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

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**EVIDENCE**

**Tuesday, April 9, 2019**

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**Chair**

**Ms. Anita Vandenbeld**



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• (1305)

[English]

**The Chair (Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.)):** Welcome, everybody.

I am very pleased to be here once again for our study on women human rights defenders.

Today we have two witnesses. First, Fernanda Elena San Martin Carrasco is coming to us by video conference from Bolivia. I want to extend the apologies of the committee to you, Ms. San Martin. We understand that your last appearance was cancelled due to the House's continuing overnight. We regret terribly that we weren't able to meet with you when you were here in Ottawa, but we're very pleased that you are with us today by video conference.

We also have today Joshua Cooper from ALQST, an organization that advocates on human rights violations in Saudi Arabia.

Normally, we do these by geographic regions, but because we weren't able to have Ms. San Martin the last time, we have to cover Bolivia and Saudi Arabia in one meeting. My apologies for that. I am sure the committee members will have many questions for you.

As you know, you have 10 minutes to begin your opening remarks.

I would like to invite Ms. San Martin to do her 10-minute opening remarks.

For the committee members, we will have Spanish interpretation, so there may be a delay.

**Ms. Fernanda Elena San Martin Carrasco (Deputy, Chamber of Deputies, Bolivia, As an Individual):** [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you very much to all of you for this opportunity to speak to you today and to your committee.

I would like to start by telling you where I am from. I have always been interested in—

**The Chair:** My sincere apologies. We're not getting the French interpretation now, so I am going to suspend the meeting for just a moment while we work out the interpretation.

**Ms. Fernanda Elena San Martin Carrasco :** No problem.

**The Chair:** Again, I am very sorry about this. We'll just suspend for a moment.

• (1305)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_

• (1310)

**The Chair:** We will resume. My apologies for the delay.

While we are working out the interpretation of the Spanish, we will ask Mr. Joshua Cooper to please do his 10-minute introduction, and then we will try to go back to Ms. San Martin.

Go ahead, Mr. Cooper.

**Mr. Joshua Cooper (Deputy Director, ALQST):** First, thank you very much for the invitation. It's an honour to take part in this important and timely study.

Unlike some of the previous speakers, my personal story is less relevant as a British male, and less interesting, but as the chair said, I'll be speaking today as a representative of ALQST, which is a human rights organization focusing on Saudi Arabia. It was established in 2014 by Saudi activist Yahya Assiri, who unfortunately can't make it today. Since then, it has taken on a leading research and advocacy role, so I'll be speaking in that capacity.

Today I'll be talking about women human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia specifically and will be addressing the situation of women's rights in the country, including the male guardianship system. Moreover, I will provide a brief history of the women's rights movement and will point out some of the risks that women human rights defenders face, both in terms of general risk in operating in an authoritarian environment and in the patriarchal social structures in Saudi Arabia. I will address briefly the case of the prominent women human rights defenders in detention, who have been subjected to torture and whose trial is now ongoing. I'll address briefly the case of women fleeing the country and, lastly, some recommendations and actions to undertake.

First, in terms of women's rights in Saudi Arabia, the most serious impediment is the male guardianship system that has been in place since the late 1970s and that prevents women from enjoying their basic human rights. They need permission from a male guardian to work, travel, study, marry and even to access health care services. In short, adult women are treated as legal minors who are not entitled to any control over their lives, and they are frequently denied the legal right to make decisions on behalf of their children.

The women who suffer most are those who have abusive guardians and find that the authorities support whatever brutal or violent treatment they carry out. Saudi Arabia has no laws to offer women adequate protection against domestic abuse and other gender-based violence. Laws relating to marriage and divorce cause many women to be trapped in violent and abusive marriages. Such restrictions, unsurprisingly, have been fought against for many years, and Saudi Arabia has a rich women's rights movement dating back to the 1990s, made up of women's rights defenders risking their own freedom and safety to reclaim their very basic rights.

