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Chair

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld

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• (1300)

[English]

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

I'm very pleased to be here today as we continue our study on women human rights defenders. We've been hearing from women human rights defenders around the world. Today we have Teresita Quintos Deles from the Philippines. She is a presidential adviser on the peace process and currently chairperson of the International Center for Innovation, Transformation and Excellence in Governance, INCITEGov. She has been very involved in having the Philippines become the first country in the Asia-Pacific to start, and enforce, a national action plan on women, peace and security.

We're very pleased to have you with us. We will ask you to make some initial remarks for about 10 minutes, and then we will go to questions and answers with committee members.

You can go ahead.

Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles (Chairperson of the Board of Trustees, International Center for Innovation, Transformation and Excellence in Governance (INCITEGov)): To the honourable chair and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to appear before you this afternoon.

Madam chair, it is with some reluctance but also great urgency that I have come from the other side of the globe to speak of the human rights situation in the Philippines. I speak in particular about the disturbing climate of unreserved and blatant targeting and victimization of women that today prevails under the Duterte regime.

I say "reluctance" because, to be frank, human rights has not really been the focus of my work. My major efforts, especially in the last decade or so, have focused on the field of conflict resolution and peace-building. While I have dealt with the issues of women's economic rights, political empowerment, child care support and violence against women, the attacks faced by Filipina women today are different. They are vulgar, carried out publicly, without restraint and outside of any personal relationship with the targets.

The vilification of women human rights advocates appears to be without any moral or social mooring or justification. Most tellingly, it is done without any provocation other than what is well known and documented: That women have been among the first, most vocal and most consistent in speaking up against the abuses of the regime.

In short, this period is unique in our history. We had thought then that Marcos' statement directed against Cory Aquino, that women belong in the bedroom, was already the height of misogyny. The intervening years and the many gains the women's movement has attained, including broader political and social participation in government and in the private sector and the passage of a wide range of laws, including the Magna Carta of women, have contributed to our confidence, even complacency, that attacks against women of the sort, gravity, frequency, flagrancy and willfulness now being perpetrated by Duterte and his minions were a thing of the past in Philippine society. They were never acceptable, and we believed they never would be.

Yet here we are, just two and a half years into his presidency and Duterte has already succeeded in victimizing every single woman who has heard him order soldiers to shoot women rebels in the vagina to make them worthless, reminisce about sexually violating their family helper while she slept, opine that rape and sexual assault are only to be expected if a woman is attractive, and trivialize the trauma of sexual violence when he called his own daughter a drama queen for speaking up about being raped.

Early in his presidential campaign he joked that the "mayor should have been first" in raping a murdered Australian nun. He has called women who oppose him "sluts" and "immoral women" to undermine the truth that they dare speak to his power.

Thus I also come before you today with a sense of urgency. Perhaps the most dangerous thing we can do is to think that first, this behaviour by the president only affects women, and second, that Duterte is simply unhinged when he makes these statements or condones behaviour and mindsets detrimental to women. There is, in fact, method to his madness.

Duterte has weaponized the degradation of women to delegitimize their calls for the government to discharge its constitutional duty and international obligation to respect and promote human rights and to defend Philippine sovereignty and democracy.

His are calculated attacks that aim to silence dissent by making an example of the women he has publicly vilified, slut-shamed and punished in order to promote a culture of impunity. This has resulted in the narrowing of political, social and economic discourse in the country.

Along with the systematic erosion of the independence of institutions that are meant to serve as checks on the abuse and concentration of powers, he has delivered one message: If you don't want to be attacked, don't speak out against Duterte. Better yet, toe the line and support Duterte's narrative that there are no extrajudicial killings, everything is going well in Mindanao and Philippine sovereignty is robust and kicking. Everything he says to the contrary is just a joke, and every fact that points in a different direction is fake news.

He is turning the Filipina into his image of what a woman should be—easily cowed, easily silenced, unquestioning and complicit. He may attempt to cast his attacks as gender-specific but the damage he wreaks transcends gender lines.

