

Philippines: Rape and sexual abuse in police custody

Women who are raped or sexually abused in custody in the Philippines experience fear and shame in reporting it and rarely see perpetrators brought to justice, Amnesty International said today in a new report to be launched at a press conference in Manila ahead of International Women's Day (March 8).

"Too often, police officers and prison guards, abuse their power to rape and sexually abuse women in their custody. With the intent to humiliate, punish, or for their own sexual gratification, the perpetrators often get away with torture," the organization said.

Victims fear reprisals and those who do have the courage to make a complaint are often threatened or pressured into withdrawing them, especially if the perpetrator is in an influential position. Intrusive media reporting of cases, lack of gender sensitivity in the courts and by police further compound the suffering of the victim.

In 1999 a male judge acquitted a policeman of raping a 13-year-old girl in Davao City. The judge reportedly called the girl "a woman in a minor child's body, old in the ways of the world beyond her years...it is possible she concocted this lurid tale of lust and rape."

Women who are sexually abused or raped in custody are often members of marginalised groups including suspected prostitutes, street children, drug users and the poor arrested for minor crimes. The anti-vagrancy law is used as a pretext for arresting women arbitrarily and subjecting them to sexual violence. Women in police custody have also reported being threatened, slapped, punched and kicked.

"The Philippine authorities must send an unequivocal message to law enforcement officials that sexual violence in custody will not be tolerated. The government should take urgent steps to end the impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators."

The lack of prosecutions for torture, including rape, of women political detainees in the past, is a major factor contributing to a wider climate of impunity today.

A set of recommendations aimed at upholding women's human rights are included in the report.

The report will be launched at a press conference being held by Amnesty International Philippines, Bantayog ng mga Bayani, Sarilaya, Makibaka and the Women's Resource Center.

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