Some of these names may now be familiar. In the 1990s, we saw a campaign against a ban on women driving, in which several activists, including Professors Dr. Aisha al-Mana, Dr. Aziza al-Yousef, and Dr. Hatoon al-Fassi, drove their cars in defiance of the ban. Some of them documented it in a book.

In terms of the younger generation, we've seen activists such as Samar Badawi and Nasima al-Sada, who are among the first to bring lawsuits demanding that women be allowed to vote and stand as candidates in elections taking place. Samar suffered particularly from the male guardianship system, as she had an abusive father. Such pressure has led to some gains, such as the authorities in 2015 allowing women to participate in council elections, yet the women behind this activism face reprisals and have been targeted for years. The 47 women in the 1990s who took part in that prominent campaign were arrested. Most lost their passports and their jobs temporarily.

More recent examples include Samar Badawi, who in 2014 was banned from taking part in an EU NGO forum; Loujain al-Hathloul, who was arrested in 2014 and again in March 2018 after attending a UN session in Geneva; and Eman al-Nafjan, who had been writing a blog on women's rights since 2008 and was arrested in 2013 for filming a woman driving.

In addition to these examples of reprisals against their activism for women's rights, they're also fighting a repressive set of laws in Saudi Arabia against all human rights defenders. Some of these include the application of terrorism legislation, such as through the specialized criminal court, which was set up in 2008 and which, using several laws, such as the anti-terror law in 2017, has been used to target activists under vaguely worded terrorism charges. Other laws include the law on associations and foundations of 2015. Such regulations have been used for years to arrest and try human rights defenders for exercising their basic rights.

• (1315)

These crackdowns have escalated in recent years, particularly since King Salman has come to power with his son and Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman. There are estimates of around 5,000 political prisoners at the moment, of which at least 3,000 have been held in excess of six months without charge. This crackdown targeted women in particular last year, with a wave of arrests of at least 13 prominent women's human rights offenders between May and July, including those who were mentioned earlier.

Several men who are women's rights activists were also arrested, such as Mohammad al-Rabea. While a few were later released, including female activist Aisha al-Mana, most remain in detention. In comparison to men who have been detained before, women have

faced particularly intense online trolling and accusations, being accused by pro-government media outlets of being traitors and of betrayal.

It's also worth mentioning the families. Aziza al-Yousef, a retired professor, is the mother of five and a grandmother of eight, and Samar Badawi is the mother of two young children. Just last week, in the latest wave of arrests of slightly less prominent activists, a female rights activist, Khadijah al-Harbi, who is pregnant, was arrested. She remains in detention.

In October of last year, as I'm sure you're aware, reports emerged that many of these women had been subjected to torture and ill-treatment, including electric shocks, flogging, sexual assault and other forms of torture. Testimonies recount that this abuse has left some women unable to walk or stand properly, and at least one of them has attempted suicide. Such torture of female prisoners is quite unprecedented in Saudi Arabia, especially with women such as these, who have a relatively high socio-economic status. It is really very significant in the Saudi Arabia context.

More recently, in March of this year, 11 of these women were finally brought to trial. It's revealing that after months of being accused of being foreign spies and traitors, the actual charges, although they haven't been officially released, almost entirely relate to their human rights work and communication with activists organizations, such as Amnesty International and UN bodies.

In their second trial session, these women recounted the torture they had been subjected to, in front of the judges in the Saudi court. That is very powerful. Their next trial session is scheduled for April 17.

To add, as well as these prominent defenders who are challenging the system inside of Saudi Arabia, there are also many cases of women deciding to flee the country. The most prominent case was Rahaf Mohammad, who in January of this year fled the country. Thanks to a prominent social media campaign and advocacy efforts, she was granted asylum in Canada. Unfortunately, others have not been so lucky, such as the case of Dina Ali, who in 2017 fled Saudi Arabia to seek asylum in Australia but was arrested in the Philippines and returned.

It's hard to get the exact numbers of women fleeing Saudi Arabia; however, the numbers of Saudis seeking asylum in general have risen sharply in the last several years. In 2017, Saudi asylum in the United States rose by 32%; in Canada, it rose by 13% from the previous year, and 2018 is likely to be similar.

