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## **Nicaragua must put an end to rape and sexual abuse of girls**

The Nicaraguan authorities must eradicate rape and widespread sexual abuse of girls, Amnesty International has said in a new report.

Listen to their Voice and Act: Stop the Rape and Sexual Abuse of Girls in Nicaragua follows the experiences of survivors as they try to overcome the barriers which obstruct their access to justice and recovery services. The report, part of Amnesty International's Demand Dignity campaign, reveals through testimonies how the state does not sufficiently help survivors to rebuild their lives after sexual violence.

"Every day girls in Nicaragua are suffering the horror of sexual violence in silence, rather than risk the rejection that many suffer when they speak out", said Esther Major, Amnesty International Central America Researcher.

"It is time for the authorities to show the same courage as the brave survivors who shared their testimonies with us and break the silence which surrounds sexual abuse."

According to police statistics, between 1998 and 2008, more than 14,000 cases were reported. Two thirds of the victims were under the age of 17.

The report, launched to coincide with International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, documents how Nicaraguan society stigmatizes victims of sexual abuse and how sex is still a taboo subject, inhibiting girls from speaking out about their ordeals.

Relatives and people in a position of power are the most commonly reported perpetrators of sexual violence against girls. The home is frequently a dangerous place and many girls who are suffering sexual abuse at the hands of their relatives are put under pressure to keep silent.

The report also documents how Nicaraguan society stigmatizes victims of sexual abuse and how sex is still a taboo subject, inhibiting girls from speaking out about their ordeals.

The absence of government programmes to raise public awareness about sexual violence and change social attitudes means that it is often the victim and not the abuser who is blamed.

Girls who do find the strength to report rape or sexual abuse often find that instead of being treated with care and professionalism, they encounter police officers, prosecutors and judges who do not adhere to national and international rules governing the treatment of victims of sexual abuse.

Despite the existence in Nicaragua of protocols for police, prosecutors and judges on the treatment of victims of rape and sexual abuse, in practice they are frequently disregarded.

Many Nicaraguan girls also struggle to cover the costs of travelling to and from court appointments, hospital appointments or forensic institutes

“Nicaraguan justice should serve all people – not just those with money and power. The government must send a clear message that sexual violence is never the fault of the rape victim; that perpetrators will be brought to justice and that survivors will be given the support they need to heal,” said Esther Major

“Too many girls are dropping out of school, giving up on work or even attempting suicide. They need to be supported to leave behind the traumas of their childhood”.

Some rape survivors suffer the additional trauma of finding out they are pregnant as a consequence of the rape.

The report shows how for girls who wish to continue with the pregnancy, there is currently no support to help care for the baby or enable the survivor to return to school or work.

In addition, the current Nicaraguan government criminalised all forms of abortion in 2008. This has serious consequences for survivors who do not wish to continue with their pregnancy.

The law now compels girls, under threat of imprisonment, to continue with their pregnancy after being raped, even if the pregnancy poses a risk to her life or health. For a girl who has already been denied any control over her own body by the rapist, the current law is unbearably cruel,

“All that young victims of rape and sexual abuse demand is that their right to be free from sexual violence is protected by the Nicaraguan government, and that they are supported so they can overcome the physical and psychological trauma caused by such acts of violence. This is Nicaragua’s obligation under national and international law”

“We are asking the Nicaraguan government to put an end to sexual violence and ensure that it does not become the event that defines the rest of survivor’s lives”, said Esther Major.

This report is part of Amnesty International’s Demand Dignity campaign which aims to end the human rights violations that drive and deepen global poverty. The campaign mobilises people all over the world to demand that governments, corporations and others who have power listen to the voices of those living in poverty and recognise and protect their rights. For more information visit <http://demanddignity.amnesty.org/campaigns-en/>

## **Background**

In Nicaragua, the most common perpetrators of rape and sexual abuse are members of the girl’s own family.

The figures of reported rapes are all the more alarming given that in Nicaragua, as in other countries, rape and sexual abuse are under-reported crimes, especially if they involve young girls and are carried out by members of the girl’s own family.

The research for this report was conducted between 2008, 2009 and 2010. Among the more than 130 people interviewed for this report were, 35 girls and young women between the ages of 10 and 20 who had been raped, 10 mothers of rape victims, experts who help the victims of sexual abuse and provide psychological help, as well as policewomen, members of parliament and representatives of the government.

In October 2010, the UN Committee for the Rights of the Child expressed its concerns about the “high level of child abuse and neglect, including sexual abuse and of domestic and gender-based violence” in Nicaragua.

The report is also part of the Amnesty International’s 16 Days of Activism campaign against gender violence which begins on 25th November and will focus on the theme of sexual and reproductive rights.

You can find out more about the campaign at <http://livewire.amnesty.org>.