• (1305)

We can see it in whom he personally targets: strong and independent women, women like Senator Leila De Lima who, as then chair of the Senate Committee on Justice and Human Rights, initiated an inquiry into the spate of extrajudicial killings apparently connected with his declared war on drugs. One day, Senator De Lima was a well-respected public servant serving her first term of office as an elected official, a lawyer by training, a defender of human rights and the rule of law by choice. The next day, all of a sudden she is the so-called “mother of all drug lords”, who today, marks her 770th day in detention, based on trumped-up illegal drug trading charges that have no evidence to back them up, save for the self-serving and perjured testimonies of actual, self-confessed drug lords.

Women like Chief Justice Maria Lourdes Sereno, who was unconstitutionally ousted from her post after she had dared call out the fakeness of Duterte's drug list, which included judges long dead or retired.

Women like Senator Risa Hontiveros, who has been charged with everything from kidnapping to wire-tapping, especially after she took steps to secure eyewitnesses to the killing of 17-year-old EJK victim, Kian Delos Santos, which to this date remains the only case, out of thousands of deaths, that has resulted in a conviction.

Women like UN special rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, who was tagged by the government as a member of a terrorist group, thus endangering her and undermining her work.

Women like Maria Ressa, who now faces 11 live cases in court and was arrested and released on bail for the seventh time last Friday after she, as CEO of the online Rappler, came under attack by the Duterte administration for publishing incisive news and commentaries on national issues, including reportage of the so-called war on drugs.

These have sent a very clear, chilling message. 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?

And it is being done to others, to the even more vulnerable women and children. I will now speak about the two most pressing human rights crises we now face in the Philippines: the extrajudicial killings connected to the so-called war on drugs, and the continuing crisis in Marawi city in Mindanao.

Countless women and children have been widowed and orphaned by the bloody war on drugs. The actual death toll is disputed, but the Supreme Court has established that 20,232 had already been killed by 2017; by now, the number could easily reach between 25,000 and 30,000.

While most of those killed are men, a closer examination of the facts will reveal the severe impact on the women: wives, mothers, sisters, daughters of the murdered men who are now left to pick up the pieces of their families' broken lives. Finding a livelihood, keeping children in school, addressing health issues, which now include recovery and healing from trauma, these are their immediate concerns—assuming they have managed to give their dead a decent burial.

Furthermore, a study conducted by my women's organization, PILIPINA, underscores the violation of women's rights and dignity in the way the anti-drug operations are carried out, including violent intrusion into the homes of the poor, which are supposed to be women's safe and sacred space, no matter how lowly; the denial of their rights to care for their dead or wounded; theft of their few belongings; threats of their being taken to substitute for their targeted male relatives when they are not found on the premises; and vulnerability to sexual harassment, prostitution and human trafficking. The women who have been left behind have become, in the words of the study, “a new underclass among the urban poor; often ostracized and isolated by their neighbours, terrorized by barangay officials and the murderers of their family members, vulnerable to sexual exploitation.”

To date, two petitions have been filed for the issuance of a writ of amparo, a temporary protection order prohibiting police authorities from getting near the residences and workplaces of the families of EJK victims. The second one, filed in October 2017, was on behalf of the families of 35 residents of San Andres Bukid, a poor urban community in Manila, who were killed within a 13-month period. The San Andres Bukid petitioners were led by Sister Maria Juanita Daño of the Religious of the Good Shepherd, who has been living among the poor of San Andres for many years. Sister Juanita or Sister Nenet has formed an all-women group that meets weekly to reflect on the challenge of the Gospel in their lives. Men were initially invited to join the group, but they didn't stay because they were not comfortable with the sharing process.

●(1310)

When the killings started, the residents thought that first death was meant only to serve as a warning to the drug users and pushers in the neighbourhood, but the killings did not stop, and the rising number of fatalities included those not involved in drugs, including several youth.

Members of Sister Nenet's core group were the first to act. In Sister Nenet's words, they were mothers. It was not okay with them that their neighbours were getting killed. They started with candle-lighting and holding prayer services for the dead—subtle actions, as Sister Nenet points out. They became even more disturbed when they heard people say that those who were killed were worthless and deserved to die. With no action forthcoming from their parish priest, Sister Nenet went to the bishop, who called for a meeting with NGO lawyers.

