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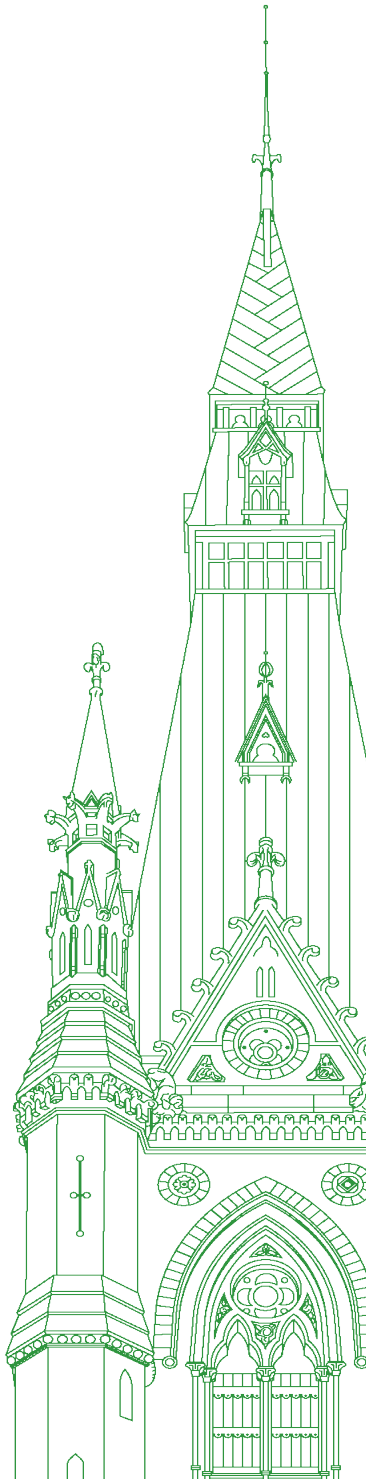
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Chair: Fayçal El-Khoury

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● (1530)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Fayçal El-Khoury (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

[*English*]

Welcome to you all.

Welcome to meeting number 26 of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Pursuant to article 108(2) and the motion adopted by the subcommittee on Monday, October 5, 2026, the subcommittee will meet today to hold a briefing on gender-based violence against Ukrainian women in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members may participate in person or via the Zoom application.

I would also like to mention that today's meeting will be conducted in three languages. In addition to our two official languages of English and French, Ukrainian interpretation services will be provided to allow our witnesses to express themselves in their own language and to ensure that they are properly welcomed.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank our dedicated team of interpreters for their invaluable contribution to the smooth conduct of our proceedings.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses today.

Appearing as individuals, we have Olesia Bondar, feminist, women's rights activist and director of the Ukrainian Women's Fund; Alisa Kovalenko, award-winning Ukrainian documentary filmmaker, human rights advocate and member of SEMA Ukraine and the global SEMA Network; and Dr. Halyna Zhukovska, senior referent for the government commissioner on gender policy.

From the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine, we have Olha Perunova, official representative, Department of Human Rights Monitoring.

Up to five minutes will be given for opening remarks, after which we will proceed with rounds of questions. Every one of our respected witnesses will have five minutes for opening remarks.

Now I would like to invite Alisa Kovalenko to take the floor for five minutes to make an opening statement.

Welcome. The floor is yours.

● (1535)

Alisa Kovalenko (Award-Winning Ukrainian Documentary Filmmaker, Human Rights Advocate, and Member of SEMA Ukraine and the global SEMA Network, As an Individual): Thank you so much.

I actually prepared my speech in English. I'm happy to speak with you as English-speaking colleagues.

Today I want to speak about hope. I want to speak about a story of hope of almost 12 years, a journey from total silence to individual voices, and then from voices to the community, and then from the community to a collective struggle for justice. I witnessed this transformation from the inside.

In 2014, at the beginning of Russian aggression in Donbas, I was 26 years old. As a young documentary filmmaker, I went to Donbas to document the beginning of Russian aggression. I was captured and raped by a Russian officer. When this Russian officer released me, he said I should be thankful that I was not executed.

For almost two years, I was silent about what happened to me. I didn't want to put this burden on the shoulders of my family, of the people I loved, but with trauma, it doesn't happen that you decide to forget it and it disappears. When I realized that I was coming back every night to the moment I was captured, to the moment I survived violence, I decided to speak publicly. When I gave my testimony to a big human rights organization in Ukraine, I asked if many other women had given their testimony about surviving conflict-related sexual violence caused by Russian aggression in Ukraine. They answered me by saying, “You are the first one.”

I realized at that moment that there was this huge wall of silence and stigma in Ukraine. There were lots of survivors, but nobody dared to speak. Nobody found the courage inside themselves to speak.

Two years later, in 2019, I received a message from another survivor who had survived captivity and sexual violence in Donbas. This survivor was Iryna Dovgan. She and Dr. Denis Mukwege, a global leader in combatting conflict-related sexual violence in the world, decided to support the gathering of Ukrainian survivors and help Ukrainian survivors unite in the community, support each other and fight for recognition and justice.

I went to that meeting. It was the beginning of a big and important movement of survivors in Ukraine. For the first time, I no longer felt alone and isolated. I also discovered the power of sisterhood and solidarity. I stayed with this community. Later it became SEMA Ukraine, our first Ukrainian survivors-led organization.

From the beginning, we realized it was so important to fight for recognition in our own country, because in 2019, not one single case was officially documented by the national police or the general prosecutor's office of conflict-related sexual violence that happened because of Russian aggression in Donbas.

Survivors became drivers for change. We pushed the general prosecutor's office of Ukraine to open investigations for 11 cases of survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. My case was one of them. It was an important beginning. Survivors, formerly invisible and silent victims, turned into agents of change.

After the full-scale invasion in 2022, SEMA Ukraine began supporting newly affected survivors as we witnessed the devastating scale of atrocities committed by Russian forces. As a documentary director, I felt that it would be so important to use documentary cinema as an instrument to amplify voices of survivors and to use the language of cinema as a bridge of empathy and an instrument to preserve memory.

● (1540)

Together with other women survivors, we started to work on a documentary film called *Traces*. *Traces* became more than just a documentary film. It's a platform for advocacy, solidarity and justice.

Earlier this year, the film premiered at the Berlinale, one of the biggest film festivals in the world. What was important was that it was a full cinema room, with 800 people there. After the film ended, all the people stood up, and we had a long standing ovation. I was together with other women survivors who had participated in the film and who gave their testimony, and I saw the eyes of people, the audience, who were crying, but I didn't see pity in their eyes. I saw so much admiration and respect.

For me, this changing of narratives was an important sign that people don't see survivors anymore just as invisible, suffering, silent victims or just as witnesses to atrocities, but as persons who can change reality around them, who can fight for justice. Also, they could feel that this community can give strength and that care can be a form of resistance.

In September, *Traces* was selected as Ukraine's official submission for the Academy Awards, for the Oscars. Now, when I look back at this journey, I see hope, because for me—

The Chair: Excuse me, Madam. I gave you two minutes extra. Would you wrap it up?

Alisa Kovalenko: Okay.

