

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL NIGERIA

PUBLIC STATEMENT

Index: AFR 44/5836/2017

7 March 2017

Nigeria: Help end discrimination by passing Gender and Equal Opportunity bill

On International Women's Day, March 8th, Amnesty International calls on Nigeria's National Assembly and other stakeholders to ensure the speedy passage of the Gender and Equal Opportunity Bill.

More than 30 years after Nigeria ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), women still experience various forms of discrimination in law and practice.

Nigeria ratified CEDAW in 1985, and ratified the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the Women's Protocol) in 2004, but is yet to domesticate either of these treaties. The two treaties contain vital provisions that will protect women from discrimination and ensure they live with dignity and fully enjoy their human rights.

Attempts to incorporate these treaties into domestic law continue to generate public and parliamentary debates.

Earlier attempts were defeated by strong opposition; some legislators, religious groups and leaders have argued that the provisions would erode local customs and religious beliefs. Yet, some of the customs and practices in question have already been invalidated by Nigerian Courts.

Domestication of these treaties will strengthen the prohibition of gender-based discrimination, already enshrined in the Nigerian Constitution. The Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill (GEO Bill) which is presently before the National Assembly is yet another attempt to complete this process and hopefully this time it will sail through.

The objective of the bill is to secure much needed freedoms and rights for women, so that women and girls may for example exercise their right to be free from discrimination and be able to enjoy their rights to education, healthcare and to own property without barriers and exclusions because of their gender.

Passing the GEO Bill into law will provide a firm legal basis to render void existing laws, policies and practices which discriminate against women. Examples of these include customary practices that preclude women from inheritance; Section 55 of the 1990 Labour Act of Nigeria which bars women from being employed in night work, except as nurses; and Section 360 of the Criminal Code Act which makes the indecent assault of a woman a misdemeanour punishable with a two year prison term, as opposed to the three years prison term imposed for indecently assaulting a man, which is a felony in section 353.

The provisions of the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill will also address the systemic sexual exploitation of women and girls by men who abuse their positions of power and authority. Examples of this type of exploitation include the practice of police officers demanding sex in exchange for bail

which is common in some police stations; and the ongoing sexual exploitation in some IDP camps where women are forced to have sex with security operatives and fellow male IDPs, in exchange for food rations.

Furthermore, the Bill sets out positive measures to actively promote equality. In a context in which youth literacy rates are almost twenty per cent lower for women than men, in which women remain under-represented in the work force, and where women hold less than ten percent of seats in national parliament, such provisions are nothing short of urgent.

Amnesty International therefore calls on the National Assembly to ensure the speedy passage of this bill by engaging all stakeholders through public hearings and community consultations. The organization also urges the federal government to put in place strong mechanisms for its implementation.