This case of the women human rights defenders and women escaping, of course, exposes the hypocrisy of the Saudi regime. Buzzwords like “reform” and “Vision 2030” and policies like the lifting of the female driving ban have been used merely to divert attention from more critical issues such as the male guardianship system—which remains largely intact—or demands for political rights. The regime has offered rhetorical support, including in its role on the UN Human Rights Council and the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

To conclude, it's clear what needs to be done. There needs to be an end to the harassment of women human rights defenders, including those who have been active and bravely campaigning for women's rights for years. Women must be allowed to exercise their rights, including their rights of freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association, without any judicial harassment or reprisals. We need to see an abolishment of the male guardianship system, which as mentioned remains largely intact. Women need to have access to justice and legal aids, which they do not have at the moment.

• (1320)

As for how this can be done, ALQST would emphasize the importance of international pressure, given the absence of civil society in Saudi Arabia because of the crackdown. This is particularly important. It was international support that helped embolden Mohammed bin Salman in the first place, convinced by his rhetoric of reform. It is also international pressure, particularly in light of the murder of Khashoggi, that has led to some concessions, such as the Saudi regime's acknowledgment that it was a state murder.

This is the same with women. It took a while for their case to generate much international attention. As we saw last summer, Canada was left largely on its own. However, more recently we've seen more international pressure, such as the EU resolution in February, a joint statement of the UN Human Rights Council and, most recently, a joint letter by U.S. senators calling for the release of these women.

Such pressure makes a difference. As we have seen in the ongoing case, it was moved from a specialized criminal court to a regular court, and most recently, we've seen the release of three of these women, although on a temporary basis. However, we're dealing with a regime intent on a total crackdown, so the pressure must be sustained. It must be extended beyond the release of these women. It also must call for comprehensive reform, which includes amending the repressive laws mentioned, ensuring a separation of powers and abolishing the male guardianship system.

I will leave you there, and hopefully the translation can be sorted out. Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Cooper. Thank you for speaking on behalf of a number of women who, unfortunately, can't testify for themselves.

I would now like to call on Ms. San Martin once again.

Please give your opening statement. Thank you.

**Ms. Fernanda Elena San Martín Carrasco :** Thank you very much.

[*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you very much, members of the committee and Madam Chair.

I'd like to explain my life path, how I came to be a member of the legislative assembly of Bolivia and how I have defended women's rights, specifically with regard to sexual and reproductive rights. That's where I started, and then I broadened the scope of my activities. I will explain.

In Latin American, and specifically in Bolivia, we have to recognize that the structure of society is not neutral. It really is a masculine enclave. There is patriarchy that comes with masculine values, and that is throughout society.

There are levels of violence that are the highest in the region, and this we can see on a daily basis. Women are under attack. They are assaulted. They are subject to violence in the home. These are all part of the structural problems we have in our society. This happens in the public sphere, as well, when women start to exercise their political rights, not only by voting but also by representing others.

There have been a number of examples of progress when it comes to women's rights in Bolivia. These began with the vote for women in 1952. Then there was a quota law in the nineties for political participation. Then in 2009, there was a recognition in the country's constitution of women's equality. There has been a great deal of participation by women activists to achieve this, and there is also an effort within the government to achieve the same number of women and men within the institutions of government.

I think the patriarchal structure still remains in one place, and that is where... We are talking about the president and the vice-president, because there is no requirement there for gender parity. But there is a bill that we would like to present to solve this problem.

The progress with regard to effective participation by women has made it possible for us to be at almost 54% women in the legislative assembly. I have seen this. I have worked toward it, as well. What I've seen in the last few years with regard to gender parity is that only 25% of women in the legislative assembly actually get to make decisions. What I mean is that they are not the chairs of committees; they do not have the positions that would enable them to make decisions; they are relegated to secondary status. There are no women who are leaders of a political party nationally, either.

Given this political participation by women and its characteristics, as well as the violence against women in the private sphere and in the public sphere, there was a bill that was adopted in 2013 that came from the murder of a municipal representative in one of the provinces of Bolivia, in Oruro. It was the result of the pressure on her by the patriarchy.

