



African Women's Day

Addressing Violence and Discrimination against Women and Girls in Nigeria is Urgent

Geneva-Lagos, 31 July 2009. On the occasion of African Women's Day, the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) and Media Rights Agenda wish to draw the attention of the Nigerian authorities to the urgent need to address the situation of women and girls victims of gender-based violence and discrimination, in particular sexual abuse.

Human rights violations are a global phenomenon. However, as a result of long standing discriminatory practices against women and the girl child and the non recognition of their rights as human rights, much remains to be done to eliminate laws and customs that violate their most fundamental human rights in Nigeria.

As a state party to the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights on Women's Rights in Africa (Maputo Protocol) and the United Nations Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Nigeria must adopt specific and comprehensive legislation protecting women and girls from violence, which should encompass preventive, protective, criminal, compensatory and rehabilitative measures. Moreover, pursuant to the Maputo Protocol and CEDAW, Nigeria has a positive duty to eliminate gender stereotypes that perpetuate discriminatory practices that violate women and girls' rights to dignity and integrity, such as female genital mutilation, widowhood harmful practices and early marriage, as well as sexual abuse, both in the public and private spheres.

OMCT and Media Rights Agenda are particularly appalled by allegations of sexual violence perpetrated against women by state agents. Nigerian prisons reportedly have a high number of HIV-positive and pregnant women, some of whom have allegedly been raped while in police custody and may have become pregnant or infected as a result of the rape.

Moreover, it has been reported that sexual violence by state agents also occurs outside of custodial settings. For instance, Ms. Queen Okoye was allegedly raped by three policemen from the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, SARS, of the Area 'G' Command, Ogba, Lagos, when she went to solicit police support to recover the money her boyfriend had borrowed from her. Thanks to the victim's protest on 24 January 2009 in a public area, which has drawn public attention, Area Commander, Mr. Mobolaji Odesanya, announced he would set up an investigation panel to investigate her allegation. However, no information on results of proceedings of an administrative or criminal nature has been made public.

OMCT and Media Rights Agenda call on the Nigerian authorities to set up an independent commission to thoroughly investigate into all allegations of sexual abuse at the hands of state officials, to bring those responsible to justice, to grant victims adequate compensation and access to free medical, psychological and social rehabilitation. In cases of pregnancy resulting from rape, women victims should be allowed to resort to safe abortion if they so wish.

Moreover, Nigerian parliamentarians should immediately address gender-based violence, by adopting the necessary laws, by granting the necessary financial resources for the implementation of preventive measures (including training of law enforcement, judicial, health and social service personnel and awareness-raising campaigns), access to legal assistance and shelters, and by establishing qualified, independent and well-resourced institutions to receive and handle complaints in a gender-sensitive manner.

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