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Pakistan crime bills must be springboard for better women's rights

Pakistan authorities must take concrete steps to end violence against women, Amnesty International said today after the country's Senate unanimously passed two landmark women's rights bills.

The Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Bill 2010 and The Prevention of Anti-Women Practices (Criminal Law Amendment) Bill 2008 aim to empower and protect women and increase penalties for perpetrators of gender-based violence.

Dozens of Pakistani women every year suffer serious injury and physical deformity as a result of having acid or other corrosive substances thrown on them, often as a result of family disputes.

"It is encouraging that Pakistan's parliament has passed more bills seeking to protect women and bring perpetrators to justice, but it is not clear that the situation for women has improved in Pakistan," said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific director.

"Pakistani authorities must establish immediate benchmarks for assessing the implementation of these new laws.

"These reforms will be of little practical benefit until federal and provincial authorities create mechanisms for compensating and rehabilitating victims of gender-based violence, addressing the low conviction rate of perpetrators and regulating the sale of acid."

Amnesty International's research in Pakistan suggests that government-run women's shelters are in dire need of an overhaul.

Most are poorly funded and their staff lack training to deal with the trauma and other issues faced by victims.

Police investigations are often compromised by political or family influence, corruption and a lack of basic training for dealing with gender-based violence.

"The need for protecting victims of gender crimes is urgent. Acid attacks leave their victims hideously scarred and severely traumatised. Many lose their lives from inadequate medical attention while others cannot work or adequately care for their children, and face social prejudice," said Sam Zarifi.

"The bills passed yesterday do not address these systemic failings of Pakistan's criminal justice system. Authorities have failed to provide any clear strategy for addressing these problems or implementing the new laws."

Activists from across Pakistan's political spectrum campaigned to secure support from lawmakers for the

two bills.

“Now it is up to the authorities to ensure that these hard-earned protections are acted upon. Without clear steps for implementing these laws, violence against women will remain a chronic problem in Pakistan.”