The bill adopted in 2013 was there to regulate political harassment against women. It's a very detailed bill. It explains what harassment is and what violence is in that context, as well. But there is a problem with the enforcement of that detailed bill.

• (1325)

In the national assembly there was a study carried out by an NGO that showed that 75% of the women in the legislative assembly have suffered from political harassment or violence. But when you look at how many times this has been revealed or spoken about by women, from 2016 to 2018 there have only been 95 denunciations. That doesn't mean there are no cases of harassment. What it means is that women are under pressure not to make any kinds of accusations with regard to political harassment or violence, given the nuances of belonging to a given gender or to a given party.

It's also a reflection of the way the judicial body in our country works, because when it comes to violence against women—and that is in both spheres, private and public, not just political—it's very rare to have a sentence applied to someone who is accused of violence against women, and it can take five to six years to even get a ruling even in a case of the murder of a woman.

There was a woman police officer, a sergeant, who was attacked by her husband, who was also a police officer, and the police, the system, was not supportive of that woman. They did not take disciplinary measures against the police officer who committed the assault against his wife. That gives you an idea of the hope that women have when they accuse someone of violence, be it domestic violence or gender violence generally.

We can see in the political sphere as well that things are not changing. There have been no sentences handed down—only one, in fact—with regard to political harassment and violence. So it is very unlikely for women to accuse anyone of that crime under that legislation. That also has to do with the corruption within the system that, in fact, minimizes the victim and does not protect the victim as it should.

This has led to a number of laws, including Law 348, which is the one that applies to gender-based violence and domestic violence, and Law 243 on political violence and harassment. They ended up being very well-intentioned laws, but lack coercive power, so they cannot be correctly enforced by the judicial branch. And this happens systematically. I have been a victim of political harassment and violence and have been unable to be heard by an impartial body that acts rapidly enough to address my case. Therefore, all of these bills that are drafted relating to women and that meet certain demands, even international demands, end up as dead letters on paper without enforcement.

Talking about those of us—men and women—who defend sexual and reproductive rights, this remains a taboo subject in our society, and within the state apparatus itself it is made invisible. The education ministry, for example, forbids NGOs from working in schools on these issues without prior authorization from the education ministry, and that authorization is never granted. It ends up being an obstacle that prevents one of the most important measures for reducing the very large number of clandestine abortions in Bolivia.

Also related to sexual and reproductive rights, the state has not been able to offer guarantees, nor change the law, to guarantee safe abortions for women.

Having said all this, I think it's very important in the future to think about networks to make more visible matters such as sexual and reproductive rights in Latin American countries that still hold on to these taboos and prejudices. On the other hand, we must also advocate for greater education at every level.

• (1330)

I also think it's very important to receive international support from various countries to make sure that these laws don't simply remain unenforced and without the coercive power to be able to transform a situation that is very concerning in Bolivia.

**The Chair:** You are over your time. I would ask you to very quickly summarize, please.

**Ms. Fernanda Elena San Martin Carrasco :** [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Yes, of course. I can end here.

Again, I think these networks, as well as international support, are very important to make these issues visible.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** I failed to mention at the start that Ms. San Martin is a parliamentarian as well. She's a member of the Chamber of Deputies in Bolivia.

We will start the questions with Mr. Anderson for seven minutes.

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

Thank you to both our witnesses for being with us today.

Ms. San Martin, you gave us both the positives and the negatives of what's happening in your country. You talked about the levels of violence that are the highest in the region, and about some issues of impunity and corruption, but you also talked about the general direction of the government's interest in parity and human rights support. I'm wondering if the political situation or direction in Bolivia gives you hope or fear, and how that compares with the countries around you.

• (1335)

**Ms. Fernanda Elena San Martin Carrasco :** [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

To begin, thank you very much for the question, David.

We will be holding elections in the month of October. After a very important crisis in our elections authority, a number of members passed in their resignations and there were challenges to the electoral results. In a referendum, the people said no to a third re-election of President Evo Morales. This was not respected by the executive, by President Evo Morales, who is once again running for re-election. This means in general terms about the political situation in Bolivia that....

