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PAKISTAN: WOMEN'S RIGHTS ARE DENIED DESPITE ELECTION PROMISES

*Pakistan's Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto, vowed before elections in 1993 to do away with laws which discriminate against women -- yet today women in Pakistan remain disadvantaged and are denied their human rights.*

*"They are raped with impunity, become prisoners of conscience and face cruel, inhuman or degrading punishments under laws which explicitly discriminate against them," Amnesty International said in a report released today.*

*"The laws which deny women's human rights have long been identified. Now is the time to change them rather than talk about them," the organization said.*

*At any one time hundreds of women are imprisoned under the Zina Ordinance, a law that punishes extra-marital sexual intercourse. Some have been convicted on the basis of procedures and rules of evidence which are clearly discriminatory, without having used or advocated violence and are considered to be prisoners of conscience by Amnesty International.*

*"They should be released immediately and unconditionally and the law be amended to prevent such imprisonment," Amnesty International said.*

The Zina Ordinance also applies to rape. Under this law, *when maximum penalties are at stake, specific types of evidence must be produced which exclude the testimony of women. By bringing a charge of rape, a woman is taken to admit that unlawful sexual intercourse has taken place. A rape victim can therefore be punished after a trial in which she was given no chance to testify.*

*Maximum penalties under the Zina Ordinance include death by stoning or public flogging. While Amnesty International acknowledges that these two punishments have not been carried out recently, it remains concerned that they remain on the statute book and might once again be imposed.*

*Even if a woman's testimony is admitted, rape victims are frequently convicted of unlawful sexual intercourse if they fail to establish beyond doubt that they did not consent. In Karachi Central Court, about 15 per cent of rape trials reportedly result in the woman who brought the case being charged and imprisoned.*

*Young girls are particularly at risk of having their human rights violated. When they reach the age of puberty, as young as 11 or 12, they are considered adult and can be subjected to all the cruel punishments reserved for adults.*

*In one example cited in the Amnesty International report released today, 15-year-old Jehan Mina was raped by her uncle and cousin. Her family filed a complaint of rape. In the absence of witnesses, the alleged rapists were acquitted, but Jehan's pregnancy following the rape*

*was taken as evidence for unlawful sexual intercourse: she was sentenced to 100 lashes in public and ten years' imprisonment. The punishment was later reduced to 10 lashes and three years' imprisonment.*

*In addition to such discriminatory laws and legal practices, women in Pakistan are sometimes detained when male family members cannot be found. In custody, many are raped and subjected to other forms of torture.*

*In rural areas of Pakistan, some women and girls are held as bonded labour, sold, chained and raped at will by their "owners"; in tribal areas they are subjected to tribal systems of retribution. The government's systematic failure to stop these practices is compelling evidence of official acquiescence in them.*

*"The measures that the Pakistan government has taken so far are not enough. It must now prove its commitment by taking determined steps towards adopting legislation that fully safeguards women's human rights," Amnesty International said.*

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NOTE TO EDITORS:

The report released by Amnesty International presents detailed information on the situation of women in Pakistan. It also includes a set of specific recommendations to the Government of *Pakistan aimed at achieving full respect for women's human rights. For reference, consult: Women in Pakistan; Disadvantaged and denied their rights. (AI Index: ASA 33/23/95).*