenders in Peril

Witnesses repeatedly drew the Subcommittee's attention to WHRDs who have relocated to escape threats to their lives or those of their family members. Witnesses also spoke about initiatives that have been developed to protect those at greatest risk. For example, regional networks currently facilitate the relocation of WHRDs to a second country to avoid immediate danger, provide support during temporary displacement, and facilitate their return.¹¹² Ms. Chavez Ixcaquic benefitted from such a program and addressed the Subcommittee from outside her native Guatemala.¹¹³

Ms. Woroniuk considered the potential positive impact of providing swift assistance to imperilled WHRDs by issuing emergency visas. This type of measure is contemplated in the European Union's guidelines on HRDs and has been implemented in the Netherlands.¹¹⁴ Through a written brief to the Subcommittee, Sisters in Trust, a Canadian NGO dedicated to protecting WHRDs, called on the Government Canada to create a

109 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 30 April 2019, 1330 (Chicaiza).

110 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 19 March 2019, 1345 (Quirós Viquez).

111 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1310 (Woroniuk); SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1325 (Vincent); SDIR, [Evidence](#), 9 April 2019, 1345 (San Martin Carrasco); SDIR, [Evidence](#), 2 April 2019, 1345 (Nasir); SDIR, [Evidence](#), 2 April 2019, 1345 (Hossain).

112 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1320 (Vincent).

113 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 19 March 2019, 1300 (Chavez Ixcaquic).

114 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1310 (Woroniuk).



“fast-track” for asylum claims made by WHRDs.¹¹⁵ Reflecting on the high-profile case of Rahaf Mohammad, a young Saudi woman granted asylum in Canada, Mr. Cooper noted that her application was successful “thanks to a prominent media campaign and advocacy efforts,” but that others “have not been so lucky.”¹¹⁶

The Subcommittee also heard about the importance of supporting WHRDs who have already relocated or who have been forcibly displaced. Displacement deprives WHRDs of much-needed networks and resources, including funding.¹¹⁷ Ms. Woroniuk pointed to a Dutch initiative to establish a network of shelter cities where HRDs could stay for a period of up to three months.¹¹⁸ In the Netherlands, 12 shelter cities have been identified to allow HRDs to “refresh, do further training and build their network of contacts with other human rights defenders.”¹¹⁹ Similar initiatives have been established in the Americas and in Africa, and are at various stages of development elsewhere in Europe. However, it is unclear to what extent shelter cities have programs tailored specifically to WHRDs.¹²⁰ Sisters Trust Canada emphasized the importance of professional integration initiatives and better access to services, among other measures.¹²¹

Funding and Capacity Building for Women’s Organizations

Ms. Woroniuk told the Subcommittee, that “[w]e have heard over and over again from front-line defenders that their best protection is a strong movement behind them.”¹²² When WHRDs can rely on strong organizations, they can develop and implement self-protection strategies, train for leadership and network effectively with others.¹²³ Ms. Deles highlighted the importance of transferring knowledge to a new generation of WHRDs, and to benefit from the skills of young WHRDs, particularly with respect to the online world.¹²⁴ Ms. Deles also emphasized the need to engage with like-minded

115 Sisters Trust Canada, *Written Brief*, April 2019.

116 SDIR, *Evidence*, 9 April 2019, 1315 (Cooper).

117 SDIR, *Evidence*, 29 January 2019, 1315 (Woroniuk).

118 *Ibid.*, 1310 (Woroniuk).

119 Denise Beaulieu and Paul Turcot, *Written Brief*, April 2019.

120 *Ibid.*

121 Sisters Trust Canada, *Written Brief*, April 2019.

122 SDIR, *Evidence*, 29 January 2019, 1315 (Woroniuk).

123 *Ibid.*

124 SDIR, *Evidence*, 4 April 2019, 1340 (Deles).

organizations across Asia to form a common front, because, in her view, the situation in her country is “a cautionary tale for other women.”¹²⁵ In light of the crackdown on civil society in Saudi Arabia, Mr. Cooper also highlighted the importance of maintaining an international network to link people in the country to members of the diaspora to perform the crucial task of documenting human rights violations.¹²⁶

