

India: Violence against women - a double discrimination

Authorities in India are failing to prevent violence against women and sometimes take an active part in it, Amnesty International said today in a new report launched as part of the organization's international campaign against torture.

The report highlights patterns of violence including the beating, stripping and rape of women, in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. It focusses particularly on *dalit* ("untouchables") and *adivasi* (tribal) women; their lack of access to justice, and the failure of the state to protect them at the local level. These women often suffer a double discrimination; discrimination on the basis of caste as well as gender.

Although high levels of violence against women are widely acknowledged by the authorities and some steps are being taken to address these problems, officials at the local level continue to ignore complaints, take bribes, and cover up the abuses.

"In a year declared by the Indian government as the Year of Empowerment of Women, Amnesty International hopes the government will take its policies seriously and not confine them to paper alone," the organization said.

"The organization is calling on the government to consider implementation of the comprehensive recommendations in the new report, which would help make the rights of women a reality in India."

Many women don't approach police for fear of dishonour or that they will be dismissed or further abused. An activist working with *dalit* women in Uttar Pradesh estimated that only 5% of cases of violence against women are registered. Many *dalits* are not aware of their rights under special legislation designed to protect them, and it is rare for police to voluntarily inform them.

Police are also accused of withholding and destroying evidence in many cases, usually at the behest of the accused with whom they may have caste or other links. Witnesses often withdraw their testimony after taking a bribe or being threatened by the accused and medical evidence is lost because simple procedures are not followed. The length of time it takes to pursue a case of torture through the courts encourages victims to make compromises under pressure.

Narbada, an 18-year-old woman from Udaipur district of Rajasthan told Amnesty International that she was raped by a Rajput (upper caste) landlord in March 2000. The attacker's mother reportedly heard the victim's screams but did nothing to stop her son. She then beat Narbada and told her not to go to the police. When Narbada tried to go to the police with her uncle, 50 Rajputs stopped them.

When they reached the police station two days later, they were verbally abused and told to pay Rs. 500 (\$11) if they wanted to file a complaint, which they refused to do. They travelled three

and half hours to the district headquarters where the Superintendent of Police recorded their complaint. Police were present during her medical examination which was conducted four weeks after the rape. When the case went to court, the public prosecutor tried to convince Narbada and her family to withdraw the complaint. Narbada and her family continue to face harassment from members of the Rajput community.

Women activists in India have played a crucial role in highlighting problems faced by women but they are often punished for it, becoming victims of violence themselves.

"The Indian government has a long way to go in bridging the gap between promises of protection for women and actual protection for women," Amnesty International said.

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To receive a copy of the report "*India: The battle against fear and discrimination - The impact of violence against women in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan*" please contact mcatsani@amnesty.org or for more information phone Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5729 web : <http://www.amnesty.org>. To find out International's campaign against torture visit www.stoptorture.org