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Papua New Guinea: Culture and resources no excuse for violence against women

The government's ongoing failure to tackle violence against women in Papua New Guinea has resulted in this violence becoming so pervasive that it impedes national development and contributes to the spread of HIV/AIDS, according to a new report by Amnesty International.

"Violence against women is endemic in Papua New Guinea: it affects the majority of women and girls in some parts of the country. Apologists for this violence, including in government, cling to tired old excuses such as culture, tradition or lack of resources," said Purna Sen, Asia Pacific Director at Amnesty International as she launched the report from the capital Port Moresby.

"This report shatters those defences. Amnesty International has researched violence against women across the world, from Sweden to Colombia to the Solomon Islands -- and we have seen governments invoke the same justifications everywhere. But there are no excuses -- governments are obliged under international law to protect women from violence, no matter where, when or from whom."

Gang rapes, knife attacks on wives, beating and sexual abuse of girls and torture and murder of female "sorcerers" are among the many forms of violence against women in Papua New Guinea. The threat of rape, sexual assault and other violence is so great that women and girls cannot freely move round their communities, go to school, to the market or to work. The state's failure to enable women to become safely involved in civil and economic life severely constrains the full use of resources for national development.

Gruesome stories of torture, rape and other violence against women are regularly reported in national media. There have been numerous policy papers and conferences on the subject. Papua New Guinea was a frontrunner among states in identifying and documenting violence against women two decades ago -- but the debate has never been translated into adequate action on the ground. A lack of political will and the government's tendency to dwell on difficulties and dredge up old excuses has meant that very little has changed for women in 20 years. Sadly, many women have come to see violence as 'normal' -- as have men, confident in the knowledge that the state will not act quickly, decisively or consistently against them.

"The Papua New Guinean government needs to snap out of its inaction and deliver its responsibilities. Insufficient resources is not an excuse -- the government must recognise the negative impact that violence against women is having on the whole population, on the development of communities and the economy and must prioritise action against this scourge, making the best use of the funds it has," said Purna Sen.

"It must set up a body to monitor how the state is measuring up to its obligations under international law, to investigate and to act on complaints of violence against women. This body must be given enough resources

to travel around the country and to do its job properly."

The police are underfunded and rarely investigate complaints. They are themselves often directly implicated in attacks. Almost all the women who spoke to Amnesty International said that the police regularly sent home those reporting domestic violence, or 'wife bashing' as it is locally termed, telling them it was a "family matter".

'Margaret', from Angoram, East Sepik said: *"My husband took a second wife and I had to live with both of them in my house. When I came home one day and found everything in a mess, I said, 'this is my house and you should keep it clean'. My husband broke my nose and hit me with timber over the back of the head. I went to the police to tell them to arrest them -- they said they would do it but they didn't... I am tired of the police -- they're useless."*

"The Papua New Guinean government must identify and eliminate the root causes of violence against women. Gender inequality and discrimination is supported by customs such as polygamy and bride price, which strengthens men's belief that they 'own' their wives. The government should conduct a review of customary laws and practices and swiftly change or abolish any that discriminate against women," said Purna Sen.

High levels of sexual violence against women also heightens their risk of being infected with HIV. Papua New Guinea is facing a growing HIV epidemic, with a reported annual increase of 15-30% in numbers infected. The social acceptability of violence against women has been identified as one of the main factors contributing to the spread of HIV/AIDS. Women at most risk -- those whose partners have multiple wives or who travel a lot -- often say they have no control over the use of condoms and cannot refuse sex.

Women human rights activists in Papua New Guinea have long been at the forefront of efforts to prevent violence against women. They do essential work offering shelter, counselling, or legal advice to survivors of violence, with little or no support from the government.

"Local activists are in effect filling the void left by the government's failure to address violence against women," said Purna Sen. "The government should be working in partnership with women activists, not expecting them to substitute for it by providing services."

Notes to Editors

Names have been changed to protect the identity of individuals.

To see the report, *Papua New Guinea -- Violence against women: Not inevitable, never acceptable!*, please go to: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa340022006>

To see a summary of the report, please go to: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa340022006>

To see profiles of women human rights activists working in PNG, *"Papua New Guinea - Women Human Rights Defenders in Action"* please go to <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa340042006>

To see the appeal case for Anna Benny, please go to <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa340052006>

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