



Opinion

Canada must seize the moment to address violence against women and girls globally

All women and girls have the human right not to be subjected to violence, including non-state torture, as written in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

BY JEANNE SARSON,
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“But you’re Canadians!” Identifying ourselves as Canadian-born human rights defenders generally results in this disbelieving response. Why would Canadian-born citizens need human rights defenders? Why, as the fall legislative session gets underway, are we calling on Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and all Members of Parliament to support a global treaty ending violence against women and girls, known as an Optional Protocol to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, left, and Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly can lead the charge by having the government support the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, write Jeanne Sarson and Linda MacDonald. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)?

Answering these questions began as a Canadian story turned global.

In 1993, as nurses and feminists, we were supporting women healing from abuse. We knew about abuse. Both of us were born to fathers who battered our mothers, forcing us as children to scream and cry “Stop it!” as their fists and kicks struck our mothers curled up on the floor, or found unconscious at the bottom of the stairs. We also knew about being sexually assaulted as a five year old, or as a young woman. Statistics Canada continues to confirm what we experienced. Because, in 2022, police-reported data found that women and girls suffer three times more intimate partner violence than men and

boys, and that family violence was more than two times higher for women and girls.

What we didn’t know was in other families, children and women were being tortured. That is, until a woman described being tortured and trafficked by her family since she was two years old. We naively assumed this must be a torture crime in Canada. It’s not. Under Section 269.1 of Canada’s Criminal Code only police or military, for example, can be charged with state torture crimes. When private individuals torture others, called non-state torture, it’s misnamed another type of crime.



Jeanne Sarson, left, and Linda MacDonald. *Handout photographs*

The World Health Organization indicates that in Canada and countries of the Americas, the lifetime prevalence of intimate partner violence is 25 per cent. When intimate partner violence involves strangulation, the risk women and girls will die raises to 750 per cent. Research suggests men who strangle are most dangerous, and go on to commit other crimes. Such as the man who strangled his female partner, and perpetrated the mass shootings of women and men in Nova Scotia. Femicides—the killing of women and girls—occur every 11 minutes worldwide. The more severe intimate partner violence is the risk is women may consider suicide. Globally, about

641 million women suffer intimate partner violence.

We've learned from United Nations experts that millions of women and girls suffer many forms of non-state torture when trafficked, in forced child marriage, and in female genital mutilations, for example. Canada can be an influential champion by supporting the Optional Protocol to end violence against women and girls globally. Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy firmly believes combatting violence against women and girls is a most effective approach to promoting peace and security at home and in less prosperous countries. By supporting the Optional Protocol to CEDAW, Canada can champi-

on its work, share its leadership, and encourage other nations to be supportive.

Currently, four nations—Antigua and Barbuda, Costa Rica, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Sierra Leone—have stepped up to lead the state initiative for a new Optional Protocol to CEDAW. Ten additional nations are expressing interest. What's needed now is for Canada and more nations to champion this global initiative. This is why we—along with 1,257 women's rights activists from many nations—are sending a letter to Trudeau, Governor General Mary Simon, and Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly.

All women and girls have the human right not to be subjected to

violence, including non-state torture, as written in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights of which Canadian John Humphrey participated in its drafting. In this spirit, we call for the prime minister to promote Canada as a champion to ending all violence against women and girls by supporting a new Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

Jeanne Sarson and Linda MacDonald are the founders of Persons Against Non-State Torture, coalition members of the global non-profit Every Woman Treaty, and members of the National Council of Women of Canada.

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