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PAKISTAN

Two years on – discrimination against women still rife

Pakistan's ratification of the United Nation's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women two years ago has failed to bring an end to discriminatory practices or human rights violations against women, according to Amnesty International today – International Women's Day.

Women in Pakistan continue to be subjected to unlawful and cruel punishments imposed under tribal systems of justice and domestic violence, for instance. That these practices have not been stopped or curtailed in any way is largely due to the complicity, acquiescence and indifference of state officials.

Law enforcement officials very often fail to investigate reports of human rights abuses against women, and they themselves continue to be responsible for violating women's human rights, such as custodial rape. Laws that explicitly discriminate against women have not been amended or abolished. The Zina Ordinance which effectively provides for the imprisonment of women solely on the grounds of gender continues to contribute to and facilitate violations of women's fundamental rights.

The Commission of Inquiry for Women, set up by the government, published its March 1997 report. Mandated to examine "all the existing laws which are discriminatory to women or affect their right to being equal citizens of Pakistan", the Commission looked at family and labour laws, criminal laws and various social practices which involve violence against women, and the lack of suitable institutions to protect women's rights. The Commission made a series of recommendations, including amendment of criminal laws and strengthening of legislation on domestic violence and monitoring of its implementation.

The report concluded with the Commission urging "decision makers, including political party leadership, the legislators and the judiciary, to give the issue of women's rights the critical priority it deserves, not as a favour or protective gesture but on their fundamental inalienable right". To Amnesty International's knowledge, no steps have been taken yet to implement any of the recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry for Women.

Amnesty International is again calling on the Government of Pakistan to take seriously the commitments entered into when ratifying the Women's Convention, and to bring about the changes in law and practice promised at the time. The organization is also calling on the government to consider the recommendations Amnesty International has repeatedly made, as well as the comprehensive steps set out in the report of the Commission of Inquiry for Women.

These include:

- abolishing the Zina Ordinance because it discriminates against women and effectively permits their imprisonment on grounds of gender;
- ensuring that unlawful practices like honour killings, widespread and grave domestic violence against women are ended and those still engaging in them are held to account;
- fully and speedily implementing all the provisions of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women;
- ratifying other international human rights treaties including the UN Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

ENDS.../