Campaign Overview

The need for an Optional Protocol to CEDAW to end violence against women and girls

Every Woman is a global coalition of more than 3,000 women's rights activists and organizations in 147 countries advancing a new Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) dedicated to ending violence against women and girls. Through advocacy and strategic diplomacy, we work to bring world leaders to the table to develop a binding framework to make the world safer for women and girls worldwide.

Our Fellowship Program, which is free and online, builds the captivity of advocates to call for a binding framework and other policy changes on women's safety. Our Emerging Leaders Council engages youth in global systems change.

Background and rationale

Violence against women and girls is the most widespread human rights violation on earth. Globally, one in three women will experience intimate partner or sexual violence, a statistic the World Health Organization calls “devastatingly pervasive.”¹ Despite worldwide recognition of the problem, this violence is intensifying. Global crises, including pandemics, climate change, and conflict, increase incidents of rape, assault and other forms of violence against women and girls.² Today, more than five women or girls are killed every hour by someone in their own family.³ In September 2023, UN Women reported that “no country is within reach of eradicating intimate partner violence” and that we as a global community are “failing women and girls.”⁴

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A new binding framework is needed to curb this violence

The need for a specific, binding global instrument on violence against women and girls reaches back to 1991 when the Commission on the Status of Women recommended the adoption of an international instrument on violence against women.⁵ UN Special Rapporteurs on violence against women and girls have called on world leaders to adopt a new instrument. In 2013, women’s rights activists heard this call and founded Every Woman, a coalition working to advance the creation, adoption and implementation of a binding framework.

An Optional Protocol would hold nations accountable for women’s safety

The current legal frameworks on women’s rights have made significant advances. However, gaps remain. Currently, no global instrument directly and exclusively addresses violence against women and girls. Despite the existence of regional mechanisms, including the Maputo Protocol, Belém do Pará, and the Istanbul Convention, nearly 75 percent of the world’s women lack access to a legally binding instrument on violence against women and girls. With the ongoing escalation in violence and the backlash on women’s rights, an Optional Protocol to CEDAW presents a unique opportunity to unite global efforts to end violence against women and girls and address the urgent need for a comprehensive response to ensure the protection, prevention, and accountability in addressing the problem worldwide.

The power of a new mechanism

a. **Effectiveness.** Treaties — an Optional Protocol, once ratified, is a binding treaty in itself — codify norms. They therefore retain a legitimacy and universality that makes them work.

b. **Transform.** Treaties generate the momentum necessary to develop stronger frameworks for domestic plans of action. A metrics-based approach to monitoring can be a key driver in achieving strong outcomes.

Steps forward

CEDAW’s General Recommendation No. 35 provides an expert-driven foundation for an Optional Protocol to end violence against women and girls, including interventions proven to lower rates of violence: law reform; training for police, judges, nurses, and doctors; violence-prevention education; and survivor services like shelters and hotlines. Separately, these interventions influence various factors related to violence prevention, but when combined — and funded and monitored — these strategies work in concert to drastically lower rates of violence.

Results

A new binding mechanism will achieve prevention, protection, and a paradigm shift away from violence and toward human thriving for women and girls everywhere.

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