

AI Index: PRE 01/109/2010  
07 April 2010

## **Uganda: Victims of rape and sexual violence denied justice**

Amnesty International has urged the Ugandan authorities to provide support for women seeking justice for sexual and domestic violence in a new report released today highlighting the barriers faced by the victims.

“I Can’t Afford Justice – Violence against women in Uganda” documents the economic and social obstacles to justice, including the costs of criminal investigations and discrimination by government officials.

Victims are left facing inadequate responses by police, having to pay for the cost of police transportation to arrest the accused, forensic examination fees and other expenses related to the investigation.

Some official responses to sexual violence also reflect a widely held attitude that the women are to blame for sexual violence in a country where the government often appears to promote “preservation of the family unit” ahead of justice for victims.

“The failure of the government to protect and support victims of sexual violence undermines the quest for justice,” said Widney Brown, a senior director of Amnesty International. “Lack of government resources and political will mean that perpetrators rarely face justice. Women in Uganda have been left with no faith in the justice system.”

Violence against women and girls in Uganda remains widespread. Two thirds of women who have experienced domestic violence say it was perpetrated by an intimate partner, while one in four women report that their first sexual experience was forced.

The report documents several personal accounts highlighting how the police, prosecution service and the courts are under funded and understaffed. These in turn become obstacles to women accessing justice as the criminal justice system lacks the resources to provide these services to victims.

“When I went to the police station they asked me for money for fuel which I did not have. My husband beat me again but I gave up going to the police because they always ask for money which I don’t have,” one victim told Amnesty International.

There is no state run shelter for victims of gender based violence. Women are also turned away from charity run shelters for lack of space and legal aid institutions are overwhelmed with cases of gender-based violence. Many women endure violent situations simply because they have nowhere else to go.

Official attitudes mean many women feel that they have no choice but to accept mediation and stay in a violent relationship in spite of the danger because they have no viable means of supporting themselves or their children. As a result, many women are stripped of their right to be free from violence and to the equal

protection of the law.

Even when the police finally take a report seriously, there are few systems in place to protect the victims. Counsellors at a women's shelter told Amnesty International about a 13-year-old victim who reported years of sexual violence by her father. She has come forward to report the rapes but now faces intimidation from her relatives and fears her safety. Her case worker believes she is not safe where she is right now.

While the report exposes the need for the government to adequately resource the criminal justice system to ensure that perpetrators of violence against women can be brought to justice, it also reveals that the government has not taken some basic measures to make the system work for women.

For example, there is no privacy for the victim whose report is taken in a public office even as she is required to give intimate details of the violence.

Many women Amnesty International spoke to said they were subjected to humiliating lines of questioning about their private lives and prior sexual conduct by inadequately trained police and defence lawyers.

The government of Uganda is also falling short of its international obligation to ensure women's access to justice. As a result, perpetrators escape prosecution and punishment for their crimes.

"The Ugandan government needs to take a hard look at its laws, policies and practices and close the vast chasm between its rhetoric of respect for women's rights and its abject failure to protect and fulfil those same rights," said Widney Brown.

Amnesty International urges the government to take immediate action to provide survivors of violence against women with legal support and related health, safety and shelter needs.

It should also take steps to prevent violence against women by addressing its root causes by transforming discriminatory attitudes and remove the obstacles impeding women's access to justice.