The most eager among the lawyers was a young woman, attorney Tin Antonio of Centerlaw. While gathering data and testimonies for the case, Attorney Antonio joined the women in cooking, washing clothes and singing with the choir at funerals.

Many of the petitioners were hesitant to join the legal action at first. They received threats from the police. The village officials got angry with them. Even their families asked if filing the case would bring the dead back to life, but they persisted. Sister told the petitioners that “even if we lose, at least you can say you fought for your loved ones”. The media report the deaths, but they have no names—only numbers. By identifying and naming them, you give them back their dignity.

Two days ago, the Supreme Court ordered the government to release all documents related to Duterte's war against drugs. The police assigned to the neighbourhood have been changed. Killings have waned, but they still happen under a different form—no longer by the police but by riding in tandem teams. Every BEC member, every core group member, now has a tarpaulin on the front door. On the tarp are written the 10 basic rights of citizens. Everyone is encouraged to memorize the list so they know what to do in case they are picked up or threatened. Sister Nenet herself narrowly escaped being identified, because she was not wearing a veil when the village ombudsman came looking for a nun.

I now will raise the second pressing human rights issue, related to the displacement caused by the five-month Marawi siege. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees reports that 77,170 families were displaced by the armed operation that began in May 2017. The city centre was completely demolished, ancestral homes looted, properties destroyed and hundreds of lives lost, including those of 45 civilians. Families were—and remain—sundered. Now, almost two years after Duterte declared the liberation of Marawi, residents have not been allowed to return to the most affected area in the centre of the city. Adding to their heartbreak, they continue to be excluded from any participation in the planning of the rehabilitation of their city.

That war and displacement place a higher burden on women than on men is well documented worldwide, but even the start of the siege was ominous. When Duterte declared martial law covering the whole of Mindanao as a response to the siege, he sought to motivate the

soldiers to fight by telling them that if they were to rape up to three women, it would be on him. Today, Marawi women find themselves dealing with a new reality of scarcity, marginalization and physical and psychological insecurity, including unverified reports of sexual abuse.

The tragedy is that the human rights defenders of Marawi are themselves displaced and are among those who have lost everything. Civil society's woman leader, Samira Gutoc, was the lone Moro voice who persisted in speaking out against the declaration of martial law when the issue was debated on the floor of Congress. Her mother and three-year-old son were caught in their home at the city centre when the battle broke out. Her ancestral home and all in it were lost. Like most of her people, she identifies herself as an IDP.

Marawi civil society leaders today are organizing and strategizing to get their voices heard by government even as they are still dealing with the loss of their dead and the missing; inhuman conditions in evacuation sites; the tearing up of the tightly woven social fabric of their lives; the threatened extinction of their culture and their identity; and, the complete lack of reliable information on what will happen next. They are standing up on their own because, if not, who else will, since the government seems intent on sweeping the rubble of Marawi under the rug, as if an entire bustling city and its needs and its people have turned invisible overnight.

●(1315)

Now, the greatest danger—and I'll end here—in all of these cases, from the vilification of powerful and empowering women, to the victimization of other women human rights defenders, especially those in the context of drug-related EJKs and the Marawi siege, is that no one seems to be listening while the government is exerting efforts to obscure reality.

May I just end with an appeal to the international community. For survivors of EJK victims, primarily women, we have tried to work, but these remain small and, to be candid, largely disjointed 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 his jokes during his speeches.

This is why we consider this as more than just a domestic concern. This calls for international solidarity. This, in fact, is the most appropriate time to mobilize the global community, for it is when local advocates are themselves being attacked and endangered that the international community of women human rights defenders is most needed to step up. Let our people know that someone is watching. Help us to grow the hope and courage of your vigilance and solidarity so that we may break the climate of fear and impunity.

Thus, we call on the international community not to depend on what the Philippine government says. Demand answers to your questions in the strongest possible terms. Leave the Duterte administration no doubt that a time for reckoning will come for those who refuse to respect human rights, especially those who prey on their own people for the sake of power.

