

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AFR/03/012/2002 (Public)
News Service No: 225
5 December 2002

Southern Africa: Women and girls still facing discrimination and violence

"Immediate action is needed to protect Southern African women from the combined effects of violence and HIV/AIDS," Amnesty International said today.

"Despite commitment by Southern African governments to eliminate 'all forms of discrimination [and] all forms of violence against women and girls' to reduce their vulnerability to HIV/AIDS, there continues to be evidence of widespread economic, social and legal discrimination along with high levels of violence, including sexual violence, against women and girls in Southern African countries," Amnesty International said.

According to UNAIDS, women and girls comprise the majority of those living with HIV/AIDS in Southern Africa. With infection levels in the countries of this region ranging from 13 to 38% of the adult population, there is urgent need for governments to fulfill their commitments made 18 months ago at the special session of the UN General Assembly on the global HIV/AIDS crisis.

States are also obliged under international human rights and humanitarian law to prevent violence against women and provide redress to survivors of violence. These obligations exist irrespective of whether the abuses were committed by private individuals or by state agents.

Last August, at an Amnesty International-organized workshop, civil society activists and healthcare professionals from eight Southern African countries identified serious problems which prevent survivors of rape from having access to justice and necessary healthcare. These obstacles include discriminatory attitudes, practices and laws, poor standards of police investigations, as well as low standards of medical care and procedures for the forensic examination of rape survivors.

Some countries, such as South Africa, Botswana and Namibia, have initiated law and criminal justice reforms and improvements to police training which will, over time, increase women's access to effective remedies in cases of rape, sexual abuse and domestic violence.

South Africa has begun to implement policies to improve standards of medical and psychological care and treatment, as well as the forensic medical examination of survivors of sexual violence. Very recently the government has begun to implement a policy of testing, counselling and provision of post-exposure prophylaxis for rape survivors at risk of HIV infection.

However these initiatives are still at a preliminary stage and in some cases are still being resisted

by some government officials. The vast majority of victims of rape in South Africa and in the sub-region still do not have access to potentially life-saving treatment.

In contrast to these positive developments, the human rights situation for women has worsened in Zimbabwe and Swaziland. The vulnerability of women and girls to sexual and domestic violence and the HIV/AIDS pandemic has been exacerbated in Swaziland by continuing legal discrimination and denial of access to social and economic rights. The current constitutional crisis in Swaziland may cause further deterioration in women's access to justice and effective remedies.

In Zimbabwe, a profound crisis of political legitimacy and widespread human rights abuses, including politically-motivated sexual violence against perceived opponents of the government, has undermined legal, police and health reforms which would have benefited women's access to justice and healthcare. Women and girls, particularly those living in rural areas, are among the most vulnerable to the HIV/AIDS pandemic and at risk from the widespread food shortages in both countries.

During this period of the internationally recognized *16 days of activism for no violence against women and children* (25 November to 10 December) Amnesty International calls on governments in the Southern African region, with the support of the international community, to show political will in addressing the multiple causes of violence against women and girls.

They should vigorously promote and protect the rights contained in the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and its Optional Protocol, the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (African Charter) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Heads of State declaration on gender and development, and its addendum on the prevention and eradication of violence against women and children. Amnesty International urges governments of the region to promote the adoption and early entry into force of the Draft Protocol To The African Charter On The Rights Of Women In Africa.

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