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Pacific region: Action needed to protect vulnerable women from attack

Pacific leaders meeting in Auckland on Tuesday must take urgent steps to eradicate endemic violence against women in the region, Amnesty International said today.

Rates of violence against women are some of the highest in the world, affecting two out of three female Pacific islanders.

“A majority of women experience abuse in the Pacific. Yet, shockingly, there are few effective mechanisms to protect them,” said Patrick Holmes, chief executive of Amnesty International Aotearoa New Zealand.

Amnesty International is calling on leaders at the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) meeting in Auckland to implement existing legislation aimed at preventing violence against women and ensure that police and prosecutors investigate and prosecute alleged perpetrators.

In a new report, ‘Where is the dignity in that?’ Women in Solomon Islands denied sanitation and safety” Amnesty International highlights how this lack of official action affects women in the Solomon Islands, who face harassment, attack or rape while carrying out their everyday household duties.

Women and girls are often attacked while walking long distances from “slums” or informal settlements in the Islands’ capital, Honiara to collect clean water for cooking and cleaning, or to visit toilets. Their journeys often take them through remote and poorly lit areas. They are particularly vulnerable on the return journey when they are carrying heavy loads of water.

“Women and girls in the Solomon Islands are forced to risk their personal safety for something most of us take for granted – clean water and basic sanitation,” said Patrick Holmes, Amnesty International Aotearoa New Zealand’s Chief Executive.

Amnesty International spoke to women in Honiara’s slums who said they were physically or sexually abused by men outside their household, but were too frightened to make formal complaints to the authorities for fear of reprisals from their attackers. Others said their complaints were ignored.

The Solomon Islands government has acknowledged the pervasiveness of violence against women and in 2010 introduced a national policy to address the issue. Amnesty International welcomed the initiative, but is calling on the government to do more.

“The Solomon Islands police must investigate all complaints by women of physical and sexual violence, and where substantiated, prosecute the alleged perpetrators.” said Patrick Holmes. “The Solomon Islands government must also put in place measures to provide adequate water and sanitation services to

Honaria's slum dwellers" he said.

But the problem is wider than the situation in Solomon Islands. According to Jocelyn Lai, a Board Member of the Solomon Islands Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), "the absence of laws addressing gender-based violence is an issue throughout the Pacific."

Amnesty International is calling on Pacific leaders to use Tuesday's meeting in Auckland to take urgent action to protect vulnerable women across the region by living up to their previous promises.

In 2009, the PIF Leaders' Meeting in Cairns pledged to 'eradicate sexual and gender-based violence'. A year later they expressed satisfaction with progress, despite the fact that their only achievement has been to set up a working group on the issue.

"It is not enough simply to pay lip service to eradicating violence against women. Pacific leaders must turn words into action in Auckland by ensuring their governments respect, protect and fulfil the rights of women to live free from violence and discrimination." says Holmes.

"Amnesty International calls on Pacific leaders to live up to their obligations under international law, and to start acting on their pledge to eradicate violence against women."