Thank you, Madam Chair, and all members of the subcommittee, and good afternoon.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Quintos Deles. We're very pleased that we were able to bring you all the way from the Philippines here to be that voice. As you know, this is a televised committee, so hopefully that will allow a lot of these issues to be aired.

I'd like to go to questions now, for seven minutes each.

We will start with Ms. Falk.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster, CPC): Thank you so much, Chair.

Thank you for your being here and for your activism and your voice. I know, being a young woman, sometimes it's difficult to know when is the right time to speak and not to be discouraged by the louder voices that don't want me to speak. So I want to thank you for your courage and for coming here.

I have a question. During the first part of your testimony you were talking about some different senators who have suffered repercussions for speaking out. You had mentioned that one of the senators was in detention. I'm just wondering if you could explain or elaborate just what that means. What does detention mean? Does that mean exclusion or seclusion, or what?

• (1320)

Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles: She was arrested. She is in jail, not in the regular jail, but in the custodial centre of the Philippine National Police. She is in complete seclusion, not allowed to socialize with other detainees there.

We can visit on hours. You have to submit your name a week before, and there are times when the custodial centre says, "No, you cannot."

She is only brought out to attend hearings, and her security really take pains to keep her out of view—until we complained—raising their hands to cover her, coughing so that she will not be heard when the media asks her questions and she shouts out.

She does her legislative work with her staff who come, and there are times when she is not allowed to meet her staff in full. She has to meet them one by one and give instructions.

She has been very busy and it is very important that we do not forget she is there, so she puts out a daily dispatch. She does legislative work, but she is not allowed to vote, which has been a precedent compared with other legislators who were put in jail formerly. They would be allowed to physically go to to vote on important issues. She has not once been allowed to vote.

She was arrested in February 2017, which means she served seven months outside of custody. Since then she has been, and continues to be, in jail.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: I know you talked about some of these women being slut-shamed, that type of thing. How are their personal reputations attacked? What is being done, and are any of the men in the country standing up and saying anything against this, or are they just being quiet and complacent?

Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles: As I said, Senator De Lima was the chair of the human rights committee in the Senate. She had started an investigation into the killings, and the president charged her with being involved in the drug trade.

She was previously the secretary of justice, and in fact was known to have been the first secretary of justice who went into prison and exposed the good conditions that some of the drug lords had there. However, the president said no, she had been in jail and had the House of Representatives, where he has a so-called supermajority, do an investigation.

Before that investigation happened, he said there was a sex video of Senator De Lima having sex with her former bodyguard and security person. It turns out that the senator had had a discreet relationship with her security person. She was married and the marriage was annulled, so it was something that was completely just their business.

During the investigation, the slut-shaming by congresspersons was terrible. They called the former security person for Senator De Lima and asked him questions about whether they enjoyed sex, what the level of enjoyment was, and so on. It was completely unreserved, and then they were all giggling and laughing.

They threatened to show the sex video. That was where one of maybe the most imaginative actions of the women's movement came in. We put out a meme on social media saying, "I would like to testify in Congress; I am the woman in the sex video." Something that had started with only 50 women reached millions of reposts in a matter of 20 hours.

Of course, the video was not shown, because in truth, it was a fake video from pornography, but it had done damage. Senator De Lima was extraordinary in that she went from an appointed position to a national elected position, because that was how much people trusted her and believed in her work. From a 60% approval rating at the time that she ran, it had gone down by the time the slut-shaming episode had happened.

She was the one most publicly shamed, but the president likes to use it every time. When we raise questions, even the women's movement, he will say, "Oh, these are old hags who are dried up and therefore they are bitter," women such as me.

• (1325)

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Wow.

Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles: It is his favourite type of thing. He's angry with the chair of the human rights commission, who is male, and calls him a fag.

It is his most habitual thing, not just innuendos but real, outright slut-shaming.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk: Thank you so much.

The Chair: We're now going to move over to Ms. Khalid, who has seven minutes.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and thank you very much, Madam Quintos Deles, for your testimony and the great work you're doing.

I want to talk about and pick your brain about the intersection between a robust human rights law within a country such as the Philippines and how it impacts, and could be the foundation for providing, better protections for women human rights defenders. Could you advise us a little about the state of human rights in legislation in the Philippines?

