

UNITED KINGDOM: Mother of three-year-old is first person convicted of FGM in UK

Ugandan woman from east London was accused of mutilating daughter in 2017

By Hannah Summers and Rebecca Ratcliffe

The Guardian (01.02.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2SmcJQT> – The mother of a three-year-old girl has become the first person to be found guilty of female genital mutilation (FGM) in the UK in a landmark case welcomed by campaigners.

The Ugandan woman, 37, and her Ghanaian partner, 43, both from Walthamstow, east London, were accused of cutting their daughter over the 2017 summer bank holiday.

While the parents were on bail, police searched the mother's home and found evidence of witchcraft, including spells aimed at silencing professionals involved in the case. Police found spells written inside 40 frozen limes and two ox tongues with screws embedded in them with the apparent aim of keeping police, social workers and lawyers quiet.



The 40 frozen limes containing spells aimed at silencing police, social workers officers and lawyers. Photograph: Metropolitan police/PA

The defendants, who cannot be identified for legal reasons, denied FGM and an alternative charge of failing to protect a girl from risk of genital mutilation. The mother cried in the dock as she was found guilty of FGM after the Old Bailey jury deliberated for less than a day. Her partner was cleared of all charges.

FGM was made illegal in the UK more than three decades ago but prosecutors have struggled to secure a conviction.

Lynette Woodrow, of the Crown Prosecution Service, said: "We can only imagine how much pain this vulnerable young girl suffered and how terrified she was. A three-year-old has no power to resist or fight back.

"Her mother then coached her to lie to the police so she wouldn't get caught but this ultimately failed. We will not hesitate to prosecute those who commit this sickening offence."

The National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) lead for FGM, Commander Ivan Balhatchet, said: "We have always been clear that prosecutions alone will not stop this abuse, however this guilty verdict sends a strong message that police will make every effort possible to pursue those committing this heinous crime."

Campaigners said they hoped the conviction would encourage other victims to report the crime.

Aneeta Prem, the founder of Freedom Charity, said: "It will give victims the confidence to come forward ... It will give police forces, social services, teachers, frontline midwives the expectation that something can finally succeed."

There have been three other trials involving FGM – two in

London and one in Bristol – all of which ended in acquittals. The crime carries a maximum prison sentence of 14 years.

The judge, Philippa Whipple, warned of a “lengthy” jail term as she remanded the woman in custody to be sentenced on 8 March. She told her: “You have been found guilty of a serious offence against your daughter.”

The two defendants were jointly accused of subjecting the girl to FGM by “deliberate cutting with a sharp instrument” at her mother’s home in the presence of her father. Medics raised the alarm when the girl was taken to Whipps Cross hospital in north London with severe bleeding and a surgeon concluded the child had been cut with a scalpel.

The defendants claimed their daughter had been reaching for a biscuit when she fell and cut herself on the edge of a kitchen cupboard. Medical experts confirmed the cause of her injuries were consistent with cutting rather than a fall.

The victim later told specially trained officers during a series of video interviews played to the court that she had been cut by a “witch”.

Leethen Bartholomew, the head of the National FGM Centre, said he hoped grassroots campaign groups would be given more support to train professionals.

“We know that FGM happens here in the UK and we didn’t need a

conviction to prove that," he said. "There is still a lack of services for survivors of FGM," he said, adding that the victim in the case must be given continual support.

Charlotte Proudman, a leading barrister who specialises in FGM, told the Guardian: "The conviction is hugely significant, securing justice for the girl but also in sending a strong message that this crime will not be tolerated."

She questioned if health workers were fulfilling their mandatory reporting duties, and highlighted a legal loophole that meant professionals only had to report cases in which children had already undergone FGM, rather than those also deemed to be at risk.

Leyla Hussein, a social activist and survivor of FGM, said she had mixed emotions about the conviction.