To succeed, organizations led by WHRDs need financial and practical resources in the form of long-term and predictable core funding, as well as program funding.¹²⁷ Core funding could address issues of staffing—a problem raised by Ms. Deles, whose organization does not have enough full-time employees to accomplish its goals.¹²⁸ Witnesses discussed training programs to enhance WHRD skillsets, particularly related to support and legal redress for survivors of violence.¹²⁹ WHRDs also discussed training for self-protection. Digital security was identified as being “of prime importance.”¹³⁰ Women’s organizations have been “highly creative in dealing with digital threats.”¹³¹ For example, in response to the circulation of a fake pornographic video purporting to depict a female opposition leader, a social media campaign emerged wherein large numbers of women claimed to be the woman in the video. The campaign began with posts by fifty women but ultimately received millions of reposts.¹³²

Ms. Woroniuk told the Subcommittee:

Local organizations of defenders usually know what they need, the skills they're lacking and where to get them, and are often best placed to design their own training...but what they often lack is the resources to put their plans into action.¹³³

As such, Ms. Woroniuk emphasized that instead of designing made-in-Canada training programs, “supporting these organizations is the best way to go.”¹³⁴

125 Ibid., 1355 (Deles).

126 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 9 April 2019, 1350 (Cooper).

127 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 4 April 2019, 1330 (Deles); SDIR, [Evidence](#), 9 April 2019, 1345 (San Martin Carrasco); SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1315 (Woroniuk).

128 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 4 April 2019, 1330 (Deles).

129 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1330 (Woroniuk); SDIR, [Evidence](#), 9 April 2019, 1345 (San Martin Carrasco).

130 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1350 (Woroniuk).

131 Ibid.

132 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 4 April 2019, 1320 (Deles).

133 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1340 (Woroniuk).

134 Ibid.



Ms. Woroniuk expressed optimism about two of the Government of Canada's funding initiatives that provide direct funding to local women's organizations under Canada's 2017 International Assistance Policy – the Women's Voice and Leadership Initiative and the Partnership for Gender Equality. However, she noted, more could be done.¹³⁵ She observed that bureaucratic obstacles are compromising the ability of groups on the ground to actually receive the support they need.¹³⁶ In response to a question about whether funding from a foreign government could compromise an organization's perceived legitimacy, Ms. San Martin Carrasco noted that, in the case of Bolivia, Canadian funding would not carry the same "imperialist" connotations as funding from other countries such as the US.¹³⁷

Diplomacy and Advocacy

Witnesses were in resounding agreement: to protect WHRDs, international pressure is both necessary and effective.¹³⁸ Mr. Cooper noted, when HRDs cannot speak for themselves, "it really falls upon the international community" to speak on their behalf.¹³⁹ Witnesses hoped that international efforts would "break the climate of fear and impunity."¹⁴⁰

A Role for Canadian Diplomatic Missions: From Guidelines to Action

Witnesses discussed the role of Canadian diplomatic missions in protecting WHRDs and civil society space. The Subcommittee heard that, in this regard, "Canada is making some advances."¹⁴¹ In 2017, the Government of Canada published *Voices at risk: Canada's guidelines on supporting human rights defenders*, intended "to complement and support the ongoing work of Canada's diplomatic corps."¹⁴² The Subcommittee learned that, as

135 Ibid., 1315 (Woroniuk).

136 Ibid., 1350 (Woroniuk).

137 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 9 April 2019, 1345 (San Martin Carrasco).

138 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 4 April 2019, 1315 (Deles); SDIR, [Evidence](#), 9 April 2019, 1330 and 1345 (San Martin Carrasco); SDIR, [Evidence](#), 2 April 2019, 1345 (Hossain); SDIR, [Evidence](#), 9 April 2019, 1320 and 1340 (Cooper).

139 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 9 April 2019, 1340 (Cooper).

140 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 4 April 2019, 1315 (Deles). See also: SDIR, [Evidence](#), 9 April 2019, 1330 and 1345 (San Martin Carrasco); SDIR, [Evidence](#), 2 April 2019, 1345 (Hossain).

