Broken bodies, shattered minds -- The torture of women worldwide

The torture of women and girls persists on a daily basis across the globe, Amnesty International said today in a new report on the torture of women worldwide -- Broken bodies, shattered minds. "It is fed by a global culture which denies women equal rights with men, and which legitimises violence against women."

"The perpetrators are agents of the state and armed groups, but most often they are members of their own family, community or employers. For many women, their home is a place of terror."

"K", from the Democratic Republic of Congo, was married to an army officer who regularly tortured her often in front of their children. He repeatedly raped her, infecting her with sexually transmitted diseases and frequently threatened to kill her with a gun. During one incident, he knocked out a tooth, dislocated her jaw and punched her in the eye so hard that she required several stitches and had continued problems with her nose, neck, head, spinal column, hip and foot.

"K", who finally sought asylum in the USA, said it was futile to approach the police, both because of her husband’s connections to the ruling family but also because “women are nothing in the Congo”. A US immigration judge characterized the abuses she had suffered as “atrocities” but denied her application for asylum, a decision upheld by the immigration appeal court.

The report is part of Amnesty International’s global Campaign Against Torture, and urges governments to commit themselves to protecting women and girls from torture. Governments which systematically fail to take action to prevent and protect women from
violence in the home and community share responsibility for torture and ill-treatment.

"States have a duty under international law to prohibit and prevent torture and to respond to instances of torture in all circumstances. However, all too often, far from providing adequate protection to women, governments have connived in these abuses, have covered them up, have acquiesced in them and have allowed them to continue unchecked."

Violence in the home is truly universal. According to World Bank figures at least 20% of women have been physically or sexually assaulted. Official reports in the US say a women is battered every 15 seconds and 700,000 are raped each year. In India more than 40% of married women reported being kicked, slapped or sexually abused for reasons such as their husbands' dissatisfaction with their cooking or cleaning, jealousy or other motives. In Egypt, 35% of women reported being beaten by their husbands.

Some groups of women are particularly vulnerable to torture and ill-treatment and face multiple discrimination. They are not only tortured because they are women but also on the grounds of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, social status, class and age.

Many domestic workers are foreign nationals who are frequently ill-treated by their employers. They are unlikely to be able to obtain redress because of their immigration status.

Nasiroh, a young Indonesian woman went to work in Saudi Arabia in 1993. She told Amnesty International that she was sexually abused by her employer, falsely accused of his murder and then tortured and sexually abused by police officers during two years' incommunicado
detention. Officials from her embassy did not visit her once. Her trial was so cursory that she did not know she had been convicted and she still has no idea for what "crime" she was imprisoned for five years.

"Honour crimes", such as torture and killing, are reported from several countries including Iraq, Jordan, Pakistan and Turkey. Girls and women of all ages are accused of bringing shame on their families and their communities by their behaviour -- ranging from chatting to a male neighbour to sexual relations outside of marriage. The mere perception that a woman has damaged a family's honour can lead to torture and ill-treatment.

Women who have been bought and sold for forced labour, sexual exploitation and forced marriage are also vulnerable to torture. Trafficking in human beings is the third largest source of profit for international organized crime after drugs and arms. Trafficked women are particularly vulnerable to physical violence, including rape, unlawful confinement, confiscation of identity papers and enslavement.

Women are frequently singled out for torture in armed conflicts because of their role as educators and as symbols of the community. Tutsi women in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, and Muslim, Serb, Croat and ethnic Albanian women in the former Yugoslavia, were tortured because they were women of a particular ethnic, national or religious group.

Women who have been tortured can face many obstacles in seeking redress. Obstacles include police indifference, failure to define abuses as criminal offences, gender bias in the courts, and legal procedures which hamper fair criminal prosecution.

Ms G was traded by her parents to a neighbour as a wife when she was 15 in exchange for his assistance in paying off the mortgage on their
farm in El Salvador. Her husband routinely raped and beat her, resulting in injuries which required hospitalization. Ms G went to the police twice for protection, but was told her problem was personal. She ran away with her two children when she was 20 but her parents and husband found her. Her mother held her down while her husband beat her with a stick. Ms G fled to the USA and applied for asylum and has been told she will be deported.

In many parts of the world, police routinely fail to investigate abuses reported by women and frequently send abused women back home into abusive situations rather than file complaints. A study in Thailand found that police usually advised women to reconcile with their violent partners and women have to bribe police to pursue the complaints. Globally only 27 countries have legislated specifically against rape in marriage.

If a woman in Pakistan fails to prove she didn't consent to sexual relations with a man, she can be accused of zina (fornication), an offence punishable by stoning to death or public flogging. In some countries, women cannot go to court in person -- their male relatives are supposed to represent their interests. Women in Saudi Arabia who leave their home to seek help from the police run the risk of arrest for being in public unaccompanied by a male relative.

"It is high time that governments recognized that violence in the home and community is not a private matter, but involves state responsibility. International standards clearly lay down that states have a duty to ensure that no one is subjected to torture or ill-treatment anywhere or by anyone," the organization said. "If states neglect this responsibility, they share the responsibility for the suffering they have failed to prevent."
Amnesty International's report sets out detailed and achievable recommendations to governments. They include: public condemnation of violence against women, criminalizing violence against women, investigating all allegations, and prosecuting and punishing the perpetrators.

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