

Jamaica

Open letter to the Prime Minister of Jamaica, Mrs Portia Simpson Miller, welcoming improvements to stop violence against women and encouraging new steps forward

Dear Prime Minister Simpson Miller,

As Secretary General of Amnesty International, I would like to welcome your commitment to ending violence against women and girls and your current efforts to make this issue a priority in your government.

As you may be aware, Amnesty International has been working on several human rights issues in Jamaica such as excessive use of force by member of the police, conditions of detention and the death penalty. In June 2006 Amnesty International published the report *Sexual violence against women and girls in Jamaica: 'Just a little sex'* (AI Index: AMR 38/002/2006). This report is part of an international campaign to end violence against women. Major publications have been produced and campaigning actions carried out in numerous countries including Turkey, India, Colombia, the United Kingdom and the USA as part of this campaign.

In the aforementioned report, Amnesty International argues that sexual violence and discrimination against women and girls is unacceptably high in Jamaica. The impunity associated with these crimes suggests that sexual assault is often not treated as a serious matter by society and that there has been insufficient political will to address gender-based discrimination.

1. Positive Change

Amnesty International is encouraged by the fact that in December 2006 the Offences Against the Person (Amendment) Bill and Incest (Amendment) Bill was retabled before Parliament, signalling cross-party political will to introduce urgently needed legislative reforms, which have been long delayed in Jamaica. Amnesty International hopes that the laws will finally be passed and that the Jamaican Parliament will take this unique opportunity to introduce legislation in line with international standards and best practices to criminalize rape, including marital rape, and other sexual offences in a gender-sensitive way.

The recent ratification of the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence Against Women “Convention of Belém do Pará,” and your public commitment to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is also encouraging.

Particularly important for combating violence against women is fighting impunity for those responsible for abuses. The process of reform of the Centre for the Investigation of Sexual Offences and Child Abuse (CISOCA) is an important step forward. Especially relevant is the extending of operational hours of the centres and the shift of supervision responsibility from the Police Community Relations Department to the Criminal Investigative Branch.

It is also encouraging that a national policy on gender is being drafted after a nationwide consultation process with stakeholders around the country; hopefully setting the basis for a national plan of action to combat discrimination against women. Equally, the policy of the Planning Institute of Jamaica for gender mainstreaming if effectively implemented, can bring the much needed coherence to public policies and comprehensively address the protection of women and girls from discrimination. Finally, it is important to highlight the role played by the Bureau of Women’s Affairs in raising awareness and technically advising other offices of the government in gender issues, as well as in catalysing women’s group concerns into the governmental agenda.

2. Steps forward

However encouraging these steps are, sexual violence and discrimination against women and girls is still unacceptably high in Jamaica. Amnesty International urges your government to take further steps during 2007 towards the elimination of violence against women in Jamaica. Important measures include:

- Passing of the amendments to the Offences Against the Person Act and Incest (Punishment) Act, to effectively protect women and girls from violence according to international standards and best practices to criminalize rape, including marital rape, and other sexual offences in a gender-sensitive way.
- Removal of the “warning” read to juries at courts in cases of sexual abuses against women and girls which expressly gives less weight to women’s testimony in courts (see Amnesty International’s report *Sexual violence against women and girls in Jamaica: ‘Just a little sex’*, page 25)
- Ratification of the Optional Protocol to CEDAW.
- Final draft and approval by cabinet of the National Gender Policy and its Action Plan, drafted after consultation with women’s group and taking into account those concerns and CEDAW Committee recommendations.
- Specific budget allocation for the National Gender Action Plan.

- Funding (either through the government budget or in partnership with private actors) for more women's shelters.
- Specific budget allocation for the necessary improvements at the Centre for Investigations of Sexual Offences and Child Abuse (CISOCA) nationwide.
- A clear plan of action to improve the low clear-up rate for sexual assault cases.

It is Amnesty International's wish to contribute to efforts within Jamaica to stop violence against women. In that context, we thank you in advance for your kind attention to these matters. I look forward to your response and to continuing a constructive dialogue with your government.

Yours sincerely,

Irene Khan
Secretary General