

## PUBLIC STATEMENT – AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

08 December 2021

Index number: AFR 03/5087/2021

# **SOUTHERN AFRICA: ALARMING RISE IN THE NUMBER OF GIRLS EXPERIENCING SEXUAL ABUSE AND UNWANTED PREGNANCIES DURING THE PANDEMIC CALLS ON GOVERNMENTS TO TAKE ACTION TO PROTECT GIRLS' RIGHTS**

Authorities across Southern Africa must immediately take action to protect girls' rights to health, information, education, equality and to live freely from gender-based violence and discrimination, Amnesty International said today as the world continues to mark 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence. Soaring rates of sexual abuse in the region in combination with closure of essential health services and schools during the pandemic has resulted in thousands of girls getting pregnant at an early age, some as young as nine or 10 years.

Restrictive lockdown measures enforced by governments across Southern Africa to curb the spread of Covid-19 have contributed to a shocking rise in sexual and gender-based violence, turning some homes into cages of violence and abuse. Access to protection and support services for survivors as well as to sexual and reproductive health services and information, were limited across the region. The risks for girls were compounded by periodic school shutdowns and led to an increase in unintended and unwanted early pregnancies.

Strictly enforced lockdowns have led to shocking levels of gender-based violence across Southern Africa, including a horrifying rise in sexual abuse of girls, some as young as nine. While these restrictive measures aimed to stem the spread of Covid-19, support services for women and girls subjected to violence and abuse were not taken into consideration in the design of the measures to control the spread of Covid-19. The Covid-19 containment measures have exacerbated and made more visible sexual violence against women and particularly girls, which is another pandemic across the region, and resulted in a rise in unwanted pregnancies.

Many survivors of sexual and gender-based violence in Southern Africa have been left without protection and support by their governments' inability to prioritize access to key services and information. The perpetrators of sexual and gender-based violence, meanwhile, are rarely prosecuted despite regional efforts to ensure adequate laws. Authorities across the region must urgently address this crisis by providing free maternal health services including antenatal care and skilled birth assistance and ensuring pregnant girls can continue their education. Authorities must also take immediate measures to prevent sexual and gender-based violence and ensure survivors can access protection, support, justice and remedies also during the pandemic.

### **SHOCKING RISE IN EARLY PREGNANCIES**

Over the course of 2020 and 2021, Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho, Malawi, Madagascar, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe all recorded a steep rise in cases of sexual and gender-based violence which has contributed to a reported increase in pregnancies among young and adolescent girls.

In South Africa, more than 600 girls aged between nine and ten gave birth during the same time period, while more than 34,000 babies were born to girls aged 17 or younger.

In Zimbabwe, almost 5,000 girls aged 17 or under became pregnant between January and February 2021, and 1,774 girls were married before they reached 18. In July 2021, Anna Machaya, a 14-year-old girl, died during childbirth at a church shrine in Manicaland Province. Following her death, Anna's husband and her father were arrested and charged with rape and obstructing justice respectively after public outcry.

In the first half of 2021, Zambia's police service recorded 4,000 cases of gender-based violence, of which 804 were sexual offences. Most of these sexual offences were committed against girls. In 2020, Botswana recorded an increase in cases of sexual violence compared with 2019, bringing the total number reported to a record high of 1,825 which also included girls.

In Mozambique, between 2020 and 2021, 14% of girls below the age of 15 fell pregnant.

## **LACK OF ACCESS TO SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH INFORMATION AND SERVICES**

In addition, access to sexual and reproductive health information and services, particularly emergency contraceptives and safe abortion - already scarce prior to the pandemic - was severely curtailed. In certain countries in the region such as Zimbabwe and Botswana, sexual and reproductive health services were the first to be cut when states were redirecting resources to Covid-19 interventions. In such situations, many girls face multiple difficulties in accessing the assistance necessary to both seek protection from, but also manage the consequences of, sexual violence and prevent unwanted pregnancies, which pose high risk to their physical and mental health, as such emergency care is very rarely available to them. Access to sexual and reproductive health information, services and goods was also limited and lack of access to comprehensive sexuality education is a consistent concern across the region.

Amnesty International is calling on the SADC leaders and Member States to urgently ensure that adolescent and young girls can have their rights respected and protected including their rights to health, information, education, equality, and the right to live freely from gender-based violence and discrimination. To this end, authorities must ensure, as part of their national response to Covid-19 and future policy reforms, that:

There is protection of all children against sexual exploitation and abuse.

Women and girls who are victims and survivors of gender-based violence have timely and adequate access to confidential reporting mechanisms, protection and support services, psychological counselling and healthcare, justice and redress.

Adolescents can access essential sexual and reproductive health information, services, and goods such as modern contraceptives to prevent early or unwanted pregnancies, and HIV/STIs.

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) programmes – which are age-appropriate, evidence-based, gender-sensitive and human rights based – be developed and implemented as part of the curricula delivered in all schools and communities to enable children and adolescents, boys and girls alike, to take informed and meaningful decisions about their sexuality and health, including information to help prevent HIV/STIs and early or unwanted pregnancy, and life-skills to detect and prevent gender-based violence.

Pregnant girls can receive all necessary care and support to continue with their life, while fully exercising their rights without coercion or discrimination, such as free maternal health services including antenatal care and skilled birth assistance, psycho-social and economic support, and continued access to education.

## **BACKGROUND**

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, sub-Saharan African countries had the highest rate of adolescent birth rates globally. To curb the spread of the virus, many African countries relied on prolonged lockdowns resulting in closure of essential health services and schools which also limited girls' access to safe spaces, and sexual and reproductive health services and information, and comprehensive sexuality education. These compound conditions in Southern Africa, where gender inequality permeates the cultural fabric of society, exacerbated sexual and gender-based violence contributing to an increase in pregnancies among adolescent and young girls.

Socio-economic conditions and some cultural practices constitute major barriers for women and girls survivors of gender-based violence, particularly in reporting the crimes and seeking justice and protection. During the Covid-19 pandemic, apart from discriminatory social attitudes rooted in patriarchal norms and harmful gender stereotypes, limited access to legal support and appropriate law enforcement heightened a sense of impunity among perpetrators, leading to increased rates of violence against women and girls.

[16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence](#) is an international campaign that began in 1991 and runs every year between the 25<sup>th</sup> November and 10<sup>th</sup> December.

For more **information** or to request an **interview** please contact Amnesty International's press office on:

Tel: +44 20 7413 5566

Email: [press@amnesty.org](mailto:press@amnesty.org)

Twitter: [@amnestypress](https://twitter.com/amnestypress)

Public Document