





Girls in Managua, Nicaragua, demonstrate on the Day for Decriminalization of Abortion in Latin America and the Caribbean, 28 September 2011. Their banner says "Motherhood: only if I am willing, only if I can". More than two thirds of rapes reported to the police between 1998 and 2008 in Nicaragua were committed against girls under 17. In 2006, the Nicaraguan government introduced a total ban on abortion. Girls who are pregnant as a consequence of rape no longer have access to safe and legal abortion services. For a girl who has already been denied control over her own body by an act of sexual violence, the current law is unbearably cruel.

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I demand that the government respects our rights as women. We are girls and we have rights, and so long as they do not respect these rights, we will continue to fight to demand them.

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Clara, youth rights promoter, Nicaragua

## DEFENDING THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN AND GIRLS

All over the world women and girls are being discriminated against and denied their human rights – simply because of their gender. In many countries, girls are not sent to school, or they are forced to drop out early. In others, women continue to be paid less than men for doing the same work and restrictive laws prevent women from inheriting.

But perhaps nowhere is the devastation that discrimination causes in women's lives more evident than in issues surrounding sexual and reproductive rights. These are the rights to choose who you have sex with and when; to choose whether and when you marry or get

pregnant; to access information about sex, health, family planning and safe and legal abortion services and to access good quality health care, including during pregnancy and childbirth. These rights ensure you can exercise control over your own body and life.

For the girl who is not taught about safe sex at school; for the teenager who becomes pregnant as a result of rape and has no choice about giving birth because abortion is illegal where she lives; for the woman who needs her husband's consent to get contraception, the consequences of discrimination can be serious – even fatal. Every year, hundreds of thousands of women

and girls die or suffer serious injury during pregnancy or shortly after giving birth because they cannot get the information, health care or medicine they need.

Women and girls have the right to make their own decisions about their lives and their sexual and reproductive health, free from threat, discrimination or coercion. Yet in every region of the world, in developed and developing countries, women and girls are denied this right.

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**The greatest difficulty I have is the distance between my house and the health post... I've got to walk up the mountain to go to my pregnancy check up. I can't move fast... my house is not near a road and I have to walk a lot.**

Yolanda Solier Taipe, an Indigenous woman in Peru pregnant with her seventh child. She lives about an hour away from the nearest health post, on a track that cannot be used by cars

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A pregnant woman walks to the health centre in Occopampa, Huancavelica, Peru. Many women in rural areas in Peru face difficult journeys to health facilities.

Simply getting access to services and information can be a daunting barrier for women.

In many countries health services needed by women and girls are not available because governments have not made these services or these women a priority. Even where health services do exist, they are often concentrated in more affluent communities or in urban areas. As a result, women living in poverty or in rural areas have very restricted or no access to essential and life-saving health

care. Travelling long distances to visit a health centre can be an insurmountable obstacle for women who have no access to, or cannot afford, transport.

For women and girls who are able to reach a health centre, the quality of the care they receive is often compromised by delays, neglect or bad treatment by medical staff. Women from marginalized communities or living in poverty are at greater risk of not getting the care, medication or treatment they need and have a right to. In some

cases, women die or suffer injuries because medical staff do not hear or understand their needs. Women may be deterred from seeking the health care they need because of the way they have been treated in the past.



Health centre in rural Huancavelica, Peru. Maternal mortality rates in Peru are among the worst in South America. They are disproportionately high among the country's poor and Indigenous rural communities.

© Amnesty International

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We're scared when they [the doctors] speak to us in Spanish and we can't reply... I start sweating from fear... What am I going to answer if I don't understand Spanish?

Rosa Quichca Vargas, a Quechua-speaking Indigenous woman in Peru pregnant with her fifth child

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A waiting area in a Sierra Leone hospital. Under Sierra Leone's free health care policy, pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers and children under five should be given essential drugs and treatment free of charge. In practice, however, they still often have to pay.



Barriers to good quality and appropriate health care need to be challenged. However, in many countries there is no way for women to register a complaint when they don't receive the services they are entitled to, when they encounter corruption or when they are ill-treated.

The right to health and other key human rights may not be recognized and protected within the legal system, denying women the ability to access justice. Even where legal

options exist, for people living in poverty they are often inaccessible because of cost, lack of information and distance. Other systems to monitor health information and performance of medical facilities and personnel are often inadequate or absent.

