

Rape is a War Crime that Canada Can Do More About

The Federation of Medical Women of Canada supports Canada's National Action Plan (C-NAP) and also advocates for special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, in situations of armed conflict. Women in conflict zones need all the protection they can get, including protection against unplanned pregnancies.

Myanmar has shocked the international community with its brutality against the Rohingya people, driving over 725,000 into the refugee camps of Bangladesh since the military action began just over a year ago in August 2017. Recently recognized by the Canadian government as genocide against the Rohingya, sanctions against the Myanmar military will be used to effect an end to the conflict.

Canada has sent a Special Envoy, Bob Rae, to Bangladesh to gather data and report back to Parliament. His report is chilling. Canada has co-sponsored a UN Human Rights resolution that "will create an independent mechanism to collect and preserve evidence related to the human rights situation in Myanmar." This is important to ensure that those responsible for these vicious actions and horrific situation are held accountable. And most importantly, we need to learn from these atrocities how to prevent them, and if not, support appropriately those caught up in conflict.

More than sanctions are needed on the ground for Rohingya women, indeed for all refugee women, beginning with reproductive healthcare, including access to contraception and abortion care.

Rape as a weapon of war is one of horrific proportion. It is sexualized violence that inflicts trauma through the generations. The profound psychological terror and violation of human rights is unacceptable. First named as sexualized gender-based violence (SGBV) in the throes of the Bosnian conflict in the early 1990s, rape as a weapon of war is particularly heinous not only for the assault on the body, but for the underlying reason of its practice: the mass impregnation of the enemy to destroy their bloodlines. **Rape is a central aspect of genocide.**

Canada has made a public commitment to the international community to promote and advance the women peace and security agenda in support of UN Resolution 1325. Adopted by the UN Security Council on October 31, 2000, Resolution 1325 reaffirms the important role of women in conflict prevention and peace building and "[i]t also calls on all parties **to conflict to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, in situations of armed conflict**" (emphasis ours)

As part of its ongoing commitment to Resolution 1325, Canada released its first National Action Plan (C-NAP) in November 2017. Organized around five objectives: women's participation, sexualized gender-based violence, promote and protection of women's human rights, sexual rights and healthcare, and increasing women's participation in the military and police, C-NAP serves as both a guide to, and a record of, the efforts of Global Affairs Canada in its support and advancement of the international women peace and security agenda.

In September 2018, Canada released the first Progress Report for C-NAP 2017-2022. Despite Canada's commitment to "promote and protect women and girls in fragile, conflict and post-conflict settings" (objective 3) and to "meet the specific needs of women and girls in humanitarian settings, including the upholding of their sexual rights and access to sexual and reproductive health services" (objective 4), there is no mention of the Rohingya or plans to advance access to reproductive health care, including abortion care, for refugee women. The Progress Report notes that "In places like Bangladesh and Iraq, Canada increased support for sexual gender-based violence, including psycho-social services and safe spaces for women" yet says nothing about contraception and abortion care in conflict areas and refugee camps.

The Rohingya are just one example of the need for reproductive healthcare, including contraception and abortion care, for women living in refugee situations. Refugee women live an existence of uncertainty, deprivation, desperation and danger. Sexualized gender-based violence is heightened in refugee camps where authority gives way to lawlessness. Women need all the protection they can get, including protection against unplanned pregnancies. Canada must up its commitment to the reproductive health, including contraception and abortion care, of refugee women and girls.

What can Canada do?

Canada is taking the lead on the Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies (2019) and **can use its position as Lead to advocate for the provision of full-service women's reproductive care to refugee and at-risk populations – including contraception and abortion care, from emergency preparedness to recovery.**

The FMWC calls for Canada to include contraception and abortion care in conflict areas and refugee camps and adds our expertise and voice to support this process. We call on all members of parliament to consider reproductive health care in the context of gender-based violence an humanitarian aid priority.



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