141 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1300 (Vincent).

142 Government of Canada, [Voices at risk: Canada's guidelines on supporting human rights defenders](#), 5 June 2017.

of Spring 2019, this document was being revised by Global Affairs Canada (GAC) to reflect the specific experiences of WHRDs.¹⁴³

However, Ms. Vincent spoke frankly, stating, “if Canada is serious about human rights and women human rights defenders, we need much more than a set of guidelines.”¹⁴⁴ Witnesses proposed more active roles for Canadian diplomatic missions, including proactive monitoring, increased responsiveness to hostile rhetoric against WHRDs, and more effective partnership-building with local civil society and, particularly, WHRDs. Both Ms. Chavez Ixcaquic and Ms. San Martin Carrasco urged the Government of Canada to establish a monitoring and information-gathering capacity, and to use Canada’s HRD guidelines as a baseline for evaluation.¹⁴⁵ Ms. Chavez Ixcaquic hoped that Canadian diplomatic officials could verify the situation of specific WHRDs through dialogues and through monitoring Canadian businesses operating in Guatemalan territory.¹⁴⁶

In the specific case of the Philippines, Ms. Deles recommended that Canadian representatives respond more directly to local political discourse in addition to supporting programming. She stated, “we are aware of your programs for women and their livelihoods, but there’s a bigger assault now.”¹⁴⁷ Ms. Deles also highlighted that the Canadian mission needs to regain the trust of civil society and NGOs as true partners.¹⁴⁸ Ms. Nasir issued a strikingly similar call, with respect to Pakistan:

We need to see the Canadian government and the Canadian high commission in Pakistan working more on the political side, with political representations to review governmental policies regarding the [international non-governmental organizations] working in the human rights sector.¹⁴⁹

Mainstreaming Support for Women Human Rights Defenders Throughout Canada’s Foreign Policy

Protecting individuals and strengthening civil society organizations may not be sufficient to empower WHRDs and aspiring WHRDs. Ms. Woroniuk highlighted that “it is important

143 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1310 (Woroniuk).

144 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1300 (Vincent).

145 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 9 April 2019, 1345 (San Martin Carrasco); SDIR, [Evidence](#), 19 March 2019, 1345 (Chavez Ixcaquic).

146 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 19 March 2019, 1345 (Chavez Ixcaquic).

147 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 4 April 2019, 1340 (Deles).

148 Ibid., 1355 (Deles).

149 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 2 April 2019, 1350 (Nasir).



to ensure that all lines of Canadian policy and all international actions create and expand the space for civil society activists to operate.”¹⁵⁰ Mr. Cooper noted “the pressure must be sustained. It must be extended beyond the release of [detained WHRDs], but also call for comprehensive reform.”¹⁵¹ Witnesses expressed hope for a variety of bilateral and multilateral diplomatic interventions. They called for the Government of Canada to make public statements and engage in bilateral dialogue to push for respect for civil and political rights, including free speech and freedom of association.¹⁵² This includes urging governments to lift restrictions on NGO funding.¹⁵³ In the case of Saudi Arabia, this would also mean calling for an end to the male guardianship system.¹⁵⁴ Ms. Woroniuk suggested that trade deals are also an important opportunity to draw attention to issues impacting WHRDs.¹⁵⁵

In this context, witnesses also called on the Government of Canada to use multilateral fora to amplify women’s voices. Ms. Woroniuk called on the Government of Canada to continue to advocate for women’s participation within the UN system, including in peacekeeping operations.¹⁵⁶ She also advocated for increased and more meaningful inclusion for WHRDs in peace negotiations.¹⁵⁷ Ms. Vincent highlighted Canada’s important role in advocating for women’s inclusion in peace processes, noting that “Canada has played a good behind-the-scenes role in the past.”¹⁵⁸

To combat impunity, witnesses called on the Government of Canada to make the most of its role in the Organization of American States,¹⁵⁹ to support bodies fighting corruption and impunity, such as the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala,¹⁶⁰ and to insist on justice for perpetrators of crimes against humanity, including by

150 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1310 (Woroniuk).