"We are sending out a strong message that children now come first," she said. "However, the sad thing is we could have helped that mother. That could have easily been me because 17 years ago I did not understand that FGM was wrong."

Hussein, who was born in Somalia and later emigrated to the UK, said it was not until she was 21 and her own daughter was two months old that a practice nurse raised the issue of her FGM.

"It's positive this girl got justice but as an FGM survivor I

can't help thinking the system failed her. Her mother has committed a crime and we need to be honest about that. But she could have been informed about FGM through her GP or midwife."

She explained: "My daughter was at risk, I was that mother. But a brilliant health professional did her job so I made sure my daughter wasn't cut. So I'm blaming teachers, health professionals and the whole system which has failed this child who will live with FGM for the rest of her life."

There are an estimated 137,000 women and girls living with FGM in England and Wales according to City University. The Home Office has identified women from countries including Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia and Nigeria as most at risk.

There have been 298 FGM protection orders issued since they were first introduced in 2015 to safeguard those at risk.

.....

If you want to be regularly informed about different violations of human rights in the world, click here for a free subscription to our newsletters!

Also:

**HRWF database of news and information on over 70 countries:
<http://hrwf.eu/newsletters/womens-rights-gender-equality/>**

**List of hundreds of documented cases of believers of various
faiths in 20**

countries: <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>

ETHIOPIA: ‘They believe I was cursed with blindness because God was angry’

Girls with disabilities in Ethiopia have been sexually assaulted and are feared for being under the spell of witchcraft.

By Ingrid Gercama and Nathalie Bertrams

Al Jazeera (24.09.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2Ikfbjn> – Newly elected Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has been praised for his recent negotiations culminating in peace with Eritrea, but still has to solve harsh realities at home.

Thousands of boys and girls with disabilities in Ethiopia are invisible in government statistics, unable to access health services, discriminated against by society and trapped in a cycle of poverty and violence.

A report from UNFPA and the Population Council highlights that one in every three girls living with disabilities has been sexually assaulted. They also face systematic and violent

abuse at home and in their communities; they're blamed for being different and feared because they're seen to be under the spell of witchcraft.

Eniyat Belete, 17, has been blind since birth. In her village, as in many other towns all over Ethiopia, disability comes with a heavy stigma.

"They believe I was cursed with blindness because God was angry," explains the teenager.

Fisseha Arage Haile, himself blind, works as a special needs and inclusive education expert for the South Gondar Zone Education Office.

He confirms that teenagers with disabilities are largely excluded from education, health and social welfare services. The Charities and Societies Proclamation (CSP) law makes it impossible for NGOs and other civil societies to operate in the country, which compounds the severe gap in service provision.

Specialised health and rehabilitation services are not accessible to the majority of the population and medical aids are expensive: crutches cost \$8 on average and a wheelchair costs \$224, unaffordable for most Ethiopians.

Only a fraction of children with disabilities are enrolled in formal education. Ethiopia, with a population over 100

million, only has 164 schools that serve students with hearing, visual and intellectual impairments. There are only two schools for students with autism, both of which are in Addis Ababa.

“There is still much work to be done until we can truly speak of an inclusive society,” Haile, an avid advocate of disability rights and changing the system from within, sighs: “As it is now, it is only inclusive by name.”

See the article ‘In Pictures’

.....

If you want to be regularly informed about different violations of human rights in the world, click here for a free subscription to our newsletters!

Also:

HRWF database of news and information on over 70 countries: <http://hrwf.eu/newsletters/womens-rights-gender-equality/>

List of hundreds of documented cases of believers of various faiths in 20 countries: <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>

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

By Lea Perekrests

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. DINOedhjaelp 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

4 Nepali Christians imprisoned for 'witchcraft' prayers released after 9 months

By Stoyan Zaimov

Christian Post (29.09.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2gJvkFF> – Four Nepali Christians who were sentenced for “violence and witchcraft” for praying with a mentally ill woman have been released after nine months in prison.

