



United Nations Human Rights Council: 27th Session (8th – 26th September 2014)

Panel: Ending Violence Against Children

Tuesday 16 September 2014

Speaker: BHA Representative, Amelia Cooper

Witchcraft accusations and persecution: ending violence against children

Thank you Mr Chair.

On behalf of the BHA and the Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network (WHRIN), I would like to thank the panel for the discussion's emphasis on the prevention and the need to end traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children/

The UN study on violence against children (A/HRC/61/299), referenced in 25/10¹, includes one definition of exorcisms and witchcraft as a 'harmful traditional practice'.² However, the harm wreaked by witchcraft accusations and persecution (or WAP)³, documented worldwide,⁴ has a far greater outreach than the victim alone.

The commercialisation of witchhunting, exorcisms, and deliverance has contributed to the proliferation of violence against children in many communities, which in turn **undermine broader efforts to combat violence against children.**

In Nigeria, despite legal provisions including the Child Rights Act⁵ and Chapter 20 of the Criminal Code,⁶ individuals such as the pastor Helen Ukpabio from the Libery Gospel Church have profited financially⁷ from promoting the belief in child witches. Ukpabio's preaching alone is reported to have 'contributed to the torture or abandonment of thousands of...children'⁸, [and numerous cases of children being set on fire, having acid poured over them, and being buried alive have been recorded in the region of Nigeria where her church is based.]⁹

Similarly, belief in malevolent spirits has led to a recent spate of child sacrifices in India¹⁰ and Uganda,¹¹ linked to the belief that the use of body parts, blood, or tissue will make traditional medicine stronger and more powerful.¹² [It must be noted that children with albinism are disproportionately affected by such killings.]

Legislative reform and real enforcement are necessary steps in eliminating child abuse resulting from WAP, [be that in decriminalising witchcraft, or in enforcing existing provisions]: in the current situation, 'to be labelled witch... is tantamount to being declared liable to be killed with impunity'.¹³

However, the roots of WAP lie in belief systems, which must be challenged through education and public enlightenment campaigns.

We therefore ask:

- The Panel, how, in their view, government programmes, educational and judicial systems can be best modified to protect child victims of WAP;
- The Council, that any subsequent report or panel on violence against children mainstreams WAP;
- And that the Council strengthens 25/10 through a targeted resolution to end WAP.

Thank you.

¹ A/HRC/25/L.15/Rev.1

² Other harmful traditional practices affecting children include blinding, scarring, burning, branding, violent initiation rites, fattening, forced marriage, so-called "honour" crimes, and dowry-related violence, exorcism or "witchcraft". Paragraph 46, p.14, A/61/299

³ Witchcraft Accusations and Persecution

⁴ Cases of WAP have been reported in Nepal, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Thailand, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, Islamic Republic of Iran, Syria, Bolivia, Guatemala, and Haiti (Alston, 2009; Foxcroft 2009; Schnoebelen 2009). Additionally, in Cameroon and the DRC (<http://www.worldpolicy.org/hunting-witches>); furthermore, murders have taken place in Europe linked to belief in witchcraft, including that of Kristy Bamu in the United Kingdom, 2010.

⁵ An Act to Provide and Protect the Right of the Nigerian Child, 2003 (also known as the Child Rights Act) http://www.unicef.org/nigeria/ng_lications_Child_Right_Act_2002.pdf

⁶ Chapter 20, Nigerian Criminal Code <http://www.nigeria-law.org/Criminal%20Code%20Act-PartIII-IV.htm#Chapter%2020>

⁷ While statistics are unavailable for the wealth that Ukpabio has amassed for her efforts, indicators of her wealth include the £500,000,000 libel suit that she has launched against her critics, including the BHA and WHRIN. She is seeking this money in damages, claiming that being misquoted as seen her Churches lose an equivalent amount of profits.

⁸ http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/22/us/22beliefs.html?_r=0

⁹ <http://www.steppingstonesnigeria.org.au/the-issues.html>

¹⁰ India has by far the highest proportion of such case and reports suggest that community members fear the practice may be spreading', p.5 http://www.whrin.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/WHRIN-UN-report_small-FINAL.pdf

¹¹ <http://www.whrin.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Child-Sacrifice-and-the-mutilation-of-children-in-Uganda.pdf>

¹² Ibid. p.31

¹³ Page 2, footnote 7, <http://www.unhcr.org/4981ca712.html>