The quality of the care available reflects the low priority that is given to women and girls, not only by doctors and nurses, but by society and those in power.

Most deaths and injuries connected with pregnancy and childbirth are not inevitable – in fact, with timely, appropriate health care, they are easily preventable.

But they are the consequences of the choices made by governments, embedded in laws, or sanctioned by communities, religious institutions, or within families.

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**The hospital, it is like a chamber of commerce...  
If you are poor, you are 'left'; if you can pay, you  
are treated. My sister died due to a lack of means  
and adequate treatment.**

Mahmoudou, the brother of Fatou who died in childbirth  
in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso

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A young woman in labour with her first child lies in the corridor in the maternity ward of Yalgado Hospital in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. The hospital has space for only six births at a time and no waiting area.





A quilt made by the Safe Motherhood Quilt Project, a national initiative developed by Ina May Gaskin to honour women who have died of pregnancy-related causes in the USA since 1982.

© Safe Motherhood Quilt Project

**Women in the USA are at greater risk of dying of pregnancy-related complications than women in most of Europe, Canada and several countries in Asia and the Middle East. Disparities in access to health care and information due to discrimination and socioeconomic differences mean women of colour are more likely to die. Amnesty International is campaigning for improved access to health care for all women in the USA.**

Photo of Tatia Oden French taken by Joseph B. French and used by kind permission of Maddy Oden and Joseph B. French.



Tatia Oden French and her baby daughter, Zorah, died in 2001 in the USA after an induced labour. Her mother has since set up a foundation to try to prevent similar deaths.



A pregnant woman sits outside a community health centre in Jakarta, Indonesia.

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**It is not possible to access family planning services without a marriage certificate.**

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Lila, a 23-year-old domestic worker in West Java, Indonesia

Many of the barriers women and girls face stem from discriminatory attitudes deeply rooted in society and reinforced by institutions through laws, policies and practices.

Many women and girls experience rape or domestic violence, or are subjected to harmful practices such as female genital mutilation. Many are forced to undergo early marriage and pregnancy, or to have repeated pregnancies. This can have serious consequences for their physical and mental health.

In countries where women can face prison or other punishments for seeking an abortion, they face a stark choice: risk their lives and health with a clandestine and unsafe abortion or continue with an unwanted pregnancy that takes an enormous mental, emotional, physical and social toll on their lives. As a health worker at a centre providing psychosocial support for survivors of sexual violence in Managua, Nicaragua, asked: “And what about the girls who are pregnant because of rape, and who live in poverty? They have no other [legal] choice but to give birth.”

Sex education and information are denied to girls for cultural or religious reasons in many countries. Many women are legally required to seek their husband’s permission to receive information and advice about contraception. This lack of choice is also closely tied to women being treated as unequal members of society, who must rely on male or older family members to make decisions for them.



In 2009 Amnesty International launched a campaign across Sierra Leone with activists, musicians and a drama group to engage with local communities on the issue of maternal mortality in the country. The campaign encouraged people to become active in demanding their rights and accountability from the authorities.



Making health services available, such as emergency obstetric care, is essential. But more services alone will not ensure safer pregnancy and childbirth. It is also vital that governments tackle the underlying issues.

Governments must ensure that women and girls have access to all necessary information and education, and that they are able to make autonomous decisions about their sexual and reproductive lives.

Women and girls must have the ability to safeguard their health and lives throughout pregnancy and childbirth, and to avoid unwanted or mistimed pregnancies. Women and girls must be able to make complaints and be compensated if they do not receive adequate medical attention and the care that they are entitled to.

States have legal obligations to respect, protect and fulfil the human rights of everybody – including all women and girls.

The real solution is the empowerment of girls and women to make their own choices about the issues that affect their lives.

Amnesty International campaigns to ensure that all women and girls around the world can make their own decisions and have their voices heard by governments.

## **OUR CAMPAIGN AIMS**

As part of our global Demand Dignity campaign, Amnesty International aims to:

- **safeguard the sexual and reproductive rights of women and girls;**
- **stop and prevent the human rights violations that lead to preventable maternal death and injury.**

It is crucial that women and girls are empowered and able to access education and information, to be autonomous, to make decisions about their lives, including on sexual and reproductive issues, and to hold institutions to account when their rights are violated.

**Find out more at**  
**[www.amnesty.org/demand-dignity](http://www.amnesty.org/demand-dignity)**



An activist at the launch of Amnesty International's campaign on maternal mortality in Sierra Leone, September 2009. Amnesty International continues to campaign for stronger accountability and greater access to health care for pregnant women and girls in Sierra Leone.