For example, I would ask what type of protections are there regarding violence against women specifically, and also about freedom of expression and how the two intersect in order to provide that defence in law for persons such as yourself.

Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles: As I had said, over the years we have been able to put up a very strong architecture of legal protection for human rights, including women's rights. You have the Anti-Sexual Harassment Act. Our humanitarian law in times of war is very strong on that. Our Magna Carta of Women also has very strong protection of women. Our anti-rape law has been updated. It is no longer as it was in the beginning. A crime against chastity is a crime against persons. Rape in marriage is forbidden. It's there. Our human rights laws are there. As I said, even in times of war, that protection is in place.

As I said, we had had a sense of confidence and complacency since Marcos' time that we had reached some level that we could rest on. We were thinking, in the women's movement in particular, that our problem was now housekeeping, enforcing the laws, making sure these were done and implementing rules and regulations. We are completely unprepared for and still unable to understand what is happening now. The president says he does not care about the law, and that is the quandary. I think we believe very much that the law should protect us. It is there to protect us and those who are especially weak and needy. We need the rule of law, and over the years, have been undergoing this reform, including the reform of the security sector.

That is why I think there is so much fear and threat now and public insults. People think twice about whether they should speak out. Anyone who is there to raise a question has received verbal assaults. Just a few hours ago, when Senator Drilon, one of our veteran senators, told Duterte to be careful in the review of the

contracts of government, he said, "Well, if you don't stop it, I will suspend the writ of habeas corpus, and I will arrest all of you. You are no different from rebels, criminals and drug users. I will arrest all of you." That is what he said.

The law is important, but the assault on human rights and the rule of law, and the lack of reservation in the way personal attacks are being made, did stunt us for awhile. The law is there, so that is what we are counting on—that there will be a time of reckoning. I think with time the people are getting braver and are collectively coming together to say that this cannot be. The law is important, but the dilemma is that we now have leaders like this, who seem to think they can get away with it, and we do allow them to for awhile.

• (1330)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: You spoke about having a social media campaign to collectively defend somebody who was being attacked and then slut-shamed, as you said. Can you talk a little bit about the role of social media and the Internet in raising awareness of what the law is in the land and creating a united front against people who violate that law?

Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles: In the Philippines social media has been two-edged. I would have to say that the ones who weaponized it against human rights used it first. The trolling is terrible. The trolling is sexual. It threatens rape, the rape not just of you but of your children. It took a while but we realized, okay, that's the weapon of choice and we need to take it in our hands. There has been a push-back, but what we fight against is that the other side is so well-resourced. Doing a good social media program needs resources.

They have trolling. They have troll farms, as they say. Messages come. We do realize that when you learn to attack and put it to reason, they don't know how to argue back, because the only thing they know how to do is to threaten, to threaten you with rape, to call you all sorts of names. That is what is happening now. The resistance, the groups in the resistance, are also learning to use social media in various smart ways, but our disadvantage is that we don't have the resources that are needed to keep a good social media program going.

We have one social media campaign, the Bantay Bastos, to guard against crassness. They call out everyone. That's what I'm saying. It's there but hard to maintain on the level that it should be.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will now move to Ms. Hardcastle for seven minutes.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Thank you.

What was the name of that social media program you just said?

Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles: Bantay Bastos.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Is that something the international women's community, women human rights defenders in other areas, are in a better position to help with? What kind of social media controls are there? It would seem to me that you are more vulnerable speaking up in the country but that if you have an international community that remains vigilant as well, there might be an opportunity there. I don't know if that's the case or if it's really controlled?

Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles: It would except that the president so far has called any international criticism part of the “yellow army”. Yes, international support would help, but also internally, when I say that we need resources, it means that we need to be able to have people who can do it full-time. We don't have that, because people like me are doing other sorts of work.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Yes.

Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles: In the network we are growing, which is determined to push back, we have not yet had the resources to even have someone to do this as full-time work. Our people are doing street action action and research.

•(1335)

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: We're trying to look at this through a lens of what things Canada can do to be more proactive with. I'm not sure what the role of the UN Commission on Human Rights is at this point. Do you think there are ways that we can support that or are there opportunities in—I don't know—legal defence?

Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles: Just—

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Sorry to cut you off. If this president isn't respecting the rule of law, is that a waste of the limited resources you have then?

Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles: In fact, that's why we're saying that the international arena for recourse is so important and that it not give up.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Okay.

Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles: He curses them. He has cursed the ICC prosecutor. He has cursed the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. But you're out there; he cannot really harm you.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Yes, exactly.

Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles: It's important that you keep on going. It was very well appreciated at home when several parliaments....and I believe the chair was the one who sponsored the bill on Senator de Lima. We picked that up.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Yes.

Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles: We picked that up. It gives us spirit. It gives us hope that people are not forgetting that we are getting darker and darker.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: What about the media and its role, or are they complicit in some of this? I'm just finding it hard to believe that a president like this can just come in and everyone is so shocked by his conduct.

Somewhere there was....

Go ahead.

Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles: You know what happened to Rappler. Maria Ressa was recognized.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Right.

Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles: She has so many cases now. Even with her board, which is also composed of private sector members, has now also had cases filed. The franchises of our TV networks, which have to be renewed every few years, are now under threat. Our major newspaper, which was very critical, was also put under

threat. We don't believe it is an excuse for them to give up, but they have been stymied in a way, but we are very, very....

It is good that there are media people who are standing up and doing all sorts of programs. We are very grateful, for example, for the so-called nightcrawlers, the photographers who keep on documenting the killings all over Manila and are continuing to publish that. Some of these nightcrawlers have had to leave their jobs to do freelance work because otherwise they would have to seek permission from the newspaper.

Really our media is also under threat. There are media people who are standing strong. I think the value of press freedom has now also risen to a higher level among the public since they have clearly seen how with Maria Ressa there was political persecution that was happening.

That's the reality. The attacks are relentless and strong, but we are growing the resistance. When you talk about international support, that recognition of the work that's going on, that recognition of the human rights challenges that we are facing continuously and relentlessly means so much to us.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: I have one minute.

I think you were going to tell us a little bit more about the vilification. If we get an international community together, is that something that social media can actually counter very effectively then?

Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles: Yes.

We do pick up everything that comes out from abroad. It helps to tell the people. I think more and more Filipinos are awakening to that. That is also the truth. There is a constituency that likes Duterte and that is very loud and well resourced to do it. I do believe there is also a community saying that, no, he has crossed the line too many times. We are also starting to stand up and we appreciate the support that comes from outside. It reminds us that we are part of a community of nations that has built a regime of human rights, that we were once so strongly part of.

•(1340)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're now going into the second round, which is five-minute questions. We'll start with Mr. Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much, Ms. Deles, for being here today.

I want to ask you about the sources of opposition to the current regime and Mr. Duterte in particular. In your opening statement, you raised examples of civil society. I wonder if you could expand on that.

Does civil society really comprise the main space of opposition for women and women's organizations in particular? Have they taken the lead?

You're nodding, so they have.

How difficult is it for them to operate?

Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles: Yes, they have taken the lead because the government institutions that are supposed to be doing this are not. We have a Philippine women's commission that is supposed to be the guardian of the Magna Carta of Women, but they have been quiet.

Of course, he appoints the people. He appoints the people to these commissions, and they say that the civil service that is still there will say, "Yes, we call him out. We write a statement to call him out when he comes out with a statement". Of course, they submit them to the office of the president, and they don't know what happens.

In fact, it is civil society that.... One of the earliest sectors in Philippine society that stood out to say, "No, this cannot be" was the women's movement. In fact, we had to do a lot of reawakening of the passion for feminism, because we had gotten complacent. We had gotten to the level of doing checklists for women and development stuff: "What do you need?" We were really quite in this kind of danger, but very quickly that has revived. I am happy to say that, in fact, the intergenerational thing in the women's movement is one of the most hopeful things to older women like me. The young women who are coming up are talking to each other and finding out what that means.

I think, in fact—and it is one of my advocacies, and I hope that there will be assistance here—we need to set up a parallel type of guardian of women's rights, because our official institutions are not working. We need to be able to bring together prominent individuals—we can say it may be a bit self-commissioning—to become recognized in our society again so that somebody will speak out publicly and in one voice with strong gravitas when there is a need to push back.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you for that.