The Chair: I have to be fair, so that every one of the others will get seven minutes instead of five.

Thank you. Please wrap it up.

Alisa Kovalenko: I'm finishing. Thank you so much. Thank you for reminding me.

When I look at this journey, it's actually paradoxical that now, in these circumstances, with a full-scale invasion and with so many atrocities still happening in Ukraine and intensified terror on Ukrainian cities, we also have something to be proud of.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now I would like to invite Dr. Halyna Zhukovska to take the floor for seven minutes.

Halyna Zhukovska (Senior Referent of the Government Commissioner on Gender Policy, As an Individual): [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows*:]

Thank you very much, Chair, members of Parliament and distinguished participants. Please allow me to thank you for today's opportunity to take part in this committee meeting. I'm grateful to the Canadian people for their continued support of Ukraine in our fight against the Russian Federation.

I am a representative of the government, and so I would like to very briefly touch on what the Government of Ukraine is doing in this area.

During the full-scale invasion, Ukraine became one of the first countries in the world that provide support to victims of sexual violence related to conflicts. This activity began in a systematic way in 2022, when the agreement was signed between the Ukrainian government and the UN in countering conflict-related sexual violence.

As part of this work, the government created an interdepartmental working group. Over 120 organizations and representatives are taking part in this working group today, and 40% of them are international organizations and civil society organizations.

We work in order to implement the framework program, and we have an implementation plan. I currently have this plan in Ukrainian and in English, and I have a report on the results of our work for 2025, which I would be happy to share with you after our meeting concludes.

Speaking of specific actions that we took, after 2024 we started to actively work on drafting the law that was later adopted on interim urgent reparations, and we started a conversation with international organizations about these reparations.

What do we have today? As part of this project, 1,208 people have been recognized as victims of conflict-related sexual violence. Of them, 819 are men, 362 are women, 20 are girls and seven are boys. All of these people have been paid interim reparations in the amount of 3,000 euros.

The country has a system and a base from which to work, and we have people who are able to provide these interim reparations. However, unfortunately, we have no financial resources to fully implement this law. That's why we appeal to you, members of Parliament, if you have any opportunity to support Ukraine in this regard so that people who have become victims of conflict-related sexual violence could feel the support and could understand how much they are really being heard. You have just heard Alisa's testimony and you can understand how important it is for all us.

Thank you for your attention. If you have any questions, I will happily reply after we have all made our opening remarks.

Thank you.

● (1545)

The Chair: Thank you.

I would like to invite Olha Perunova to take the floor, please.

Olha Perunova (Official Representative, Department for Monitoring Human Rights Compliance, Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine): [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you, Chair.

Good afternoon, distinguished members of Parliament.

First of all, I would like to thank your country for the support of our country and for your powerful position regarding us.

This is my first time in Canada, the first time in my life, and I would like to say that my presence here and the opportunity to speak with you is an extremely important event in my life.

As a representative of the National Police and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, I would like to bring to your attention several aspects of our law enforcement agency activity and how large the law enforcement agency role is in documenting and identifying war crimes.

Since the first days of the full-scale invasion, the police have been fully involved. They were working in all the occupied territories. Police representatives and officers, together with the military, are really the first people who get in contact with the population under occupation.

Their main role is as trained, professional rapid-reaction mobile groups that are able to communicate with the population in order to document crimes and build confidence within these communities that have been de-occupied.

We are creating these specialized groups. They include juvenile prevention specialists, psychologists, investigators and other operational unit representatives who are specially trained in communications. They work with the population and have worked with over 700 towns and cities to document and identify the facts about every person who went through this violence.

I'm grateful to the Government of Canada. In 2022, you supported our initiative to develop online training for police officers in order to teach them greater awareness and skills. We haven't all been prepared for the war. It was actually quite unexpected, and this training has been invaluable for our police officers. It was thanks to Canada that this online communication course was implemented, and it is very effective. I would like to thank you for it.

I was one of the coordinators of this course. I went through this course myself. I saw the results and effects, and I heard the positive feedback from the police officers who went through the course. It really helps people gain new skills that we didn't have need of before.

In addition to that, we continue documenting. We have created 12 rooms for interviews within the National Police, and that's a great success for us, because interviewing people is one of the most important moments of communication with the victims. The set-up, atmosphere and everything surrounding them have to help the person speak calmly and frankly about what they have gone through.

The police work is ongoing. We are working in coordination with others to do everything we can. We are collaborating with the prosecutor's office and the Security Service of Ukraine, making sure that each case is documented and that each person who is a victim receives the assistance they need.

Thank you very much.

● (1550)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Perunova.

Now I would like to invite Olesia Bondar to take the floor. The floor is yours, Madam.

Olesia Bondar (Feminist, Women's Rights Activist and Director of the Ukrainian Women's Fund, As an Individual): [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you very much.

I can't help but join my colleagues and thank the Canadian people for their continued support of Ukraine in various areas.

I represent the Ukrainian Women's Fund. I am very pleased to speak about Canada's support for women and the women, peace and security agenda. It helps us drive systemic changes and it helps us to be here in Canada to speak to you.

Speaking about the issue of the agenda, today I would like to share two more statistics.

My colleagues have already said that 1,208 victims of CRSV have applied for interim urgent reparations, but only 410 cases of conflict-related sexual violence have been documented. That's despite the fact that the OHCHR of the UN documented 984 cases of conflict-related sexual violence. This discrepancy means that the subject of conflict-related sexual violence remains taboo in Ukraine, and the victims remain silent about the crimes committed by Russia.

As Alisa mentioned, she was the first woman to speak about this openly. We understand that there are many more of these people; they just remain silent.

The number of men who have suffered from sexual and gender-based violence is steadily increasing. Those returning from captivity report various forms of abuse, including sexual and gender-based violence.

There is a different situation regarding women. Many women remain in uncontrolled territories or in captivity, and we don't know what's happening to them. Right now, there are 494 women who are being held as prisoners of war or being held captive by Russia. Russia systematically refuses to return Ukrainian women or put them on exchange lists or prisoner swap lists.

The number of organizations led by victims is also increasing. Currently, there are 11 such organizations in Ukraine. Two of them are led by women, and the remaining nine are led by men or families of the victims.

With regard to civil societies, here's what I would like to bring to your attention.

First, survivors seek reparations, but they do not officially file complaints with law enforcement agencies to document the crime.

Second, victims are often forced to seek various services separately, and the available support does not always meet their needs, especially those related to age and gender. Furthermore, there is limited support tailored to the needs of male victims, especially in civil society organizations. They have more experience in working with female victims. That's why the male victim category is relatively new.

Third, we are seeing insufficient services in rural and war-affected areas. I would also like to note that the organizations that the victims create experience financial difficulties. They do not have sufficient financing to continue their activities. Here, we see quite a significant role for civil society organizations, especially in regard to the women's movement, in helping survivors speak out and access available services.

At the moment, survivor-led organizations are not strong enough and therefore need the support of civil society. They need help in making their voices heard and in being represented. Women's organizations are the ones survivors turn to for help, and they are the ones that help identify new cases.

