



United Nations Human Rights Council: 27th Session (8th – 26th September 2014)
Item 8 General Debate
Monday 22 September 2014
Speaker: BHA Representative, Amelia Cooper
Witchcraft allegations and persecution

Thank you Mr President.

I make this statement on behalf of the British Humanist Association and the Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network.

The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action prioritises the inherent worth of the individual, and has chapters dedicated to freedom from torture, the rights of the child, the rights of disabled persons and achieving equal status for women. It is rare that a specific genre of human rights violation can seamlessly undermine these seemingly disparate categories, rarer still to do so with impunity. However, witchcraft allegations (hereafter referred to as WAP) do exactly that.

Torture, one of the most *'atrocious violations against human dignity'*¹ is a typical consequence of WAP. It is used as punishment, under the guise of an exorcism from perceived witchcraft, or in eliciting a confession through a 'trial by ordeal'. A recent report on witchcraft accusations and persecution of women in Nepal detailed that *'those identified as witches are: "beaten with hands and fists, with implements, with stinging nettles, forcefully fed excreta, burned, blinded, and murdered."* Similar reported methods of torture are used in many countries where witchcraft belief and WAP prevails.²³

However, the perpetrators of WAP often act with impunity, whether they are family members or individuals, such as Nigerian pastors like Helen Ukpabio of the Liberty Gospel Church, who profit from promoting the belief in child witches and identifying individuals as 'witches',⁴ in what has become a lucrative trade. Such actions perpetuate public fear of witchcraft, and facilitate the continuation of this anachronistic practice.

The VDPA cannot be fully realized while WAP remains rife and unpunished. Accordingly we call for:

- The mainstreaming of WAP in to the discourse of the VDPA and its concomitant initiatives;
- The identification of solutions that put a stop to WAP;
- The prosecution of those responsible for such abuses, and
- Greater protection of those who are vulnerable to this abuse, including prevention through education at both the national and international level.

Thank you.

¹ Paragraph 55, the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action

² There have been numerous such cases reported in India, Kenya, Papua New Guinea, amongst others. For example see: The Global Mail, It's 2013 and They're Burning Witches (2013) available at <http://www.theglobalmail.org/feature/its-2013-and-theyre-burning-witches/558/>

³ P.5, http://www.whrin.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/2480903_nepal_report_FINAL.pdf

⁴ Ukpabio's preaching alone is reported to have 'contributed to the torture or abandonment of thousands of...children'
http://nytimes.com/2010/05/22/us/22beliefs.html?_r=0