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How the Canadian government can improve its record on women's rights

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This year marks the 15th anniversary of [UN Security Council Resolution 1325](#), the auspicious formal beginnings of the UN's fight against sexual violence in conflict.

The resolution reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction. It stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security. Resolution 1325 and a number of subsequent related resolutions call 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.

In the 15 years since UNSC Resolution 1325 was adopted, Canada has implemented a [National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security](#) (WPS), and otherwise engaged in the WPS agenda. And there have been other highlights, such as Canada's Development and Peace Project in Afghanistan. However, there is still much that the next government can do to improve this country's record on women's rights.

Although Canada has long had a position amongst the world's nations that earned respect for its human rights record and history of peace building, this reputation has been eroded. The UN Human Rights Committee and other UN human rights reporting bodies have on multiple occasions called for changes to the way Canada approaches the human rights of its citizens, in particular with respect to aboriginal peoples and women. On 23 July 2015, the Committee released its [first report card on Canada in approximately 10 years](#) and, unfortunately, it highlighted a number of examples where this country is failing to meet its human rights obligations.

Of particular importance is the reference to the fact that Canada has yet to implement a number of the UN Human Rights Committee's previous recommendations, a signifier of the Canadian government's lack of commitment to human rights. This is troubling for a country that has the means to provide full human rights protection to its citizens, but seems to lack the will to do so.

Specific recommendations also target the current government's lack of response to the issue of murdered and missing aboriginal women in Canada. With an overwhelming number of other reports and recommendations on this issue, it's not surprising that the UN Human Rights Committee is again calling out the Canadian government for ignoring this glaring problem. What should be surprising is our continued blasé response to such disturbing statistics – approximately 1,017 missing and murdered aboriginal women between 1980 and 2012. It is important to bear in mind that this number is likely quite a bit higher, and does not take into account the number of aboriginal women subjected to sexual violence throughout the country.

Now, one might say that perhaps Canada is doing a better job of protecting the human rights of those in other countries, upholding its tradition of peacebuilding and humanitarian aid. However, although considerable sums of money have been spent on victims of sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a commendable and appropriate way to fulfill the country's commitments under UNSC Resolution 1325 and the other associated WPS resolutions, some of the specifics of this humanitarian funding fall short of what we should expect from Canada. Although money is provided to ensure that victims of sexual violence in the DRC have access to health care, the provisions by which this funding is provided are quite specific in that it cannot be used to fund abortions for rape victims. This requires women who have already been traumatised, who are already stigmatised by their communities, to carry the child their rapist left within them. It is a cruel and unnecessary provision that undermines Canada's programming on sexual violence in the DRC.

Similar stipulations against funding the full range of health services have tarnished Canada's current international development priority on Maternal, Newborn and Child Health.

These are just a few examples of the problems facing Canada and its obligations to fulfill human rights, at home and abroad. The two are connected: the example we set in Canada strengthens our international standing and credibility to promote human rights internationally.

In this anniversary year of UNSC 1325 a global review is underway at the UN, to draw lessons from the past and develop improved programs for member states and the UN system in the years ahead. The next Canadian government should support this process.

At present, Canada's WPS National Action Plan reporting process – plagued by delays, lack of clarity and incomplete reporting in the past – is in danger of not being funded at all beyond 2016.

A future Canadian government should commit to long term funding for the WPS national reporting process under START (the Stabilization and Reconstruction Task Force). This would provide an example and catalyst for a wider commitment to the Women, Peace and Security agenda internationally. A future Canadian government should also consider Canada's poor record on women's rights at home in the past few years, and take a long look at the recommendations on how to combat the problem of the murdered and missing aboriginal women in this country. It should consider whether we are spending our humanitarian aid appropriately, in a way that treats victims of conflict with dignity.

In essence, a future Canadian government should consider making some changes so that Canada can once again say that it is fulfilling its international obligations towards women, at home and abroad.

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