I think you have an ally in Canada. You will know, of course, that our government has spoken out strongly on extrajudicial killings as part of our foreign policy agenda and the development policy in particular that we've spearheaded under the Prime Minister, under then Minister Bibeau in international development and now Minister Monsef. We have seized the moment to fund women's organizations because we truly believe in making that a fundamental cornerstone of our foreign policy and development policy, and that includes the Philippines.

What else would you like to see Canada do?

Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles: I would like to see the Canadian embassy, for example, get more engaged in the democratic discourse at home. We hear it from outside; we don't hear it from your representatives inside the Philippines. We are aware of your programs for women and their livelihoods, but there's a bigger assault now.

• (1345)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Yes.

Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles: We do not see that in the diplomatic community at home. Even the small mission-funded projects are looking and recognizing that, in fact, we have a different threat that faces us now.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

The Chair: We'll now go to Mr. Sweet for five minutes.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Ms. Quintos Deles, I've read your bio. You've led an extraordinary life in human rights. We can't thank you enough for your good work.

Your courage has already been mentioned, so I want to ask you this directly, because you mentioned some heinous treatment that women who have spoken up have faced. You're here, televised and speaking up very clearly. Are you concerned for your own safety in this regard?

Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles: Every time, you think twice, but I think you have no choice. I have fought all my life. I fought the Marcos dictatorship. I did it for my children. I now have a grandchild, and I cannot imagine my grandchild being raised where I could not let him listen to the president, not being able to look up to the president, that I could not tell him to respect the president for his views.

I think there is no choice. I have chosen. I have stood. At the age of 70, I climbed again onto the truck to make a speech and call the president a coward, because if you don't do it, then who will do it? We have just invested so much in the democratic project, and we thought we were winning it, that we cannot.... I could not now....

I think that is why the grey power in the Philippines is now coming out. It's because to give up now would be a repudiation of what we have spent our lives for. As someone had said, who is now a widow, if she was fearless before, she is even more so now because she has fewer years in her life now. We have more people on the other side of life, so we have to do it.

I think our effort, of course, is that we are able to touch and make the connection with the younger generation, learn to speak each other's language, because the reality is that we don't. The millennials don't, and that has been one of the challenges and certainly one of the most rewarding things that the younger women are now claiming feminism again and are saying, yes, they value the same values but they will fight it their way. That's fine. Some of our creative actions recently were designed by them, and it was good. It was refreshing. We go and stand out, and it is good that we can work with our young women who have more creative ideas about how to do street action. We don't do the rituals, just the old rituals anymore when we go onstage, when we do our rallies. That is one of the things that we continue to do.

It is a question that we ask. How can you face yourself in the mirror in the morning? How do you explain yourself to your child or your grandchild that you let that go? That is a major question that we are asking. What will the future generations ask of us? What did we do during this dark time? For whatever it's worth, I would like to be able to say I did my part.

Mr. David Sweet: I'm just trying to identify, because we want to do a report and we want to illustrate exactly all of the different places where women human rights defenders are mistreated in different ways and for different reasons. I see that the Philippines has wrestled with some pretty interesting leaders over my lifetime. I see Duterte has withdrawn from the International Criminal Court. The Philippines is actually on the United Nations Human Rights Council.

In spite of that, which should really ignite people passionately in the Philippines, it sounds to me that one of the challenges you're wrestling with is that men, particularly, but maybe some women as well, just won't speak up in the Philippines and push back on this kind of tyranny from the president.

● (1350)

The Chair: Unfortunately, we have to hold that answer because we're at five minutes.

We will go to Mr. Tabbara for five minutes, and perhaps you can address that in one of your future answers.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): If you want, please continue answering the question.

Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles: We continue to count on that. We will continue to hold to the ICC's declaration that the crimes committed before he withdrew are still subject to reckoning. It is one of the things that we hold on to, that reckoning will happen, if not today then some time in the future, if not in the Philippines then internationally, and that we will come around again to be the Filipino people who defend human rights.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you very much for being here.