Persecution watchdog International Christian Concern, which led a petition in their name, reported on Wednesday that Lali Pun, Bimkali Budha, Ruplal Pariyar and his wife, Ganga, have all been released after their sentences were reversed.

“International Christian Concern is so pleased that this situation has reached its rightful resolution. However, the imprisonment of these Christians should have never taken place as the facts of their innocence were clear,” said Nate Lance, ICC’s advocacy manager.

“This is a step in the right direction for religious freedom in Nepal, but there is still much work to be done. No one should fear imprisonment for the free expression and practice of their religion.”

The Christians were convicted back in December after the father-in-law of Seti Pariyar, the mentally ill woman, accused them of abuse.

The father-in-law had reportedly brought the woman to a local church in hopes that prayers could heal her.

Pariyar apparently left the prayer service at the time, and was later found in a forest “harming herself and yelling before being taken home.”

Although Pariyar and her husband later testified in District Court that the Christians were not abusive toward her, with the woman even claiming that she had been healed, the four were still found guilty and sentenced to prison.

In August, the minority Christian population in Nepal found itself in fear of a government crackdown after the country’s parliament passed a bill criminalizing religious conversions and the “hurting of religious sentiment,” which critics say aims to restrict evangelism.

The U.K.-based Christian Solidarity Worldwide pointed out at the time that certain clauses in the bill are similar to controversial blasphemy laws in other countries, such as Pakistan, which are often used to target Christians and other minorities.

ICC described the wrongful imprisonment of the four Christians and the new anti-conversion laws as “Nepal’s continued backslide on issues of religious freedom.”

C.B. Gahatraj, general secretary of the Federation of National Christians, Nepal, told The Christian Post in January that

believers face a number of challenges in the country, such as a lack of burial land, forcing some to bury relatives hidden away in forests.

“When Christians die in Nepal, they have two pains. One is they suffer, they grieve because of their loved ones who are no more; secondly, they have no place to bury their loved ones,” Gahatraj told CP at the time.

“If Hindus find Christians buried in their area, they force Christians to dig them out from the graveyard, and bury the bodies in another place.”

.....

If you want to be regularly informed about different violations of human rights in the world, click here for a free subscription to our newsletters!

Also:

**HRWF database of news and information on over 70 countries: <http://hrwf.eu/newsletters/forb/>
List of hundreds of documented cases of believers of various faiths in 20 countries: <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>**

WORLD: The UN will hold its

first meeting to discuss witchcraft-related violence

Every year, thousands of people are accused of witchcraft and face persecution, abuse, and even death. Now the United Nations is organizing to defend victims of witch hunts.

By Caroline Kent

Broadly (19.09.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2wJfCw2> – In Ghana, women accused of witchcraft are hounded out of their communities and forced to live in isolated “witch camps”. They are the lucky ones.

All over the world, allegations of witchcraft can result in brutal torture, abduction, and murder. This month, a groundbreaking workshop will take place at the UN office in Geneva to discuss this kind of witchcraft-related abuses. It will be the first of its kind held by the international organization, and is the first discussion to take place at any international level.

According to the UN, reports of witch hunts are on the rise, and cases are becoming more violent and prevalent across the globe. Experts and academics hope that the conference will raise awareness of the phenomenon so that it can be better understood as a human rights problem and integrated into the UN’s approach to humanitarian issues.

“Witchcraft beliefs are encountered on virtually all continents,” explains Dr. Charlotte Baker, who launched the upcoming meeting with funding from Lancaster University. “Globally, witchcraft accusations and persecution have resulted in serious violations of human rights including beatings, banishment, cutting of body parts, amputation of limbs, torture and murder.”

Witch hunts haven't featured prominently on the radar of human rights organizations, in part because of the difficulty of defining what witchcraft actually means across different cultures. A spokesperson for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights told *Broadly*, "Statistics are not easy to come by, but it is known that every year, thousands of people are accused as witches, often abused, cast out of their families and communities and in many cases murdered."