● (1555)

That's why it is crucial for these organizations to be included in the movement and for the movement to speak on their behalf. It's very important for survivor-led organizations to be strong, to have their voices heard and to have access to international platforms in order to provide advocacy in cases of conflict-related sexual violence.

In regard to specific assistance that Canada could provide, I would like to emphasize that we need you to continue putting pressure on Russia to release prisoners of war, particularly women, whom they simply do not want to exchange. We not only need international platforms for advocacy; we also need access to them so that survivor-led organizations can speak from them. It's very important for us to learn the feminist-based approaches to supporting victims. This is where you could really assist us.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Bondar, and thanks to all of our excellent witnesses. Your remarks are really touching. We welcome you here.

Now I would like to open the floor to questions from the members and answers from you.

I would like to start with Mr. Mahal. You have the floor for seven minutes.

Jagsharan Singh Mahal (Edmonton Southeast, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As the chair said, yes, we really mean it. Your remarks and the stories, especially those of the witnesses who lived them, are really touching. I want to thank you and salute you for sharing your experiences with other countries of the world, which would not have been possible without your courage.

I also want to thank all the advocates for making sure all of these witnesses are supported and that there is a mechanism and a platform of support for all of the victims.

As we consider the conditions for a lasting peace, I would like to focus on how women affected by this violence can help shape the decisions that will affect the future. My question is this: What priorities do survivors want reflected in peace discussions, and how can Canada help to ensure that their voices are heard?

Anyone can answer. Perhaps Dr. Halyna Zhukovska can start.

● (1600)

Halyna Zhukovska: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you very much for your question.

The issue with regard to the voices of the victims of sexual-related violence would be incorporated into the peace negotiations. This is one of the most topical tasks and one of the most important objectives of the commissioner for gender equality policy, Dr. Kateryna Levchenko. We are very actively involved in advocating this activity.

Last year, we conducted a number of meetings and sessions in which individuals from the government and from civil society organizations participated. We developed recommendations on exactly how to incorporate the needs of various categories of both men and women into talks that may bring lasting peace. We tabled all of these proposals before the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy. We also passed them over to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs so that these issues would be taken into account when peace negotiations are held.

Thank you.

Alisa Kovalenko: Thank you so much for your comment and for the question.

As a survivor myself, and as a member of a survivor-led organization for seven years, I can say that this flexible institutional support for survivor-led organizations is very important.

During my five years in the organization, my work was a volunteer job. I didn't receive any support as a survivor. I did it because it was important for me and because I felt it was our collective fight for justice. We just need to have this basic foundation so that we can continue our work.

We are also helping to put this fundamental justice in place for our law enforcement institutions, because, first, when survivors.... No, I will say it a different way.

We created a program with special awareness-raising sessions for the communities in the liberated territories, which had been under occupation for eight months, and we spoke with people from those communities. There were a lot of survivors who decided to speak out because we were representing women survivors. We had this bitter privilege of saying to those women and men that we understood them and that we had gone through the same thing.

With this kind of program, when survivors can support other survivors and help them to go and give official testimony to the national police and to the general prosecutor's office, it's very important to support different initiatives that are made for survivors. It's created from inside the survivors' community, because we can understand better the legacy of the subject and we can find a way to speak with affected women.

There is another thing that is very important, which is that survivors can be considered not just as witnesses to atrocities but as active participants in justice-shaping mechanisms, can become experts, and, as Olesia said, be invited to international platforms and events and speak out not only to share their experiences but also as experts and as agents of change.

● (1605)

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: In your opening statement, you mentioned it took you about two years to open up and come forward. With the initiatives you have taken yourself for the organizations similar to yours, and with the help of all these women's advocates, can you comfortably say that the situation now is different and that people are coming forward on a regular basis sooner than two years or more? Has there been a decrease in the time?

Alisa Kovalenko: When I started to speak, there was nobody around. There was no organization that could help me and support me. I felt absolutely isolated with my trauma. Now we have a lot of survivor-led organizations. We have institutions that are helping survivor-led organizations.

We also have support at the state level. Now it's a big ecosystem in which we feel that at least we can be heard, but still it's a very stigmatized and silent crime. It's especially complicated for women and men to speak out in the small towns and small villages. That's why we also need to work with the communities in those places.

A lot of those towns and villages are very close to the front line, so people also live in very different difficult conditions. We need more programs to work with the communities there. We need to involve survivor-led organizations in working with the communities to support people and create this empathy in the communities to reduce the stigma there, because there is still quite a high level of stigma.

I can say that, yes—

Jagsharan Singh Mahal: Dr. Zhukovska wanted to add something as well.

Halyna Zhukovska: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

I would love to mention one very important aspect to confirm the fact that the voices of community organizations, which were set up and composed of victims of sexual of violence, should be heard across the world: Russia was blacklisted. It happened exclusively because civil society organizations were helpful. They stood up, and their voices were counted.

I would love to take this opportunity to ask you, as members of Parliament, to support not only our civil society organizations but the Ukrainian national government as well, so that next year Russia will stay blacklisted and feel the shame of what it has done.

The Chair: Thank you

I now invite Madam Vandenbeld to take the floor, please.

Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I just want to say, listening to all of you today, that we are looking at you with great admiration. We see your strength. The fact that you are here and the fact that you are taking on this really hard issue with such grace, such empathy and such strength matters. It makes a difference. You're on an international platform. I just want to acknowledge that.

I also know that being first is very hard. I want to acknowledge that as well, because most people turn inward into their pain. You turned outward and made sure others don't need to have the same pain. For that, we are very grateful to you.

Ms. Kovalenko, when you gave your opening remarks, you didn't get a chance to finish everything you wanted to say. I have about six and a half minutes left. You can have my time. Please say anything that you want to say. You have the world listening to you. Canadians are listening to you, so take the rest of my time.

Alisa Kovalenko: Thank you so much. I'm sorry, but I want to say so many things.

I didn't finish one thing. I was talking about the story of hope and of how community is created. We can only change the future together. We cannot survive the reality of war individually. We can survive it only collectively, in communities, supporting one another and in solidarity with one another.

I started the film *Traces* as a document of crimes against humanity. We received a small grant, so it started with testimonies. In the moment, I felt I was diving into an ocean of pain. Later, I realized that this film could not be just about this bottomless evil and it could not be just about pain and trauma. It had to be about dignity triumphing over evil—the human dignity I found in the recovery process, this sisterhood and this solidarity. This film became one about community as a place of care and hope.

This is why I started to talk about the civil society organizations I'm representing. It's so important for us to be united and to have this bond because of what's happening with totalitarian regimes and dictatorships, and because of what they want to do. First, they want to break these connections inside communities. They want to break communities. I see the existence of those communities as a source of resilience.

There's one more thing I want to say.

We survivors united, first of all, with one goal: to fight for justice and to fight against immunity or amnesty for these war criminals. I remember that one of the points of the peace proposal or agreement with Putin was amnesty for all war criminals. What kind of peace can we have if there is amnesty for the most extreme war crimes?

It's hard to talk about justice. What is it? We cannot bring Russian war criminals to the International Criminal Court in The Hague. We cannot see them punished. At the same time, we need to keep a sense of what justice is. It's about recognition. It's about voices. It's about testimonies. This is the first step towards justice.

