

OP-ED: Witches, witchcraft and violence

When women, children, parents, elderly, physically or mentally disabled persons, church-goers, albinos and witches are all potential victims

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HRWF (31.10.2017) – While non-violent witchcraft and mystical elements fall under protection of freedom of religion or belief, there are however grave human rights violations linked to such beliefs.

The human rights violations surrounding witchcraft are two-fold.

In some communities witchcraft is something to be feared. Here, accusing innocent individuals of being witches, presents dangerous situations involving exorcisms, exiling, and killings.

Meanwhile, in other communities, where witchcraft is supported, self-proclaimed witches engage in the murder and mutilation of Albinos.

In both cases, national and international actors need to create solutions to protect both those who are incorrectly branded as witches, and those who are at risk of being victims of witchcraft.

Violent witch-hunts

Even before the famous Salem Witch Trials of the 17th century, people have been incorrectly labeled as witches, which can result in severe consequences.

Who is at risk?

Women, children, elderly people, and disabled people are specifically vulnerable for being labeled as witches.

Women can be branded as a witch for a multitude of reasons. Vice's channel Broadly visited a 'Witch Camp' in Ghana where women were sent to live if they were branded as such.

"Sometimes, a husband takes more wives than he can take care of," one local explained. "Occasionally, the wives don't get along and see the others as obstacles in the way of their children's wellbeing. And so they accuse each other of witchcraft. If somebody in the family or village gets sick, or if someone experiences some type of misfortune, they can accuse their foes of using dark magic, a juju, to cause their bad luck". [1]

Accusations, of course, are not driven by any proof but mere suspicion or hatred amongst social circles.

According to UNICEF children who have been orphaned, have had disagreements with step-parents, have a physical or psychological disorder, have shown unusual behavior (stubbornness, aggressiveness, laziness, etc.), or who have come from 'bad births' are at risk of being accused of witchcraft.

Some people truly believe the child is a witch, believing that they were the cause of someone's malaria, tuberculosis, or

even HIV and AIDS. The accused child can also be blamed for poverty, harvest failure or unemployment.

Girls can also be seen as being too seductive, and therefore are accused of being a witch.

Often times it is not the parents that have accused the child either, but other members of their community. The parents may stand up for their child, but then they also risk consequences, which sometimes are deadly.

What happens to those who are labeled as a 'witch'?

After being accused, consequences can range from being rejected from the community, undergoing exorcisms, to even being lynched.

The Met Police of London identified 60 cases of children being accused of witchcraft in London in 2015. Detective Sergeant Terry Sharpe reported that there was physical abuse, injuries and even homicides related to these accusations.

'Witch camps' are a common response in African communities that believe in witchcraft, as was the case in Ghana. In these camps, the accused are separated from their families and communities, and must live amongst each other, severely isolated and separated from others.

Children are also expelled from their families and communities. DINOedhjelp is one humanitarian organization that has created an orphanage in Nigeria that houses many children who were exiled from their families and communities for witchcraft.

Another response is to perform an exorcism.

Exorcisms can sometimes be distressing, violent, or even deadly.

In the past year alone, multiple cases of exorcism following the accusation of witchcraft have been discussed in the media including the death of a Nicaraguan woman, the beatings and torture of so-called Dalit women in India and the death of a woman during an exorcism that included tooth-removal in Zimbabwe.

Some believe that a number of these accusations are driven by churches. Debbie Ariyo, the founder of Africans Unite Against Child Abuse, claims there is a financial motivation for churches when accusing people of witchcraft.

“The pastor says there’s a witch in this church today; looks around and points to a child – that means public humiliation for the family,” Ariyo told the Daily Mail. “The next step is exorcism which is not done for free. It’s a money-making scam”.

But witch-hunts resulting in false accusations and sometimes fatal results are not the only type of violence to be discussed. People who identify themselves as witches can also cause harm.

Witches who hunt

Witchcraft is a wide-spread belief system that encompasses many varying practices and traditions around the world.

The issue of violence is not a common characteristic of practicing witches world-wide; this only concerns a minority in sub-Saharan Africa.

Here, medicinal and healing provisions and the administration of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ luck have fostered grave human rights violations. The main concern is the use of body parts from persons with albinism in these rituals.

The words ‘muti’ or ‘juju’ refer to types of traditional

medicine, potions, charms or amulets that are created from plants, animals or minerals by a person who has gained expertise in the field.

Sometimes, people believe that the muti or juju is more effective if it contains body parts of persons with albinism, or that drinking the blood of persons with albinism will give them magical power, prosperity or good luck.

People also believe that being present for the murder of a person with albinism can enhance the power of the related medicine, potion or amulet.

In 2016, a UN report stated that there were almost 500 cases of attacks (physical assault, murder, and sexual violence) against persons with albinism tied to witchcraft beliefs and practices across 26 countries. These numbers are particularly concerning as there are estimated to be only thousands or tens of thousands of persons with albinism in each country. And, these are only the reported cases.

Sometimes these attacks and murders are committed by witches, by organ traffickers, or by the 'clients' of the witches.

Many governments seem to be faltering in their efforts of protecting persons with albinism.

In Kenya, for example, media sources reported that even presidential candidates have visited witchdoctors in order to gain these violence-backed potions to gain political luck.

Other countries have adopted legislation to address the killings of persons with albinism, criminalizing witchcraft altogether. However, this is not an appropriate response, as it is the certain violent practices that are the problem, not the sole beliefs in witchcraft.

Earlier this month, the United Nations held its first workshop on the issue of witchcraft-related violence. Hopefully this

international attention will result in placing pressure on state leaders in sub-Saharan Africa and the production and dissemination of accurate information on albinism.

[1]

https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/3dxg4v/the-women-of-ghanas-witch-camps