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Rape victims worldwide denied justice and dignity

Victims of rape and sexual violence worldwide are denied access to justice due to gender discrimination and assumptions about the sexual behaviour of victims of rape, Amnesty International said in two regional reports released today.

To mark International Women's Day, Amnesty International released two reports looking at sexual violence in locations across the developed and developing world; specifically Cambodia and the Nordic Countries of Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden.

"In poor and rich countries alike, women who are raped or abused have little chance of seeing their attackers brought to justice," said Widney Brown, Senior Director of International Law and Policy at Amnesty International. "It is shocking that in the 21st century with so much legislation designed to ensure women's equality, that virtually every government fails to protect women or to ensure that their abusers are held to account for their crimes."

Amnesty International's reports show that victims of sexual abuse and domestic violence seeking justice face many obstacles. These include inadequate, negative or dismissive responses by police, medical and judicial personnel. Given the pervasive indifference of authorities, many women feel ashamed or blame themselves and don't even try to report these crimes to the police.

In instances where women do go to the police, their claims for reparation and justice are rarely met. The two reports found that prosecution rates for rape are among the lowest for any offence.

"Unless the sexual violence is also accompanied by physical violence, it is simply not taken seriously," said Widney Brown. "A woman who survives the rape without significant physical injury is often stigmatised or held responsible for a crime committed against her while the rapist often faces limited, if any, social or legal sanction."

Though the legal systems examined in the reports vary greatly, Amnesty International found that all contain gaps and discrepancies which discourage women and girls from seeking justice for crimes committed against them.

In Nordic countries, for example, the use of violence or threats of violence determine the seriousness of rape rather than the violation of a woman's sexual autonomy. The report *Case Closed*, documents one case in Finland where a man forced a woman to have sexual intercourse in the disabled toilet of a car park by banging her head against the wall and twisting her arm behind her back. In the prosecutor's opinion, this was not rape as the violence used was of slight degree. The man was convicted of coercion into sexual intercourse and sentenced to a conditional (suspended) seven-month prison term.

By comparison, refusal to undertake compulsory military service, including civilian service, in Finland is punishable with a prison sentence of at least six months.

In Cambodia, women do not trust the justice system. Costs associated with police processes deter women from pursuing a case. Victims are often asked to pay a bribe before police will start an investigation. Money is also usually required for medical expenses, transport and phone credit costs for police during the investigation.

Breaking the Silence also documents how extra-judicial payments were negotiated as a 'solution'. Typically police officers act as an arbiter between the families of the victim and perpetrator to secure a financial settlement on the condition that the victim withdraws the criminal complaint. The mediator receives part of this settlement.

“For too many women, their experience of the justice system exacerbates the initial act of violence and abuse,” said Widney Brown. “Every perpetrator that goes unpunished as a result of these failures is a signal that the authorities are indifferent to the plight of the victims of sexual violence.”

Violence against women remains one of the most pervasive and significant barriers to gender equality. Amnesty International calls on governments to exercise due diligence to prevent, investigate and punish acts of violence. Central to this is ensuring women subjected to violence can access justice and an effective remedy for the harm they have suffered.

Amnesty International is also calling for the creation of a consolidated and strong UN women's entity, to ensure that women and girls around the world enjoy their rights in practice. Amnesty International is part of the global NGO campaign on the Gender Equality Architecture Reform (GEAR) calling on governments and the UN system to ensure that the new UN agency for women is given the resources, personnel and authority it needs to make a real difference to women's lives around the world.

Amnesty International urges all governments to fully reaffirm their commitment to respect women's human rights as articulated in numerous human rights treaties as well as in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, an agenda to advance the goals of equality, development and peace for all women.

Notes to Editors:

- Amnesty International launches two reports looking at violence against women. 'Case Closed: Rape and Human Rights in the Nordic Countries' and 'Breaking the Silence: Sexual Violence in Cambodia'.
<http://www.amnesty.org/campaigns/stop-violence-against-women>
- The reports are released during the UN Commission on the Status of Women. This year's focus of the Commission is the 15 year review of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action an agenda to advance equality and development for all women and to ensure the full implementation of their human rights. The BDPfA was unanimously adopted by participating member states at the 4th UN World Conference on Women in 1995
- Amnesty International believes that governments will not achieve any meaningful progress on the Millennium Development Goals unless they address structural human rights issues such as denial of sexual and reproductive rights, the right to be free from all forms of gender-based violence and discrimination against women.