I suggest that this will be a slow horse. I don't know if I or other survivors from my community and organization will live long enough to see justice in the future, but we need to give water and food to this horse and to walk it together. We need to participate in these processes to bring this justice closer and participate in the future of this justice.

Thank you so much.

● (1610)

Anita Vandenbeld: I think that is very inspiring. That struggle for justice never stops. We—Canadians and parliamentarians—are beside all of you in trying to find that justice and peace, because there is no peace without justice.

I have about 40 seconds left.

I want to ask you one more question. I want to ask about the 400-and-some who are still in captivity. I think it was Ms. Bondar who mentioned that.

What can we do to get them free? In this committee and in Canada, we've worked on freeing the children. What more can we do?

Olesia Bondar: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

I don't really know what you can do. I don't know how to make Russia return our women.

This is what our ombudsman office says: No matter how many times they compile lists of women to return, including military servicewomen, Russia refuses. It refuses to exchange our women and return them to Ukraine. I think they are doing it on purpose. They're doing it to hurt us, these women and their families, and to inflict as much pain as possible.

I don't know how we can make them return our women. We see men being exchanged in prisoner swaps, but not women—not at all.

Anita Vandenbeld: This committee did quite a bit of work about the children who have been abducted, so I think that perhaps something we could take away is to do more work trying to bring those women home.

Ms. Perunova, I think you talked about law enforcement. I know that we have sent RCMP to Ukraine to give training so that the way in which things are documented will hold up in international court. You've talked about justice and impunity, but if you don't have that documentation on the ground preserved, then it is very hard to prove these things later. Can you tell me a bit about how you're doing that?

That's for whoever is the most appropriate person to answer.

● (1615)

Olha Perunova: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Our police officers—I'm speaking about the investigative units—go through specialized training in all of the aspects regarding what you have mentioned, and in accordance with all of the standards that exist to preserve documentation and to document each war crime. We're not just speaking about conflict-related sexual violence here.

The experience that every delegation from your country brings to us, and other countries as well, is extremely valuable for us. At a certain point, we thought we were alone. We're able to implement the experience that you give us into police practice to document each case of these atrocities. Police do incredible work, thanks to that experience and expertise that you and every country share with our law enforcement agencies.

I am very grateful, because I know that before the full-scale invasion, our national police had no specialized units. Today we have them. These are people who are highly qualified to document war crimes. I think these are investigators who go through Canadian training. They are from 12 regions bordering the front lines and they receive survivors of conflict-related violence. They have larger groups where these units work. We understand that people move across the country, and each person is important to us. This is the work that these investigative units are focusing on.

The standards they are implementing are also very important. Two weeks ago, there was a joint order signed between the prosecutor general's office and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, as well as the state security service, for instructions on procedures for investigation of conflict-related sexual violence crimes. This procedural document includes the best practices of the international humanitarian law and the best ways of conducting interviews with survivors. They are the best practices to allow us to document each case in the best way possible.

Thank you.

Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have the floor for seven minutes, plus two additional minutes, because everyone got two additional minutes.

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

Thank you very much to the witnesses. Welcome to the subcommittee.

I always spare a thought for Victoria Amelina, an extraordinary woman, a Ukrainian artist who succumbed to the bombs of the Russian regime. In 2023, I was fortunate enough to meet her and speak with her. We even had private conversations—which, obviously, is no longer possible. Whenever I have the opportunity, however, I always take the time to say her name and acknowledge her sacrifice. So, that's done.

Ms. Kovalenko, your work has helped provide a voice to survivors. I think it's important to emphasize that. However, beyond acknowledging the crimes, what needs to be done to ensure that survivors feel truly heard and believed, and that they receive support not only from their own government but also from the international community?

● (1620)

[*English*]

Alisa Kovalenko: Thank you for mentioning Victoria Amelina. I didn't know her personally, but we had a lot of friends in common.

I could speak for maybe more than an hour about different checks that support.... I already mentioned that it's important for survivor organizations to receive this institutional support so that we can exist and we can support other survivors. This principle of peer-to-peer support is very important, because it's also a psychological rehabilitation process when survivors arrive and become a part of the community. They can see other women's recoveries and this post-traumatic growth. It's creating this kind of group therapy process for survivors.

However, we need some very practical, obvious things, like medical support. We don't have sustainable medical support for survivors. Maybe some who were in an official exchange—those who were exchanged after captivity on Russian-controlled territory—would receive one month of rehabilitation, but afterward, that's it. Recently, we received a small grant for medical checks for survivors. Thirty survivors went through medical checks, and for 80% of the survivors, we found different kinds of health problems. For some, we need to collect money for very complicated operations.

It's also very individualized. We cannot say, “Okay, all survivors need this. All survivors need that.” Some survivors lost their homes and have no place to live. In our organization, we had women whose houses were bombed. One woman, for example, survived torture and sexual violence, and on top of that, her house was bombed. First we needed to support her and create better conditions for her to live in. Things are very complex.

What can we do for survivors? First, we speak with them and we try to understand what this person—this woman, this man—needs first. What kinds of emergency help do we need to provide, and afterward, what can be the other steps in this trajectory of help and recovery?

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you for that useful answer.

Ms. Perunova, in November 2024, Ukraine adopted Law 4067-IX, which recognizes the status of people who've experienced conflict-related sexual violence and provides for provisional reparations. I would like to know what progress has been made in implementing that law. Are there any remaining difficulties in ensuring that victims can actually benefit from these measures?

Ms. Zhukovska, you wanted to answer that question. Please go ahead.

[*English*]

Halyna Zhukovska: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Indeed, I can answer your question.

Law 4067-IX is the Maryna Bardina law, which came into effect in January of this year. As far as the implementation goes, I did mention very briefly in my opening remarks that Ukraine adopted this law. At present, the cabinet of ministers of Ukraine have a resolution about interactions among different institutions in order to grant the status of “victim of conflict-related sexual violence”. There's a working group, which includes central government authorities, international organizations and civil society organizations, that works on granting such status. The Ministry of Social Policy, Family and Unity is the lead ministry on this and on the implementation of this policy.

What has been done? The National Social Service is finalizing the monitoring of the services that exist to provide support to victims of domestic and gender-based violence, and we'll see it very soon. It includes victims of conflict-related sexual violence. We have heard today that the services that exist are mostly adapted for women. However, you have also heard that a great number of men are also victims of conflict-related sexual violence. This number, 819, is two-and-a-half times the number of women. Services have to be adapted to assist men who are victims as well. It is very important.

There's also another open question about providing reparations regarding financial assistance of 3,000 euros. There is a great issue that needs resolving.

I also want to add something. You asked Olesia about what should be done to help those people who are survivors. Here we have to use a complex, comprehensive, human-centred approach. Those people who are victims stayed in the temporarily occupied territories or have returned from captivity. They could be civilians or prisoners of war. I fully agree with Olesia that support has to be individualized to determine their needs. However, we're all people. We understand that the approaches for their recovery have to be comprehensive, perhaps providing them with housing, education and mental health support and helping them renew ties with their families as well as giving them constant medical and mental health support and counselling.

