

AI Index: PRE 01/117/2008  
17 April 2008

## **Brazil: Women's lives shattered by public security crisis in shanty-towns**

In a new report published today, Amnesty International revealed the untold stories of women who are forced to live, bring up their children and fight for justice in Brazil's lawless shanty-towns.

"The reality for women in Brazil's slums is catastrophic. They are the hidden victims of the criminal and police violence that has engulfed their communities for decades," said Tim Cahill, Brazil researcher at Amnesty International.

The Brazilian state is virtually absent in marginalized communities and often the only contact people have with the government is via sporadic, militarised police incursions.

Though the federal government has launched a new project which promises to attend to the decades of neglect that have contributed to this reality, little has been done to analyse and address the specific needs of women living in these communities.

"Far from providing protection, the police often subject women to illegal searches by male officers, abusive and discriminatory language and intimidation, especially when they attempt to intervene to protect a relative," said Tim Cahill.

Women who fight for justice on behalf of their sons or husbands end up on the frontline, facing further threats and harassment from the police.

"In the absence of the state, drug lords and gang leaders are the law in most shanty towns. They dispense punishment and protection and use women as trophies or bargaining tools," said Tim Cahill.

Used as "mules" or as decoys by drug gangs, women are seen as disposable by criminals and corrupt police officers alike.

Amnesty International heard stories of women having their heads shaven for infidelity, and being forced to provide sexual favours for the payment of debts. Growing numbers are ending up in Brazil's overcrowded, unsanitary prison system, subject to physical and psychological abuse – and in some cases rape.

The knock-on effects of crime and violence reverberate through entire communities, severely affecting the provision of basic services, such as healthcare and education. If local clinics fall within the territory of a rival gang, women can be forced to travel miles to see a doctor. Maternity services, crèches and schools can be closed for long periods because of police operations or criminal violence. Healthcare workers and teachers are often too scared to work in crime-blighted neighbourhoods.

Women in poor communities face incredible stress. As one said: “I live doped up. Take that diazepam to sleep. Because if I’m lucid I can’t sleep for the fear. Doped, I grab my daughter, throw myself on the floor to protect myself from the shooting, and sleep all night. If my daughter loses her dummy, she’s going to cry all night because once it’s eight o’clock I’m not leaving the house for anything.”

“The state violates the rights of these women in three ways. It supports policing practices that lead to killings, perpetuates a system that ensures access to justice is extremely difficult if not impossible, and condemns them to intense hardship,” said Tim Cahill.

The Brazilian state has introduced some positive initiatives, including strengthening the protection of women suffering from domestic violence through the introduction of the Maria da Penha law, which is yet to be fully implemented.

Far-reaching, long-term policies aimed at improving the lives of women living in marginalized communities are urgently needed to tackle violence against women. As a first step, Amnesty International called on the Brazilian federal government to integrate the needs of women into the new public security plan, the National Public Security and Citizenship Programme (Programa Nacional de Segurança Pública com Cidadania, PRONASCI).

### **Background information**

This report is based on interviews with women in six states – Bahia, Sergipe, Pernambuco, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and Rio Grande do Sul – carried out between 2006 and 2007.

For a copy of "Picking up the pieces – Women’s experience of urban violence in Brazil", please see: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AMR19/001/2008/en>