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Jamaica: Political will needed to end violence against women and girls

In a new report published today, Amnesty International urges the Jamaican authorities to prioritize the implementation of a 15-point Action Plan developed by women's organizations across the country to fight discrimination and sexual violence against women and adolescent girls.

The Action Plan includes recommendations such as the development of a public education programme aimed at preventing rape and sexual crimes, the introduction of a national campaign against discrimination and sexual violence and the establishment of a series of shelters to provide support and refuge for victims of sexual violence.

"Only decisive action will put an end to discrimination and sexual violence against women in Jamaica. Most of the recommendations of the Action Plan do not require extensive investment, only determination and political will," said Kerrie Howard, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Americas Programme.

According to Amnesty International's findings, widespread discrimination against women in Jamaica makes them targets of sexual violence and exposes them to serious health risks – including sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS.

Amnesty International also found that girls are particular targets of sexual violence and that the Jamaican government has consistently failed to deal with the issue effectively.

According to one study published by UNICEF in 2004 alone, 70 per cent of all reported sexual assaults were against girls.

"Discrimination against women and girls is so entrenched in Jamaican society that many Jamaicans and government officials are failing to see it as a problem, even when it's killing hundreds of women every year," said Kerrie Howard.

In a survey carried out last year, 2005, 66% of men and 49% of women agreed with the statement "women and girls sometimes bring rape upon themselves." Certain guidance issued by judges to juries states that "... experience has shown that women and young girls often tell lies...".

"Jamaican women frequently do not feel safe. They know that whether at home, on the street or even at

school they risk being beaten, raped or even killed," said Kerrie Howard.

Women also face discrimination and strong barriers when they decide to report sexual violence. The sexual assault investigations unit in Jamaica estimates that only 25 per cent of sexual violence is reported.

"I didn't tell anyone for six months then I told my parents. I asked dad not to do anything about it; that's one thing I insisted on. I didn't want anyone to know because even at that age I knew they would say it was my fault [and] I thought no one would believe me. I blamed myself and I thought I was foolish and so naive," said Mary (not her real name), who was raped when she was 13.

"Women have good reason to think that they will not be believed – the evidence is all around them, in their societies and communities. Juries, the police, families, and sometimes women themselves, believe that they are partially responsible for their attacks," said Kerrie Howard.

Bringing cases of sexual violence to court is extremely difficult. One problem is that witnesses or victims are often threatened even killed. Enid Gordon was 15 when she was raped by two men. She and her family filed a complaint against the men, who were arrested, charged, and released on bail. On 12th October 2005, one week before she was due to testify against the two men in court, Enid was found dead in the same place that she had been raped a year earlier. She had been strangled with her school tie. Results of the investigation are pending.

Amnesty International is also calling for legislative reforms – particularly to the Offences against the Person Act, the Sexual Harassment Bill, and the Incest (Punishment) Act – for improvement of investigation techniques and for the establishment of gender-based training for police and judicial officials dealing with cases of sexual violence against women.

"Jamaican society as a whole is paying the price of discrimination against women and girls. They pay a high price when their mothers, sisters and friends are injured, when diseases such as HIV/AIDS are spread, and when poverty increases. It isn't an impossible or expensive task to end violence against women in Jamaica. It only takes determination and respect for the human rights of women."

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