151 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 9 April 2019, 1320 (Cooper).

152 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1355 (Vincent); SDIR, [Evidence](#), 19 March 2019, 1340 (Chavez Ixcaquic); SDIR, [Evidence](#), 2 April 2019, 1350 (Hossain).

153 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1310 (Woroniuk).

154 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 9 April 2019, 1320 (Cooper).

155 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1310 (Woroniuk).

156 Ibid., 1335 (Woroniuk).

157 Ibid.

158 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1355 (Vincent).

159 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 19 March 2019, 1345 (Quirós Viquez).

160 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1320 (Vincent).

imposing sanctions on those engaged in gross violations of internationally recognized human rights.¹⁶¹

Likewise, the Government of Canada has a role in ensuring that Canadian businesses respect human rights and environmental standards.¹⁶² Ms. Chicaiza believes that the intervention of an ombudsperson, such as the newly created office of the Canadian Ombudsperson for Responsible Enterprise, is essential. Any investigator, she added, must be independent of the mining industry. She also hoped for greater access to Canadian courts.¹⁶³

A Coordinated Response

Governments can act as key players in building public awareness by recognizing “the legitimacy and credibility of women defenders and a need to focus on them, in particular, for protection and support.”¹⁶⁴ In order for the Government of Canada to support WHRDs, “their work and their challenges must be visible and understood,” particularly by policy-makers and diplomats.¹⁶⁵ Policies will fail WHRDs unless their needs are specifically taken into account.¹⁶⁶ Indeed, a 2013 UN General Assembly resolution on WHRDs calls on states not only to put in place laws and policies for the protection of WHRDs and their families, but to include WHRDs in these measures’ design and implementation.¹⁶⁷ In this regard, the Subcommittee believes that the Parliament of Canada is well-positioned to amplify the voices of WHRDs, and to call attention to the extraordinary risks which they take to champion their causes. In light of the testimony, the Subcommittee makes the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1 – Building an Action Plan to Support Women Human Rights Defenders

That the Government of Canada develop an action plan to:

161 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 19 March 2019, 1345 (Quirós Viquez).

162 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1310 (Woroniuk); SDIR, [Evidence](#), 30 April 2019, 1350 (Chicaiza).

163 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 30 April 2019, 1350 (Chicaiza).

164 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1330 (Vincent).

165 Ibid., 1310 (Woroniuk).

166 Ibid.

167 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1305 (Vincent).



- **establish processes and procedures for expediting emergency visas for women human rights defenders and their families when they are in imminent danger;**
- **ensure that infrastructure and resources are in place to be ready to assist in temporarily relocating women human rights defenders and their families into Canada or other countries;**
- **study and report on international best practices regarding the temporary or permanent relocation of women human rights defenders and their families when they are under threat or in imminent danger;**
- **enhance measures to support women human rights defenders and their organizations abroad, including through core funding and funding for locally-developed training programs;**
- **establish indicators for evaluating women-led civil society organizations' ability to operate freely, proactively monitor their status, and raise the cases of at-risk individuals or organizations with governments and other partners, as appropriate;**
- **enhance, through diplomatic missions, efforts to identify and partner with women's human rights organizations that can use Canadian support through measures such as funding or advocacy; and**
- **develop an information campaign to raise international awareness about the programs and assistance that Canada offers to support women human rights defenders.**

In developing and implementing this action plan, the Government of Canada should continually consult and coordinate with the international community, including but not limited to, the United Nations, regional organizations, like-minded states and other partners.

Recommendation 2—Combatting Impunity

That Global Affairs Canada engage bilaterally and multilaterally to combat impunity for human rights violations against women human rights defenders.

Recommendation 3—Promoting Respect for Human Rights in the Private Sector

That Global Affairs Canada act decisively to ensure that Canadian businesses respect human rights abroad, particularly through the office of the Canadian Ombudsperson for Responsible Enterprise.

Recommendation 4—Seizing All Opportunities to Support Women Human Rights Defenders through Canadian Diplomacy

That the Government of Canada ensure that all foreign policy choices are consistent with the goal of facilitating women human rights defenders’ participation in public discourse, political processes including conflict resolution, as well as national and international institutions.