Now, speaking specifically to women's rights, even though there is plenty of rhetoric supporting women's rights, in fact law Law 243 of 2012 and Law 348 of 2013 have not borne fruit. There hasn't been the political will to modify the structures in the judicial branch. This is important, because we don't see the political will. Once again, the judicial body has been manipulated and employed by the party itself for political means, for political persecution.

**Mr. David Anderson:** Mr. Cooper, I want to ask you a question about the role of the new crown prince. You brought him into this in the middle of the discussion. We've heard a lot about this new freedom to drive vehicles. From outside, you don't know whether that's a substantive change in rights or just a cover for other bad behaviour. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about his role. He seems to get better publicity than he probably deserves. I'm wondering if you could talk about his role in the human rights issues in Saudi Arabia.

Second, what level of freedom do women human rights defenders actually have? Where are the lines that they can't cross? Do they start very early in the discussion? Or do they have some freedom and then there's a sudden clampdown on their activity?

**Mr. Joshua Cooper:** Thanks very much for those important questions.

As to the role of Mohammad bin Salman, ALQST have certainly documented a substantial shift in the scope and scale of the crackdown in Saudi Arabia since he assumed power, effectively in 2017.

As for the widening of the targeting against human rights defenders—in the 2000s and in recent years—there has always been a crackdown on dissent, but it really escalates in scale, including the targeting of women in particular. I mentioned beforehand how some of these women have faced reprisals in the past, such as in the 1990s and with the arrests of Loujain and Eman al-Nafjan in the early 2010s. However, there was some restraint in the attacks on them, such as torture, which historically has not been so prevalent in Saudi Arabia compared with neighbouring countries. You see, in practices like this, torture and sexual violence are really quite unprecedented.

On the second question, on the space for women human rights defenders, when dozens of women human rights defenders were targeted last year, the ones who were targeted were really the most prominent ones. There aren't really any other defenders out there in Saudi Arabia anymore. In the latest wave of arrests just last week, I think there are now 10 confirmed arrests of slightly less prominent activists, including one or two women.

Just to conclude, I would say that the space is really at an all-time low. Obviously, we'll see how the trial at the moment pans out. The release of three of the women is a positive sign. However, much more needs to be done.

• (1340)

**Mr. David Anderson:** Canada has been fairly aggressive in calling for the release of Badawi, for example, and others. When we've done that, the Saudi foreign ministry has basically called it blatant interference in the kingdom's domestic affairs.

How does Saudi Arabia react to international pressure to free women human rights defenders? Are they responsive to it, or is it

just written off with those kinds of comments? Do they actually take it seriously when they start getting that kind of pressure? Can we make a difference by pressuring them?

**Mr. Joshua Cooper:** The role of Canada, while applaudable last summer, was unfortunate in that Canada did not receive adequate support from the rest of the international community, such as the U.K. and the U.S.

But I would still emphasize the importance of the international role, particularly given the fact that there aren't journalists and human rights defenders who are able to speak out in Saudi Arabia itself. It really falls upon the international community to speak on behalf of them.

As I mentioned briefly in the presentation, there are some positive signs of more coordinated efforts at the EU level and the UN level, such as the joint statement led by Iceland, which I believe Canada and other countries like the U.K. signed. I would say these sorts of efforts are welcome and do have some impacts.

The latest wave of arrests in Saudi Arabia is somewhat shocking, because it comes at a time when there is increased scrutiny of Saudi Arabia in light of Khashoggi and the women. However, I think we still do see that the Saudi authorities, unlike maybe those in some countries, do care about their image to some extent.

We've seen some concessions, such as the release of the women a few weeks ago, although on a temporary basis; the moving of the cases from the Specialized Criminal Court, which is really the worst type of court, to a more regular criminal court; and other concessions, such as the end of the torture because of increased international pressure, such as from the U.K. Some U.K. parliamentarians called to visit the prisons inside Saudi Arabia to see the torture for themselves, and to report on it. The torture and ill treatment did subside after that. I would emphasize the importance of that.