In our Ukrainian women's fund, we had the opportunity to learn about the international experience in supporting such people. These people require lifelong support, and that's what we have to design and establish in Ukraine within institutions that can support these people over their whole lives.

Thank you.

● (1625)

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

You talked about—

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

I invite MP Zuberi to take the floor now.

Thank you.

Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Thank you.

Dyakuyu to the witnesses for being here today, and for your testimony and your strength in being steadfast in seeking justice. Thank you for your courage. A lot has been said already, and your testimony is very powerful. To those who are working to support and to seek the pursuit of justice, what you are doing is also very noble, powerful and important. Thank you to you all.

Alisa, in your testimony you highlighted a number of points that are really important, such as admiration and respect when those who have gone through a great ordeal are seeing admiration and respect, and that you are fighting for justice.

You also touched upon and spoke about the concept of community a number of times. Can you share with us how the sense of community is so important? What have you seen in terms of the strength that has been gained through the sense of community among those who have survived these great ordeals? Can you share more about those two points about the community and what has happened from that?

● (1630)

Alisa Kovalenko: I just want to clarify the question.

Sameer Zuberi: You talked about community and how important it is for people to gather together and have that sense of togetherness. How have you seen people who have entered the community change for the positive?

Alisa Kovalenko: I understand. Thank you.

I can say one very important thing, and I think I've already mentioned it. When you come as a newly affected woman, for example, and you've just recently survived torture, sexual violence or captivity, you arrive in a place where there are other women who have already gone through this healing journey. You see them not recovered and not healed, but these other women can give you an example of how you can overcome trauma.

By observing and seeing other women inside the community, you see this trajectory and you have hope that you can overcome trauma. This is based on sister-to-sister support, and this is a real concept.

I read a long time ago, even before the full-scale invasion, about an American investigation regarding post-traumatic growth in civil society organizations of survivors of domestic violence. It was a very interesting investigation. It found that women in these organizations and communities went through this post-traumatic growth journey 10 times faster than women who were isolated in trauma. They could see examples of the resistance of other women.

Also, in our organization, it's not only sister-to-sister support; we are also supporting people socially and psychologically. We are trying to find different programs of rehabilitation. For example, we are now working with a monastery in Switzerland where women can go and stay for 10 days in a calm and beautiful setting surrounded by nature. These are small things, but we are trying to help survivors as much as possible by finding different ways to do that.

I can give an example of one woman from our organization. I was a witness to her first testimony. She was sharing her story for the first time, and she was in a horrible state. She was crying all the time. A Russian soldier had raped her and had also infected her with hepatitis, so she was very sick. At first we were shocked, and we had to help her with so many things. Also, her house was bombed, so it was a totally catastrophic case, and she was in a very bad psychological state.

People from the village started to hate her because she was crying all the time. These people had survived the occupation, so why was this woman crying all the time? She then started to be hated by the community in her own village, so we had to start to help her with different things, as well as medical treatment. We bought medicine for her and we organized a rehabilitation process. One year later, I saw her smiling, and I saw this incredible journey of healing. It was beautiful.

Sameer Zuberi: Was the lady you described public about her story?

Alisa Kovalenko: She is in my film, *Traces*.

Sameer Zuberi: For the benefit of our committee, can you share her name?

Alisa Kovalenko: Her name is Nina. I cannot share her surname, but she is part of the film.

It was also a unique thing, because I was not sure if she would accept to be part of the film. I waited for one year for her to agree to be part of the film. It was also part of her recovery process. For her, it became important to speak publicly.

● (1635)

Sameer Zuberi: You are going through a great trial, and your attention and focus are rightly on Ukraine and what's happening there. Are you hearing from other survivors of violence from other conflicts? Are they looking for support from you and your organization?

Alisa Kovalenko: Actually, I'm also part of the global SEMA, so I'm a part of a big global network, with survivors from 29 countries. One year ago, we had a big experience exchange in Uganda. We were together with survivor-led organizations from Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, the Central African Republic and Ethiopia. During four days, we were exchanging our advocacy experiences.

Yes, we are in contact, and we also often participate together at different events or conferences, such as in New York during the CSWF conference. We were speaking together with women from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and from other African countries.

Yes, we are trying to work closely together and share our experiences.

Sameer Zuberi: Thank you for sharing these stories.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Zuberi.

Now I invite Mr. Jackson to take the floor, please.

Grant Jackson (Brandon—Souris, CPC): I have a couple of specific questions for each of the witnesses, so I'll try to address them directly.

I'll begin with Ms. Bondar. Thank you for being with us.

The Ukrainian women's fund has been inside this crisis from the beginning. It has not waited for the international community to notice but has been building the structures that let women survive what is being done to them. The hardest thing about documenting sexual violence in conflict is that most of it never gets documented in the first place. The silence is the evidence.

Would you take a minute to describe what you are actually seeing on the ground and help us understand the distance between what is being formally recorded and what is actually happening to women in Ukraine?

Olesia Bondar: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you so much.

The Ukrainian women's fund was established 20 years ago. This is a charitable organization we developed to strengthen women's movements. We don't win cases ourselves, but we do support organizations that are directly involved in working with the victims. As Alisa said, very often this organization can receive funds, but it does not get them for administrative purposes for the organization. They do not receive funds to enhance and support members of the organization.

In order to talk with the voices of the victims, you have to set up special advocacy companies. We are one of those advocacy companies. We help those organizations to grow and develop. We also provide support to organizations that are directly working with and supporting victims of sexual violence, but we're not involved in documenting or registering it ourselves.

We also have an organization of Ukrainian lawyers, JurFem, and it does the work when it comes to the legal protection of sexually affected victims. They do that job.

Grant Jackson: I appreciate that. I guess my next question is more along the line of your experience in this sphere.

Canada was among the first states to refer Russia to the ICC. We have the diplomatic commitment on paper. The pattern in conflicts like this is consistent: Document it, condemn it and watch the prosecution rate stay near zero, while survivors carry the weight of impunity alone.

If you or your organization could identify the one intervention that would most close that gap—whether it's dedicated prosecution capacity, direct legal recourse for survivors or sustained international funding for documentation—what would that one major initiative be that would most close the gap, in your view?

● (1640)

Olesia Bondar: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you for the question. There is one little thing I want to add on documentation.

When the full-scale war started, there were a number of organizations that were ready to start documenting it, but they were not prepared to do the job professionally. They did not know how to do it correctly and properly in order to open the possibility of starting legal action. They made some mistakes, and the documentation could not be used in the legal framework. Later, when there was training offered for them, it was very helpful.

In many cases, we could not receive the information on the first try from the victims, so we had to talk to them again and again. Then, when these organizations learned how to do it properly, how to work with witnesses, we streamlined the process of documenting the cases in a way that was legally correct and proper. As of today, I would not say Ukraine has sufficient practical skills, but there are enough that can be used in a court of law to bring Russia to justice.

We do not work on tribunals, so I will ask my colleagues to add to this issue, because it is relevant to your question.

