

Pakistan: Violence against women on the increase and still no protection

The Pakistani government is failing to protect women from increasing violence, in the home and community as well as in custody, Amnesty International said today in a new report.

In its fifth report on women in Pakistan, Amnesty International summarizes the current government's commitments to uphold women's rights, describes cases of abuses, the failure of the criminal justice system, and sets out recommendations.

"Domestic violence, which includes physical abuse, rape, acid throwing, burning and killing, is widespread in Pakistan. Few women make official complaints and those that do are often dismissed and sent back to their abusive husbands," Amnesty International said. "The law is not being applied equally and verdicts often reflect the gender bias of individual judges."

Very poor women, women from religious minorities and women bonded labourers are particularly vulnerable to violence in the community and home.

Acid-throwing is on the increase. Acid burns do not usually kill but result in hideous disfigurement and suffering, destruction of self-esteem, and confine women to the home. The government has done little to restrict the sale of acid or to punish those who use it to injure women.

Forced marriage of young girls continues to be reported and while slavery is illegal in Pakistan, girls and women continue to be traded to settle debts or conflicts. The open sale of girls and women in markets is reported in underdeveloped areas such as parts of Balochistan.

Pakistan is both a country of origin and a transit country for the trafficking of women for domestic labour, forced marriage and prostitution. This form of slavery is organized by crime networks that span South Asia. Some women, both local and trafficked, are killed if they refuse to earn money in prostitution.

"Honour" killings continue to be reported daily. In the higher levels of government and the judiciary, "honour" killings have been recognised as murder, yet there has been little effective action to prevent them from happening.

In March 2001, a 60-year-old widow, Hidayat Khatoon, and 55-year-old Baksh Ali were killed by the widow's son in Chandan village, district Sukkur. When the son surrendered to police, he said that he had been teased by villagers over his mother's alleged affair and had therefore killed both.

In November 2000, Mohammed Umar Magsi killed his 11-year-old daughter with an axe because he suspected her of having an affair. When his wife and younger daughter tried to intervene, he killed them as well. On 8 January 2001, Riaz Ahmed axed to death his wife, three daughters and two sons, because he suspected his wife of adultery. On 16 January 2002, Jamal

threw hand grenades into his father-in-law's house when his wife refused to return to him, killing five of her relatives and injuring eight.

The emergence of "fake honour" killings is a worrying new trend. There is a pattern of men accusing their wives of being dishonourable with wealthy men purely for financial gain. The wife is declared "kari" (black woman, one who brings shame) and is killed. The suspected man is then made to pay off the husband and is "pardoned".

Physical abuse of women in custody continues to be rife in Pakistan. Despite promises of police reform, police continue to use torture to intimidate, harass and humiliate detainees to extract money or information. Rape in custody is widespread.

"Amnesty International's recommendations are well within the powers of the Government of Pakistan to implement and do not require a huge investment of resources. They do require political will and the determination that violence against women is unacceptable and cannot be allowed to continue," Amnesty International said.

"However, underlying the abuses suffered by women is a discrimination perpetuated by society as a whole. In this regard, everyone has a role to play –government, political parties, religious groups, all elements of civil society and individuals. Everyone has a responsibility to commit themselves to the equality of all human beings, irrespective of gender."

Media briefing: www.web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/index/asa

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"Honour" killings are carried out by men who assume that their wives, daughters or sisters have in some way contravened norms relating to the behaviour of women which reflect on and damage a man's "honour". Often the grounds for such assumptions can be very flimsy and amount to nothing more than a suspicion about a woman's fidelity. Men are also known to have felt shamed if "their" women seek divorce or become the victims of rape.

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