Unfortunately, it's not as much as we'd like, but it can still be very vital.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

We will now move to Mr. Tabbara for seven minutes.

**Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you to the witnesses for being here today, and thank you for giving voices to those whose voices are marginalized.

I want to begin with Mr. Cooper. I'm looking at stats on Saudi Arabia. In 2015, 52% of university graduates were female. That number climbs a bit higher for those with a postgraduate degree. The GDP growth is around 4% in some years, such as 2015-16, and 50% of Saudis are below the age of 25.

In 2016, Saudi Arabia launched a Saudi vision. Their vision is that by 2030 their dependency on oil will be reduced and their economy diversified with renewable energy.

All of these statistics show that it's a relatively progressive country, but we see a big hindrance to women's advancement. I know that you talked about the male guardianship.

We see so many graduates and many youth, but do we see many of the men in Saudi Arabia pushing for more advancements and rights for women, or is that being hindered because of this guardianship? Is it hindered because it's taboo to speak out for women's rights?

**Mr. Joshua Cooper:** The figures you point out do highlight some of the positive steps in the social and education spheres, particularly in recent years. I believe someone raised earlier the point of the driving ban on women, which women have been fighting for years.

These steps are welcome, but I would argue they are more of a deflection from providing more political rights for women and do not address more fundamental rights, such as the male guardianship system, which remains very intact.

So, yes, I would say these sorts of buzzwords are not very sincere in realizing the full rights of women. The arrests of the women's rights activists and the cases of women fleeing the country are not exceptions to the rule, or mistakes borne out of a slightly reckless reason, but are really systematic events that really get to the heart of the political will of the regime to respect women's rights and women human rights defenders in particular.

• (1345)

**Mr. Marwan Tabbara:** Ms. Carrasco, leading into that as well, in your testimony you said there have been steps made to get women into political roles. There have been targets and quotas, but women haven't been committee chairs or leaders of political parties.

Within government, have you seen male allies who have pushed for this advancement as well, and pushed for women to be in higher government roles as well?

**Ms. Fernanda Elena San Martin Carrasco :** [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Yes, in fact I feel that there is a big difference between formal equality and substantive equality. In terms of substantive equality of a full exercise of women's political rights, while we have made great progress, there remains a long road ahead related to decision-making.

With respect to your question about allies, yes, we've made progress. I think we do have male allies who have contributed to our cause to make qualitative advancements in women's rights.

Nonetheless, I think we could talk about individuals and in that sense, what I don't yet see is a will by the state as a whole to turn this willingness, this desire, this rhetoric and this discourse into a reality, into concrete and tangible facts. We see this, for instance, in the justice reform, which in my opinion is one of the pillars for women's rights to be made effective through existing legislation. For example, a few weeks ago, we lost a major European Union fund that was earmarked for justice reform. The ministry of justice has been unable to implement a plan and a program for justice reform, which in my opinion, as I mentioned before, is the most important aspect of this.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Garrison for seven minutes. Welcome to the committee.

**Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Saanich—Sooke, NDP):** Thank you very much. I want to thank both of our witnesses for

being here today. In particular, I want to thank Ms. San Martin for the work she's doing in Bolivia, in the face of reports that show incredible levels of harassment and violence against women there.

I want to start by asking you this question, Ms. San Martin: If Canada wishes to help women human rights defenders in Bolivia, what are the most effective ways we could do so?

**Ms. Fernanda Elena San Martin Carrasco :** [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you, Mr. Garrison.

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. I think that's important, and this of course goes to all levels.

There are activists with many different backgrounds. There are activists who are doctors and economists as well. It's not just grassroots; it's through all levels of society. There's also help required with regard to economics for women—how they make their living—and their reproductive and sexual rights as well. They work in all of those areas and they need to be supported.

Thank you.

• (1350)

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** When you say we could help strengthen civil society with respect to monitoring and information reporting, how, specifically, would you envision doing that? Is that through running training courses? Is that for providing core assistance to organizations that are doing that on the ground?

In what ways could we be most effective in trying to help do that?