Alisa Kovalenko: If I may, I just want to say something that is important. Maybe you know that we are now in the process of creating a special tribunal against Russian crimes of aggression. I think the most important role can be to help in this creation process, to involve more experts in it, more people from international criminal law.

Recently I had a speech in a Nuremberg court, in the legendary room 600 where Nazi war criminals after the Second World War were prosecuted. A leading person, Anton Korynevych, was working on this tribunal. We were talking with him about the importance of involving survivors in the prosecution process and involving their expertise in it. Actually, it could be a new approach in the history of international criminal law if survivors finally become participants in this mechanism of shaping justice.

We really need international support for this special tribunal. This special tribunal on crimes of aggression by Russia against Ukraine will be the first case in world history.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, the floor is now yours.

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

Ms. Zhukovska, you gave me a lengthy reply earlier when you talked about men and women who are victims of sexual violence. There's an NGO based in Oslo, called the Peace Research Institute Oslo—I don't know if you're familiar with it—which pointed out that children conceived as a result of sexual violence are often stigmatized and discriminated against. Their rights may be overlooked in legal frameworks and, consequently, in support systems. Is there any support currently provided to children born as a result of sexual violence in the Ukraine conflict? Are these children recognized, and can they access support?

● (1645)

[*English*]

Halyna Zhukovska: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Indeed, children worldwide who are born as a result of sexual violence are also victims. They are sexual violence victims.

In our country, we also recognize these children as victims, but at this time, we have no officially recognized cases of parents coming to us and requesting support of these children who were born as a result of sexual violence. We don't have these cases documented, but I am absolutely convinced that these children do exist. We do know that they exist. In particular, we know that there are some children like this in the Zaporizhzhia region, part of which is under temporary occupation.

I'm completely convinced that in the future we will work with these children as victims. They will be considered victims of this conflict-related sexual violence.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Yes, absolutely. It's not easy to shed light on this problem precisely because of the safety issue for children—but also, often, for the woman who was a victim of sexual violence and ultimately gave birth to a child under those circumstances. That is still something that I think needs to be highlighted. Perhaps, in the future, these issues can be addressed and other countries will also get involved and offer this kind of support. We hope that Canada will do so.

Ms. Kovalenko mentioned earlier that women living in occupied territories, in areas near the front line or in more rural communities face specific obstacles—which differ from those elsewhere in the country—when it comes to accessing protection services, psychological care or legal support. What can be done to adapt services for these people, who are experiencing situations that are completely different from those encountered in the rest of the country? That's a broad question.

Ms. Kovalenko, perhaps you could discuss this—since you were the one who raised it.

[*English*]

Alisa Kovalenko: Thank you. It's a very good question, but not an easy one. How can we organize support on this when it can be a very dangerous zone?

I will give the city of Kherson as an example. It's a drone safari there. You can see, even in some videos on social networks, how Russian drones are chasing and killing people. How can you organize this kind of support for people in a normal way?

We need to think about how we can find safe places for those people to come and have support. We cannot organize security for any kind of programs in the Kherson region, in the city of Kherson or in the Zaporizhzhia region. It's too dangerous. That's why we have to think about more solutions for bringing people to some of these places.

For example, in our organization, when we organize sessions for women—different kinds of psychological or educational sessions—we bring women to the western part of Ukraine, where the women can rest a little bit from the constant bombings. They can rest and feel safe. We bring them to towns in the most secure territories. That's what we can do. So far, it's been really hard to find another solution.

Halyna Zhukovska: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Our approach to assist people like this is to relocate territorial communities. For example, the Luhansk region, the Donetsk region and the regional military administrations of these regions are working directly with the territories where their populations are relocated temporarily. As part of this work, assistance is provided. Ukraine has adopted action plan 1325, the third plan, and this plan includes assistance to conflict-related sexual violence survivors. It's one of the goals of this plan. As part of this, at the level of regional military administration, there are special tasks and events that will be held to assist these people.

I completely agree that this work is very complicated. It requires constant improvement. We've had a lot of questions at the level of territorial communities about how we restore these things and how we implement this work.

In this regard, civil society organizations who work on these issues have a great role to play, and other countries—Canada especially—that support this activity could play another great role through their projects. That's how we work. It's either relocating people or working with these relocated people directly.

● (1650)

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[*English*]

I invite Madam Dhillon to take the floor now.

Anju Dhillon (Dorval—Lachine—LaSalle, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all our witnesses for being here today in these very difficult circumstances. You've stood up and shown courage and fought for yourselves, and you are fighting for the future of all women—not just Ukrainian women, but all women, and, as Ms. Bondar said, for men and boys who are subjected to sexual violence. We are seeing this more and more, very disturbingly.

What boggles my mind is how these so-called soldiers—men—commit these cowardly acts, these acts that are so spineless, and go home and face their mothers, daughters and wives, the females in their families. I don't know how they do this.

I'm just wondering, to start with, if you could tell me whether any of their spouses or daughters or mothers come out as allies to activists like you and speak out about what the soldiers in their family are doing.

Any of you can answer that.

Alisa Kovalenko: Thank you for this question.

Actually, even the wives of some soldiers have encouraged their husbands to rape Ukrainian women. There are intercepted recordings of some Russian soldiers talking with their families. You can find the recorded tapes on YouTube.

Unfortunately, it's not individual cases. It's not that something happened with me or something happened with Iryna and something happened with other women. I would say it's an act of genocide. Russia is systematically using sexual violence as a weapon of war and as an instrument to suppress Ukrainian people and break their resilience.

We can see very concrete patterns. It hasn't happened only in Bucha or only in Kherson under occupation, or only here or there; it has happened everywhere. That means it has been absolutely normalized and encouraged from high-ranking commanders.

In the places of detention, sexualized torture is absolutely widespread. According to the last UN report, 75% of documented testimonies confirmed the use of sexual violence. Again, this is 75% of the people in captivity, so it's almost everyone. For 90%, there are other kinds of torture. It's evident that Russia is using it consciously.

If we talk about women in our organization, they have survived conflict-related sexual violence. They survived not only conflict-related sexual violence, which was not an act of sex, but also brutal torture. A 75-year-old woman was raped and tortured by a Russian soldier. He broke her teeth. She lost all of them. He cut her stomach and raped her. We see these cases of torture in almost every second case of conflict-related sexual violence. It's more evidence that they're using sexual violence as a weapon of war to break us and kill us.

Males who survived sexualized torture in captivity were often tortured by a “call to Putin”—an electric shock connected to their genitals. After this torture, the men couldn't have children.

We see evidence of all these crimes that they're committing consciously.

● (1655)

Anju Dhillon: Thank you so much.

Would any of your colleagues like to add comment on these dehumanizing acts?

Mrs. Bondar, maybe you could start. You spoke about men and boys also increasingly being treated in this manner.

Olesia Bondar: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

I can only confirm those words and back up what was said.

It's true that we have a lot of interceptions. We intercept those talks and conversations. People have this understanding that when someone learns about this or becomes aware of it, there should be a negative reaction, that women in Russia should be disgusted to hear about what Russian soldiers are doing. However, it was mind-boggling for us. You could have knocked us down with a feather. How can they support this violence? They are suggesting that their soldiers—their sons or husbands—commit these horrible crimes. We gave up hope that they could become our allies in this fight for justice.