Fatimata on her way to collect water at the end of the day, with her baby on her back. Women in Burkina Faso, especially in rural areas, are expected to continue their normal, often arduous, work regardless of pregnancy and childbirth.

## KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

**Everybody – women and girls as well as men and boys – has sexual and reproductive rights. States have an obligation to ensure that you can freely, without any fear, coercion or discrimination:**

- Make decisions about your own health, body, sexual life and identity.
- Seek and receive information about sex, contraception and related health services.
- Decide whether and when to have children.
- Choose whether or not to marry and what type of family you want to create.
- Access family planning, contraception, safe and legal abortion and maternal and other health care services. Nobody should be deprived of health care or information because of who they are or what they can or cannot afford.
- Live free from rape and other violence, including female genital mutilation or being forced to undergo pregnancy, abortion, sterilization, or marriage.

## OUR CALLS FOR ACTION

There are some crucial steps that governments **must take to guarantee the sexual, reproductive and health rights of women and girls. Governments must ensure that women and girls are:**

- **Empowered and able to claim their rights**, with the necessary information, knowledge, skills and power to **participate** in shaping the laws, policies and practices that affect their lives.
- Able to access sexual and reproductive health services and information **without any barriers** and to exercise their sexual and reproductive rights **free from discrimination.**
- Able to access justice and **hold institutions to account** when their rights are violated.



Women domestic workers demonstrate for their rights, Jogjakarta, Indonesia. Women and girls across Indonesia continue to face serious obstacles in exercising their human rights. The government has failed to remove discriminatory laws and policies or to tackle entrenched discriminatory attitudes in society. Domestic workers are one of the most affected groups.

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The butterfly for us is a symbol of the desire to realize our dreams, spread our wings... fighting with strength for our rights.

Martha Munguía, Nicaraguan Alliance of Women's Centres

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Women, girls, men and boys take to the streets in Nicaragua on the Day for the Decriminalization of Abortion in Latin America and the Caribbean, 28 September 2011.





## WORKING TOGETHER FOR CHANGE

Amnesty International has joined with women's rights, health and development organizations that have many years' experience of working to promote women's and girls' sexual and reproductive rights. Together, we seek to forge a strong, international force for change in the lives of women and girls.

This work is part of our continuing efforts to promote women's rights, which includes campaigning to stop violence against women, ensuring international justice for women and supporting women human rights defenders.

So far, Amnesty International has focused on campaigns on maternal health and sexual and reproductive rights in **Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso, Indonesia, Nicaragua, Peru and the USA.**

Working together with women and girls and local partner organizations, we campaign on specific issues, supporting women and girls in claiming their rights and holding their governments to account. We also engage in strategic advocacy at the international and regional level, promoting, protecting and further developing key international standards on women's and girls' sexual and reproductive rights.

## GET INVOLVED

If you want to make a difference to the lives of girls and women, get involved in Amnesty International's work on maternal health and sexual and reproductive rights.

- Contact Amnesty International in your country
- Become an international member of Amnesty International at:  
[www.amnesty.org/join](http://www.amnesty.org/join)
- Learn more about the campaign on maternal health and sexual and reproductive rights and support our campaign actions at:  
[www.amnesty.org/demand-dignity](http://www.amnesty.org/demand-dignity)



Rosmery, a 13-year-old rape survivor in Nicaragua, draws her hopes for the future.



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**Amnesty International** is a global movement of more than 3 million supporters, members and activists in more than 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion and are funded mainly by our membership and public donations.

*Cover image:* Survivors of sexual violence and their carers and support staff at a women's centre, Nicaragua.

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## **SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH IS A HUMAN RIGHT**

### **DEFEND THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN AND GIRLS**

Women and girls have the right to make their own decisions about their lives and their sexual and reproductive health. Yet the discrimination they face at every level of society, in every region of the world, means they are denied this right.

When women and girls die or are injured in pregnancy or childbirth the devastating impact of this denial of their rights is only too clear. With access to health care, information and decision-making power, these deaths and injuries are easily preventable.

Demand that governments ensure that women and girls are able to claim their sexual and reproductive rights.

### **TAKE ACTION**

**Visit [amnesty.org](http://amnesty.org) or contact your local Amnesty International office to find out how you can get involved.**

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