CONCLUSION

The Subcommittee listened carefully to witnesses from all walks of life—from indigenous land rights defenders to parliamentarians, lawyers to public health workers. They came from the Americas, from South and Southeast Asia and from the Middle East and North Africa. They shared profoundly personal, often tragic stories. In doing so, they entrusted the Subcommittee, and the Canadian public, with the task of amplifying their voices.

They told us that WHRDs “have to fight the status quo on all fronts.”¹⁶⁸ They face resistance from their families, community and even fellow HRDs.¹⁶⁹ Those who are not silenced by threats of sexual violence, threats to their family, or the prospect of smear campaigns are often failed by their national institutions. National politics remains an unwelcoming arena for women, even where the law provides measures to enhance women’s participation. Judicial institutions are often ill-equipped to address the most common forms of violence against WHRDs. In many places, the space for civil society is closing, with WHRD-led organizations particularly vulnerable to state interference.

What should be done? Changing attitudes about women happens “over generations.”¹⁷⁰ Ms. Deles warned us not to rest on past victories for the rights of women—complacency, she noted, has left her community of WHRDs unprepared to deal with resurgent misogyny.¹⁷¹ In that spirit, the Subcommittee has made

168 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 2 April 2019, 1320 (Nasir).

169 Ibid.

170 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 29 January 2019, 1335 (Woroniuk).

171 SDIR, [Evidence](#), 4 April 2019, 1300 and 1325 (Deles).



recommendations to the Government of Canada based on the priorities identified by witnesses: supporting a strong, secure and independent civil society through funding and strengthened partnerships; empowering diplomatic missions and giving them the tools to defend WHRDs; providing immediate protection to WHRDs in peril through expedited and well-resourced immigration arrangements; and mainstreaming concern for civil society space and WHRDs across Canada's foreign policy initiatives—in bilateral settings and across a variety of multinational forums.

Through this study, the Subcommittee attempted to call attention to the challenges facing WHRDs, as well as their resilience. Too many aspiring WHRDs are forced to remain silent. We should continue to ask ourselves how to empower more women to participate in public life.

APPENDIX A

LIST OF WITNESSES

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

Organizations and Individuals	Date	Meeting
MATCH International Women's Fund Beth Woroniuk, Policy Lead	2019/01/29	135
Nobel Women's Initiative Rachel Vincent, Director Advocacy and Media	2019/01/29	135
Center of Information and Advisory Services in Health (CISAS) Ana Quirós Viquez, Director	2019/03/19	143
Council of K'iche Peoples for the Defense of Life, Mother Nature, Land and Territory (CPK) Aura Lolita Chavez Ixcaquic, Spokesperson Amnesty International Canada	2019/03/19	143
As an individual Asiya Nasir, Former Parliamentarian and Human Rights Defender National Assembly of Pakistan	2019/04/02	144
Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust Sara Hossain, Honorary Executive Director	2019/04/02	144
International Center for Innovation, Transformation and Excellence in Governance (INCITEGov) Teresita Quintos Deles, Chairperson of the Board of Trustees	2019/04/04	145
ALQST Joshua Cooper, Deputy Director	2019/04/09	146

Organizations and Individuals	Date	Meeting
As an individual	2019/04/09	146
Fernanda Elena San Martin Carrasco, Deputy Chamber of Deputies, Bolivia		
Acción Ecológica	2019/04/30	148
Gloria Chicaiza, Mining Justice Coordinator		
Free Sight Association	2019/04/30	148
Arbia Jebali, President		
Tounissiet Association	2019/04/30	148
Hend Bouziri, Vice-President		

REQUEST FOR GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

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

A copy of the relevant *Minutes of Proceedings* of the Committee ([Meeting No.148](#)) is tabled and copies of the relevant *Minutes of Proceedings* of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights ([Meetings Nos. 135, 143, 144, 145, 146, 148, 154 and 155](#)) are tabled.

Respectfully submitted,

Michael Levitt
Chair