I did not bring up one very important factor when I mentioned the women held in captivity. There is another problem associated with this. We have information on, for instance, women who are combatants, but we have zero information on civilian women. We receive information only when they go through the court system. Before the verdict by a court, there is zero information for a woman's family, for her kith and kin. We know nothing.

It's so important that we do more helpful things for women who are civilians. In many cases, kids blame their mothers for their pro-Ukrainian position. They are blamed for being in captivity. The children accuse their mothers. They say, “Mom, if you had not been so loud and vocal about your support for Ukraine, you would never have ended up in captivity.” That's their reality.

We had an instance in which one woman was invited to participate in our activities and become one of us. She could not travel with her child. Well, this was a 15-year-old kid. After being in captivity, she could not leave the child alone, because she was so stressed out.

In many cases, when we provide support to women, we do not incorporate support for their children into the formula. This is a big issue. It is a loophole. When we receive donor funds to help these women, children are somehow not included, and they suffer. Many women do not have the strength or energy to leave their kids. They say, “I will not go anywhere without my child anymore.” They constantly move with their kids, side by side. If they cannot leave the child alone, they'll refuse to be an active member of our organization.

● (1700)

The Chair: Thank you.

I invite Mr. Kuruc to take the floor now.

Ned Kuruc (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

First, I'd like to thank everyone for coming today and sharing these extremely difficult stories and truths with us. I commend you for your courage and I thank you for your voice. It is very important that Canadians hear this, and I hope they're listening.

That said, I've been able to listen to a lot. I think I'd like to listen some more. I think that possibly each and every one of you has not talked about something that you really want to talk about.

Also, if I were going to ask a question, I would ask if there is something that you believe this committee or Canadians in general need to understand about what's happening in Ukraine in relation to conflict-related sexual violence. You could also take your time to pinpoint something very important that maybe wasn't discussed today. I think the chair could give you each a minute and a half.

I think we could start with Ms. Perunova.

Halyna Zhukovska: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Allow me. I can start. I'll do my best to take your question.

First and foremost, we would like everybody present here to understand very clearly that what has been committed by Russia on the territory of Ukraine is a crime. This is unequivocal.

We also want this position to be supported not only in these halls, but wherever you go and by anyone you speak to. Please get our voice and our hopes across to people you socialize with and work with.

We have mentioned that we're grateful for Canada's support of Ukraine. It is comprehensive assistance, and I'd like to once again thank you.

This support includes many aspects. We mentioned some of them today. As of today, many of them have become a reality for Ukraine. They're real.

Today we would say we need more systemic and more comprehensive long-term support for the victims. We would say we need support for community organizations that are composed of victims. As of today, we have 11 of those in Ukraine.

If we are talking about SEMA Ukraine, this is part of a much bigger international community. We understand our mandate, our role and our vision, but we also have organizations that just came to the surface that are very new and very inexperienced. We have several men's organizations that are obviously very young and inexperienced, so they need help. We spoke about service centres that support victims. They need support and help for their development. We have to take into account international experience, and the Canadian experience is of paramount importance for us in this regard.

We spoke about various aspects of documentation. We spoke about the problems associated with the International Criminal Court. We have diverse and conflicting numbers of victims of sex crimes and war crimes in the conflict, because the UN monitoring mission gave us a number of about 1,000, but in Ukraine, a different number of people are officially documented and registered. Why is there this discrepancy? I would suppose that we probably have somewhat different criteria for documentation and registration. They have to be comprehensive and agreed upon. We have to speak with one language. Here, we need your support.

There is yet one more important element, which is the international register of damage and losses. Ukrainians can make a request and write an application to the international register of damage and losses, but today we can register those appeals only from the time of the full-time invasion. The Ukrainian documentarian is very loud and clear about this problem. She has been trying to get this idea across to the world community for many years, so support her.

● (1705)

Last but not least is finance. Yes, in our situation, we have very insignificant human resources and very limited financial resources, but we strongly believe that we will win and that we will overcome, and we very much rely on your ongoing help and support.

Thank you.

Ned Kuruc: Does anyone else want to share?

Alisa Kovalenko: Thank you. I just want to emphasize the uniqueness of Ukrainian survivors of conflict-related sexual violence.

Let's talk about other countries, such as the former Yugoslavia, Bosnia and Kosovo. Women started to speak and testify 15 years after they survived CRSV, after the war was over. In Ukraine, our survivors are testifying during the ongoing war, living under bombs every day. Even Kyiv now has turned into, I would say, a frontline city. It's a very different environment of survivor-led organizations and generally for a survivors' movement to speak out. It needs even more courage. In Kyiv now, with the Russians' intensified bombing, even to move from the left bank of Kyiv to the right bank is sometimes impossible. That's why we need support. It's so that we can continue to speak out, even during the ongoing war.

We need more sanctions against Russia. We really need them a lot. We also need a big push to use Russian frozen assets for survivors of Russian aggression, for survivors of Russian war crimes, for all countries' recovery processes. I think we can manage to do that, I hope.

Thank you.

● (1710)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you now have the floor.

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

During my remaining time, I'm going to ask some questions that are a little more sensitive. I want to make it clear, however, that I'm a staunch ally of Ukraine. I am, of course, subject to sanctions and banned by Russia—so there's no need to worry.

The Subcommittee on International Human Rights has carried out extensive research into various armed conflicts that have arisen all over the world. We've witnessed events and carried out field missions. That's why I say this may be a little more sensitive, but in armed conflicts, such crimes are often committed by both sides.

Here's the question I ask myself: when a woman is, sadly, the victim of such a crime—because we can't control everyone, even on our own side—it's harder for that woman or man to report a crime that is, in fact, the result of friendly fire.

That's why I say it's a sensitive issue, but please understand that this in no way alters my unwavering support for Ukraine. That is not the point. The point is that we are here at the subcommittee to understand, to help as much as possible and to find out what can be done. With this in mind, I was wondering if you had any data. Obviously, this doesn't come only from the Russian army. When there are victims of sexual crimes, unfortunately committed by allied troops, what is the response? What is the course of action in such situations?

I tried to ask the question as delicately as possible.

[*English*]

Halyna Zhukovska: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Indeed, we do know of such cases that you have mentioned. The monitoring mission of the UN has documented 31 cases of representatives of Ukraine who have committed sexual violence. We work comprehensively, and of course this is a crime. There are no two ways about it.

Second, we actively work on the prevention of such crimes. First of all, we work with the representatives of the defence and security sectors in order to prevent this, in order to make them understand which actions would constitute a crime and in order to make them understand that this is a crime. We have programs aimed at that. We have a series of lectures. I think Olha could mention more about this.

In order for this work to be systemic, the government commissioner for gender policy has met with each leader of the defence and security sectors. She conducted personal meetings where she raised those issues. Second, she planned a visit to places where Russian prisoners of war are being held in order to find out about the conditions of their detainment and whether or not human rights are being respected in these places. It's very important.