**Ms. Fernanda Elena San Martin Carrasco :** [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]

Yes, I think it would take core funding for organizations that work in the field. I think there's also a need for training. In Bolivia, there are great limitations on foundations and NGOs. They can't work appropriately without supervision by the government. There was an act adopted five or six years ago that greatly cut the funding and support that was being given to civil society organizations.

These foundations and NGOs have always been very critical of the government, whichever government it happens to be. I think it's very important to find the proper mechanisms to support the organizations, through funding and training, so that the women and men who defend human rights can in turn be supported.

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** If they were accepting funding from an international organization or another government, would that cause problems for them in terms legitimacy?

**Ms. Fernanda Elena San Martin Carrasco :** [*Witness spoke in Spanish, interpreted as follows:*]



I will speak very clearly. Problems are generated when the funds come from the United States. An ongoing type of rhetoric here focuses on the imperialist force of the United States. It's very different for Canada.

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** Mr. Cooper, how are women's rights and human rights defenders integrated into the overall work of your organization, or is it a separate stream of work? How do you deal with that when confronting human rights in Saudi Arabia?

**Mr. Joshua Cooper:** ALQST is based in the U.K., but is entirely dependent on networks within Saudi Arabia itself. In the past, it has worked closely alongside several women human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia. More recently, since the crackdown, it's become increasingly difficult to find sources and contacts within Saudi Arabia, but it has a range of male and female activists in the diaspora in Europe and in America. Many prominent Saudi women are in the diaspora, such as Hala Al-Dosari in the United States, and Madawi Al-Rasheed, who obviously are not working with ALQST, but are real sources with inside knowledge of Saudi Arabia.

Obviously, some of the ALQST team must remain anonymous because of fears of reprisals and so forth. We depend on such networks because it's crucial information to get out. ALQST is one of the principal sources of information relating to Saudi Arabia. Through these networks, ALQST is one of the first points of contact for what's going on with the ongoing trial or the torture.

● (1355)

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** In your presentation you mentioned some of Canada's positive activities in defence of human rights defenders, and I have to make a footnote here. I have some trouble with that when we continue to sell arms to Saudi Arabia. I'm not trying to put you on the spot, but that, to me, wipes out some of the other part of the ledger.

Can you talk a little more about...? It seemed that people from Canada, and also from the U.K., were doing prison visits, observations, trials and those kinds of things. Do you find these to be effective ways of letting Saudi Arabia know that the international community is watching?

**Mr. Joshua Cooper:** Yes. I would emphasize the importance of these advocacy steps, such as Canada's last year—although, as I mentioned, Canada was left rather isolated—but now we're seeing more pressure, albeit unfortunately still at the parliamentary level mostly, such as the U.K. parliamentary initiative by members of Parliament. It was not met with support from the government itself with statements and so forth.

There's still a lot of work to be done, but there are encouraging signs, particularly at the UN level. Across countries we've seen wide criticism of the human rights situation and a focus on the women human rights defenders, which, I think, is an issue that resonates quite rightly and is symbolic of the wider crackdown. The international community should rally behind this.

We're pushing for more pressure at the government level. Unfortunately, the U.K. raises these issues behind the scenes, but it doesn't always do so forcefully enough, and like Canada continues to arm Saudi Arabia. Just today in the U.K., we're seeing a court case against the U.K.'s sale of arms to Saudi Arabia. It will be interesting to see how that turns out.

**Mr. Randall Garrison:** Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** I want to thank both of our witnesses: Ms. Martin for being available once again, and for both your and Mr. Cooper's very informative testimony today and the important work you're doing.

I will remind committee members that on Thursday we will be in camera because we'll be discussing committee business.

I will also remind you that we originally planned to hold a joint meeting with the foreign affairs committee on May 9 and not hold our meeting. However, because we lost one meeting, we will still be doing the joint meeting at 8:45, but we will also be holding our regularly scheduled meeting at one o'clock on May 9. An updated calendar will be distributed to committee members shortly.

With that, thank you very much, and we'll adjourn our meeting.

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