

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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## **Belarus: Domestic violence as a secret problem**

*"He was holding the child in his arms and beating me... You know it is really terrifying when the child's clothes are covered in blood and he is laughing and saying: 'There, you'll get on your knees now and beg me not to kill you'."*

Yelena, a victim of violence in the family.

Thousands of women in Belarus suffer from domestic violence, with little legal protection and almost no support services, according to a new report by Amnesty International.

According to official information obtained by the organization in 2006, nearly 3,000 women were registered as victims of violence in the home in Belarus in 2005, although the actual number is believed to be much higher. As there are no shelters for victims of domestic violence in the whole of the country, these women have nowhere go. The three existing state-run crisis centres are underfunded and provide insufficient support for victims. Many non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which have the expertise and will to help, are stifled by government restrictions on their activities and funding.

Amnesty International's latest report, *Belarus: Domestic violence -- more than a private scandal*, highlights the valuable work being done by individuals in NGOs and in the state sector. While the government of Belarus has recognized domestic violence as a problem and has taken steps to address the issue, both practically and legislatively, these measures are, so far, inadequate.

"Despite measures that have been taken by the authorities, Belarus is still falling short of its international obligations to protect women's rights," Heather McGill, Amnesty International's researcher on Belarus, said.

The Criminal Code does not yet define or criminalize domestic violence, although a draft law on the prevention and elimination of domestic violence was drawn up in 2002. While Amnesty International considers this draft law a positive measure, the organization is concerned by elements of it. In particular, the clause regarding "victim behaviour" could serve to incriminate women for provoking violence and thus undermine the state's obligation to protect them. The organization believes this clause should be removed and that the definition of domestic violence, in both the Criminal and Administrative Codes, should be in line with the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women.

Perpetrators of domestic violence continue to act with impunity because only a small fraction of women exposed to violence in the home actually report the crime to the police. Women are deterred from reporting violence because of fear of reprisals from abusive partners, fear of prosecution for other offences,

self-blame, fear of shaming the family, low self-esteem and financial insecurity.

"Lack of political will to combat domestic violence, as well as ongoing discrimination caused by gender stereotyping, is depriving women of their basic rights."

The report calls for the government to take measures to increase public awareness of domestic violence and to encourage women to speak out.

*Vera's husband, Oleg, beat and partially strangled her for sexual enjoyment on a regular basis for 23 years until her death in 2005. Police were called by neighbours numerous times but Vera did not complain out of fear of her husband, a former policeman. She was taken four times to hospital after severe beatings but her husband bribed policemen and medical personnel so that his crimes would not be reported. Vera was found dead with a noose around her neck. On 26 May 2006, Oleg was charged with driving his wife to suicide. Vera's family believe that she was murdered and are contesting the charge.*

"Women will trust the legal system if they have reason to believe that a prosecution will result in a life free of violence for themselves and their children. Only once there is a coordinated cross-ministerial system of support and protection in place will women turn to the criminal justice system with confidence," Heather McGill said.

"On their return from prison, men often continue to beat their partners. A system of support and protection for women would include access to shelters and, in the long term, alternative affordable accommodation for themselves and their children."

Amnesty International believes that protection for victims of domestic violence must be significantly improved and impunity for violence in the home reduced in Belarus. The organization is calling on the government of Belarus to honour its obligations under international law, with a focus on the following points:

Protect women against domestic violence -- all women who have been subjected to domestic violence must have access to full redress and reparation; they must be provided with temporary shelters and long-term housing.

End impunity - remove the "victim behaviour" clause from the draft law and define domestic violence in line with the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, in both the Criminal and Administrative Codes.

Raise awareness - the government must run public awareness campaigns to overcome the stigmatization of victims of domestic violence and encourage women to report such crimes to the police.

**See:** *Belarus: Domestic violence -- more than a private scandal* (AI Index: EUR 49/014/2006)  
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engeur490142006>

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