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Indonesia: Barriers preventing women achieving reproductive health

Many Indonesian women and girls, especially those from poor and marginalised communities, struggle to achieve reproductive health in the face of discriminatory laws, policies and practices, a new report by Amnesty International says.

Left Without a Choice describes how government restrictions and discriminatory traditions threaten the lives of many Indonesian woman and girls by putting reproductive health services beyond their reach.

“The Indonesian government has pledged to enhance gender equality, but many Indonesian women still struggle for fair and equal treatment”, said Salil Shetty, Amnesty International’s Secretary General. “A combination of unchallenged social attitudes, unfair laws and stereotyped gender roles often relegate women to second-class status.”

Amnesty International research shows how discriminatory practices and problematic laws are restricting access to contraception for unmarried women and girls, and allowing early marriage for girls younger than 16. The law also requires a woman to get her husband’s consent to access certain contraception methods, or an abortion in the event that her life is at risk. Amnesty International also found that health workers frequently deny the full range of legally available contraceptive services to unmarried or childless married women.

Even though the government has taken steps for better protection for women victim of violence, it is failing to ensure that survivors of rape can access health information and services. Although abortion is legally available to women and girls who become pregnant as a result of rape, this fact is not well known, even amongst health workers, and victims of rape can face significant obstacles to accessing safe abortion services.

Interviews with dozens of Indonesian women and girls, as well as health workers, highlighted how these restrictions increase unwanted pregnancies and force many women and girls to marry young or drop out of school. Many others choose illegal abortions. An estimated 2 million abortions are performed in Indonesia every year, many of them in unsafe conditions. According to official government figures, unsafe abortions are responsible for between five and 11 per cent of maternal deaths in Indonesia.

Sharifah’s case is a typical example. When she became pregnant at 17, her boyfriend left her and her school expelled her. Traditional healers in her village induced an abortion, but she soon developed complications. Two days later she had died from blood loss.

“Restrictions on sexual and reproductive rights are placing severe and potentially deadly obstacles in the way many women and girls can access reproductive health information and services,” says Salil Shetty.

“Indonesia must do more to ensure that old stereotypes and mindsets are replaced with a more forward-looking recognition of the problems and needs facing their wives, sisters and daughters.”

Amnesty International found that some groups of women and girls face additional threats to their sexual and reproductive rights because the state has failed to protect them in vulnerable contexts. Domestic workers, for instance, face specific risks of abuse because they are not fully legally protected as workers, while their work conditions put them at greater risk of sexual harassment and violence, and they are at risk of abuse at

the time of pregnancy.

“The Indonesian government has done a lot to realize its commitment to the Millennium Development Goals, especially for gender equality and maternal health,” said Salil Shetty. “With this report, we’ve highlighted important areas where the law needs reforming, or much better implementation, in order to overcome discriminatory practices and social norms that disempower women and put their health at risk.”

Amnesty International has been campaigning for individuals’ rights to sexual and reproductive health and autonomy – in Indonesia, and around the world – as part of its Demand Dignity campaign. The campaign calls for governments to ensure access for all to sexual and reproductive health information and services free from discrimination, coercion and the threat of criminalization.

Amnesty International calls on the Indonesian authorities to take the following steps as a matter of priority:

□ Repeal all laws and regulations, at both the central and local levels, that violate sexual and reproductive rights, ensuring women and girls can realise their rights free from coercion, discrimination and the threat of criminalization.

□ Decriminalize abortion under all circumstances in order to combat the high number of illegal and unsafe abortions, ensuring access to safe abortion services in cases when women and girls have unwanted pregnancies as a result of rape, or where a pregnancy poses a threat to the woman’s life or health.

□ Enact a Domestic Workers’ law in line with international standards, ensuring that women and girl domestic workers are afforded the same level of protection as other workers in Indonesia and that provisions pertaining to women’s special needs, including maternity provisions are included.

ENDS

Notes to editors:

- This report is issued as part of Amnesty International’s global Demand Dignity Campaign, launched in 2009, which aims to expose and combat the human rights violations that drive and deepen poverty.
- This report builds on Amnesty International’s earlier work on violence against women within poor and marginalised communities in Indonesia. Amnesty International’s February 2007 report, “Exploitation and Abuse: The Plight of women and girl domestic workers in Indonesia” highlighted the factors that put women and girl domestic workers at risk of domestic violence, as well as their lack of legal protection as workers. Subsequently, Amnesty International made a submission to the Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women in July 2007.
- This report also follows on from Amnesty International’s 2009 report, “Unfinished Business: Police accountability”, which highlighted inter alia the vulnerability of women and girls from poor and marginalised communities, in particular in urban settings, to police abuse without adequate access to legal remedy.
- Left Without a Choice is based on work conducted by Amnesty International across Indonesia in March 2010. Researchers interviewed an array of individuals, including health workers such as doctors and midwives, traditional birth attendants, government officials and women and girls from both urban and rural areas. Case studies are available.