

AI Index: PRE 01/303/2008
27 November 2008

Haiti: No protection for girls against sexual violence

(Haiti) The government of Haiti is failing to protect the country's girls against rape and sexual violence, Amnesty International said today, as it launched a report calling for authorities to recognise the severity of the problem and to fulfil its duty to protect young women.

Fifty five per cent of the 105 rapes reported so far this year were of girls aged under 18. This is according to one of the few organizations which records the number of sexual attacks on women and girls. Last year the same organization recorded 58 per cent of rapes or sexual violence involving girls aged between 19 months and 18 years. Crucially, however, the real scale of the problem is not fully known because of a lack of central figures.

Amnesty International said the police unit in charge of protecting minors, the Minors' Protection Brigade (Brigade de Protection des Mineurs), is woefully under-staffed. In March 2008, the unit had only 12 officers to cover the entire country with not one vehicle at its disposal. If complaints are investigated, the organization said, the response of the justice system is weak and largely ineffectual.

"Sexual violence against girls, and in particular rape, is pervasive in Haiti and it can no longer be ignored," said Gerardo Ducos, Amnesty International's Caribbean Researcher.

"The Haitian government does not fulfil its obligations to protect girls. Given the lack of official help, it is perhaps not surprising that most of those who rape and attack girls are not brought to justice and are able to continue committing these crimes with no fear of punishment. For many girls, surviving sexual violence means keeping silent."

The organization said that, while widespread reports of groups of armed men raping women started under the military regime between 1991 and 1994, it has now become a common practice among gangs of young men, especially in the run up to Carnival each year.

While Amnesty International recognised the country's National Plan to Combat Violence Against Women as a step forward, it urged the Haitian authorities to implement it effectively and to fulfil their obligations under regional and international human rights law.

"We recognize that the government faces serious challenges. It is trying to strengthen development, good governance, and the rule of law - none of which could be fully achieved without the protection of girls' and women's rights," said Gerardo Ducos.

"Leaders must address the lack of confidence in the police and the justice system so girls can rely on them when they're seeking help and redress. There must also be a coordinated way to collect information across

Haiti to measure the nature and extent of violence against girls and women and to make these results public in both official languages. The government must not turn its back on the girls of Haiti."

Amnesty International is highlighting this sexual violence in Haiti as part of its Safe Schools for Girls project within the campaign Stop Violence Against Women. The Safe Schools for Girls project is founded on the belief that the violence that girls face as they pursue their education violates their fundamental human rights. If violence against school girls goes unpunished this sends out a message to other children and society at large that violence against women and girls is acceptable and that suffering violence in silence is the norm.

Background

This report '[*Don't Turn Your Back on Girls: Sexual violence against girls in Haiti*](#)' is based on research carried out by Amnesty International and interviews carried out during visits to Haiti by Amnesty International researchers in September 2007 and March 2008. Girls' names have been changed in this report in order to protect their privacy and ensure that their security is not compromised.

Haiti is one of the few countries in the Americas region which doesn't have specific legal provisions addressing domestic violence.

The report was launched as part of a series of workshops by Amnesty International representatives in Haiti, and as part of a global campaign of actions about women's rights, around Women Human Rights Defenders Day on 29 November 2008.

The [Stop Violence Against Women](#) campaign pushes for the implementation of existing laws that guarantee access to justice and services, calls for new laws to be enacted that will protect women's human rights, demands an end to laws that discriminate against women, and urges the ending of violence against women perpetrated by a state and its agents.

The Safe Schools for Girls project recognises that no violence against girls is justifiable and all such violence is preventable.

When girls are denied their right to education, this is often linked to other human rights violations. For example, if girls are denied their right to adequate housing by being forcibly evicted from their homes, they may not be able to attend school. If their right to the highest attainable standard of health is violated, for example if they are denied essential medication, this will adversely affect their educational opportunities. If girls are not protected from physical, psychological and sexual violence, the effect is to undermine their right to education, as well as their right to freedom from violence. Girls who are subjected to violence report that they have difficulty learning, find that their sense of self-worth is diminished, and may drop out of school altogether. Once they leave the formal education system, most will never return.

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