Additionally, tomorrow, under the leadership of the deputy prime minister on European and Euro-Atlantic integration, there will be an interdepartmental meeting with the security and defence sector. During this meeting, we will discuss the issue that you mentioned. We will present the analysis following the one-on-one meetings with the leaders, and a road map will be established on how to move forward in order to prevent such crimes from occurring and on how to work on this in the future.

● (1715)

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you for your answer, because you just described what the rule of law means in relation to Putin's Russia, and I'm very grateful to you.

Another question that arises in the studies and missions we carry out is that, often, in armed conflicts, the victims are increasingly young and are targeted because of their age.

You're signalling to me that this is not the case, Ms. Kovalenko. I'll turn it over to you to speak to that.

[*English*]

Alisa Kovalenko: Absolutely no. I can say that in our organizations, it is much more senior women who have survived conflict-related sexual violence. It is more evidence that conflict-related sexual violence is not an act of sex. It didn't happen because there was a pretty girl in the village, and the Russian soldiers were attracted—

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I was talking about children, not necessarily beautiful young girls. I was really referring to acts—crimes against humanity, war crimes—that target children in order to destroy them. We're hearing more and more about this, but you're telling me that it's not necessarily the case. Does it actually happen?

[*English*]

Alisa Kovalenko: We don't see that the tendency is young women. We actually see the opposite. We see more senior women.

There are a few reasons for that. Senior ladies often decide to stay in the villages to protect their property. They even said to their children and grandchildren, “Go. Run. I will stay. I will protect our property. I will protect our houses.” They didn't expect that Russian soldiers would come and start to rape grandmothers, really. Literally, they are grandmothers. Many women, when we were documenting these war crimes, said, “That Russian soldier was like my grandson.” Those Russian soldiers were raping women the age of their grandmothers. We see this tendency even more than with kids or with young women.

We also have young women in our organization. We have a 17-year-old young woman who gave official testimony to the general prosecutor's office, but she's not ready to speak publicly about it. I can say that it's a much higher stigma for younger women to speak out. We now have more women survivors who will speak publicly because it's the more senior elderly women who are speaking, but it happens with all ages. We have testimony from different ages.

I hope I answered your question.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

For the remaining time, I would like to give each of you two to two and a half minutes for closing remarks.

We would like to start with Ms. Bondar and then continue.

● (1720)

Olesia Bondar: I will do this, but not as the first one. I need one minute to think.

The Chair: Madam Zhukovska, please go ahead.

Halyna Zhukovska: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you very much.

I think I spoke more than everyone today.

I would like to really thank you. We went in so very deeply and did this deep dive into this issue. I'm very grateful that we looked at it very comprehensively. This proves that you do have great experience in working on it constantly and that you know all the aspects that need to be considered in order for such issues to be resolved.

I would also like to make an appeal to you: Please support Alisa Kovalenko, who is doing great work today. She didn't just manage to speak about this: She managed to show this, to visualize what had happened and show that in the conditions in which we live today, we remain human.

We want this victory to come. This is very important. The very fact that this movie, this documentary, was nominated for an Oscar is another proof that the entire Ukrainian community recognizes this as a crime, that the entire Ukrainian community supports those who survive, those who were victims, and will do everything it can for these people not only to survive physically but also to heal and continue to live their lives to the fullest.

I would like to say that we all live in very difficult times. It's very hard. We have our families—our children, our husbands, our parents—back in Ukraine, and we are very worried about their well-being. I'm very grateful for your involvement in our pain and for your support, and I ask that you be as confident in our victory as we are.

Thank you so much for today's meeting and for all the work that you do.

Olha Perunova: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

I would like to say a few words.

I have analyzed all the questions that you, as parliamentarians, asked us. You emphasized the biggest priorities in terms of what our country is doing. This shows how aware and well informed you are about what is happening in Ukraine. I would like to express my utmost respect to you for being so involved in things that are happening in Ukraine.

We have to stay united and consolidate our efforts. Only as a team, as a democracy, can we achieve the result we all want to see, which is victory.

Thank you to everyone here.

The Chair: I would like to keep you until the end to give you some free time, because you have great experience.

Madam Bondar, please go ahead.

Olesia Bondar: [*Witness spoke in Ukrainian, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you for giving me this additional time to put my thoughts together.

I am indeed very grateful to you for putting this meeting together. We can see how involved Canada has been from the very beginning of the full-scale invasion. We can see that the priorities Canada supports in Ukraine remain unchanged. We know many other different problems arise—other conflicts in other countries—and we are so very grateful that you remain steadfast in your support of Ukraine. It is easy to support a country when everybody else supports it; it's very hard to support it when partners leave. Only the most resilient, reliable and trustworthy remain.

There is another aspect I would like to underscore.

We didn't speak much about a just peace today. I would like to emphasize this: Long-lasting and just peace can only be achieved when the criminals are held accountable. It is not about the dialogue that some parties—Russia or other partners—are trying to initiate between the countries to bring us to this reconciliation. That reconciliation will not lead to lasting peace. Only prosecuting criminals and holding them accountable will lead to a long and just peace.

I want you to remember the women Alisa spoke about. There are so many of them. The full truth will only come out when the war is over. That truth will be horrifying. We already know that there are so many of these victims. Their number, and the things we'll uncover after the war is over, will be truly terrifying.

I don't know if Alisa will invite you to the movie that will be screened tomorrow. I would like to mention it. You are all invited to attend. Please attend. We'll be happy to see you.

Thank you.

● (1725)

Alisa Kovalenko: I will continue with words of gratitude. I want to say thank you to all of you. You know, it takes courage to speak out, but it also takes courage to be ready to listen, to hear, and it's important to have a space where you can feel that you are heard. For me, it was incredibly important to have this feeling of being heard.

The second thing I want to say is something that may be existential: For us, it's very important that we are not to be considered as victims, not as survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, but as Ukrainians, all of us. Just imagine: For 12 years, we have been and are resisting one of the biggest countries in the world. We are fighting back.

I want to say one personal detail from my biography.

At the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion, I went to fight. I became a soldier in an infantry unit. I went to fight because I survived sexual violence and torture in 2014 at the very beginning of the Russian aggression. At that time, I saw this bottomless evil. I realized what could happen with my country if this bottomless evil would spread.

At the beginning of the full-scale invasion, my son was four years old, and it was really heartbreaking to leave him and go to fight on the front line without knowing if I'd come back, but I knew that I would fight for his future and for the future of this new generation, and that I would protect the world of values, the rule of law, democratic values and freedom—positive freedom—because I was fighting for his future, and not just against Russia. It's important to remember that we are defending our home from aggressors who are raping all of us.

Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Chair: Thanks to all of you. Your testimony here is really touching the feelings of everyone in this room. As the chair of this subcommittee, and on behalf of all my colleagues, I can assure you that Canada is standing with you and will continue to do so. For the Canadian people, it's the same thing.

In what we have now heard, especially from Madam Kovalenko, you adequately reflected to us what happened. We did not have that broad information, but you provided it in a very good way. We thank you. We stand with you.

You're welcome to add anything that you did not get a chance to say, if you would like to. Feel free to write to either the chair or the clerk, and you will receive the right answer.

Thank you. It was a great pleasure to receive you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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