My question is within the legal court system. Whenever women human rights defenders speak out about some of the atrocities and injustices against them, within the court proceedings, do we see some discrepancies between how men and women are treated when it comes to criticizing the regime? Can you give us some examples?

Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles: So far, in the Philippines, women have stood out faster and more consistently. It also so happens that some of the most crucial institutions were headed by women at the time that he took office. Of course, that has caused him to say, for example, after the ousting the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, that he would not appoint women again. Of course, it happened that he appointed another woman, but that was someone who is completely on his side.

The public shaming has been stronger. The use of sexual attacks on women has been stronger. The defence of women I think has been weaker, in a way, because while we have very strong, empowered women in our public life, the reality is still that they are a minority, and so far, men seem to be able to take it.

In fact, for a while the thinking was that the issue of the treatment of women is not a life or death issue, that it is not the most important issue we are facing. We've had to fight that, and I think we are beginning to win on that. It is not a life or death issue, but it is an issue that strikes at our very cultural core. It is an issue that hits our soul. Its impact is not just on this generation but on the generations to come. I think there is greater awareness of that, but for a while there was the belief that you could let that go because it is not a life or death issue.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: In terms of that awareness, I know that the Philippines has had many struggles, whether with the economy or the natural environment. Have you been able to branch out? Some of the human rights defenders have been able to branch out to neighbouring countries and been able to talk about similar causes and struggles, to ensure that they're being treated equally and not being shamed by oppressive regimes.

● (1355)

Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles: Yes, we are quite active now in the regional discourse. It is our message that we are a cautionary tale for women. This is apparently not an aberration, because when I go to other countries in Asia, the taxi driver, the tour guide and even a parliamentarian will tell me they like my president.

We say in the women's movement in Asia that we need to talk more with each other. In fact, we have expressed in different countries that we need to do more self-talking. We need to talk more about women. We do see the threat. It's not isolated. This is happening in different parts of the world, and the sisterhood needs to gather again.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

For the final question, we'll go to Ms. Hardcastle for five minutes.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Thanks.

It's such a privilege to be with you today because you're really expressing things so well. We've heard from other human rights defenders as well, and you're really getting to the heart of something that is universal.

One of the things that intrigued me was when you talked about how Canada is supporting women and livelihood programs, and how what we're looking at is something bigger here. Do you have a suggestion as to how Canada could segue into addressing those bigger issues? I know I had asked you a little bit before about legal support. I'm trying to think of what there could possibly be that is appropriate in our international regime as well.

Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles: They need to talk to women who are in the resistance. They're not talking to us. The livelihood projects stay on the livelihood level. When you have a regime that looks at women this way, those livelihoods will only go up to a certain place.

Duterte has chilled even the diplomatic community. He has insulted some ambassadors. He has threatened to throw out some missions from the country. I think it is important that your representatives in the Philippines be braver and be unafraid to be seen talking to people who dare to question the president, not just his policies but his performance, because he's acting out. It could begin there. Our people have lots of ideas of what we'd like to do, and we can find the spaces to do it. We can do it sometimes very bravely, but we can also do it sometimes very quietly, growing the movement and growing the understanding. A lot has to happen in the Philippines in terms of looking at what happened and why.

That is a discussion that needs time. It needs trust. It needs building connections among people. You will have to do some self-examination, and we will also have to examine you. That needs trust. In the past, the Canadian mission in the Philippines had that kind of relationship with civil society and with the NGOs. I don't think I'm mistaken when I say that I don't think it's there now. You have to talk to people like me, at home. I'm not the only one. There are brave women. There are creative women. There are women of all ages from different sectors. We are trying very hard, banging our heads on the wall, and thinking about how we can break this non-violently, because violence is not our way.

It is good to have those conversations coming from the outside as well. That tells us that people recognize what we are going through. It tells us that they are supportive and that they also believe in the future that we continue to believe in.

•(1400)

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very, very much, Teresita Quintos Deles. I think I speak for the committee when I say that we have great

admiration for the work you and the other women are doing in the Philippines. We will be following your future endeavours very closely. I want to thank you for your very compelling and open testimony today.

Again, thank you very much.

Ms. Teresita Quintos Deles: Thank you.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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