Workshop co-organizer Gary Foxcroft is the executive director of the Witchcraft and Human Rights Network (WHRN), an international organization that seeks to highlight the rise in these violent witch hunts. "The failure of the international community to acknowledge the massive scale of these horrific human rights abuses has allowed them to spread like a virus across the world," he says.

Foxcroft explains that getting slapped with the charge of witchcraft is easier than it seems. "Job losses, illnesses, accidents, relationship breakdowns, and property damage can see a vulnerable person placed at the centre of a witch hunt," he says, "but it's estimated that around 70 percent of witchcraft accusations are triggered by public health problems, like the spread of infectious diseases. People look for someone to blame. It is almost exclusively the most vulnerable members of the community who are accused. Very rarely is it men."

The UN has identified women, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities as those most at risk of witch-related abuse. Foxcroft says that the violence can look different from country to country, from "elderly women being beaten, tortured, and killed in places like Kenya, Papua New Guinea, and India" to abuse in Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo, where it is "mainly children who are targeted." According to the WHRN, those with albinism, autism and Down's syndrome have been targeted by such accusations, while a claim

against an older woman is often used as an excuse to acquire her land and property.

What these cases share in common, however, is the startling lack of response from local judicial systems and the resulting impunity for the perpetrators. Branding someone a witch has historically been used to justify abuse, particularly by patriarchal religious leaders (see: the infamous Salem witch trials of the 1690s), and experts like Foxcroft believe that the spread of witchcraft-related human rights abuses is exacerbated once more by faith leaders who spread malevolent beliefs in witchcraft to exploit people or extract money from the fearful public.

According to a 2009 report from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the DRC alone is home to thousands of churches that make money off exorcisms. Despite the fact that the government outlawed accusations of witchcraft against minors in 2005, up to 50,000 children are still thought to be imprisoned in religious buildings awaiting deliverance ceremonies, where they may face abuse, torture, and potential death under the pretext of spiritual cleansing.

“Attackers are often driven by both financial gain and cultural, social, and spiritual contexts that facilitate the myths they propagate, such as the false notion that the body parts of people with albinism can produce wealth and good luck,” explains co-organizer Ikponwosa Ero, the first-ever UN independent expert on human rights for people with albinism.

Ero explains that there is a general lack of awareness that this is prevalent, and minimal understanding of what needs to be done to stop it. Positive change needs to involve both legal and cultural reform: “Law enforcement alone cannot eradicate beliefs,” Ero says, “but public discourse, social support for vulnerable people (e.g. those with albinism) and positive representations of their conditions, could.”

But with the sort of global shifts that can trigger witchcraft accusations—natural disasters, famine, war, and political unrest—seeming to occur with more frequency than ever, efforts to combat the persecution taking place in the wake desperately need to be stepped up. According to the 2009 UN report, these kind of crises can all too easily lead to “the collapse of community-based safety nets.”

“During these critical periods of indeterminacy, when old and new forms of social organizations are in a state of flux,” the report states. “The anxieties generated are most likely to be translated into societal fears and suspicions.” In Angola and the DRC, decades of conflict has caused the breakdown of community networks and families, contributing to the increase in witchcraft accusations against children.

The UN organizers hope that the event will help increase the understanding of witchcraft-related violence among everyone who has a part to play in stopping the abuse—from police and lawyers to national ambassadors and state legislators. Most importantly, Foxcroft says, it will be “the start of a longer process that looks to find the solutions needed to stop more innocent people being tortured and killed.”

.....

If you want to be regularly informed about different violations of human rights in the world, click here for a free subscription to our newsletters!

Also:

HRWF database of news and information on over 70 countries: <http://hrwf.eu/newsletters/human-rights-in-the-world/>

List of hundreds of documented cases of believers of various

faiths

in

20

countries: <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>