

Concept Note

Side event to the 37th session of the Human Rights Council on: “Violence Against Children: Witchcraft Beliefs and Practices”

Background

Following up on the Expert Workshop¹ on witchcraft and human rights that took place in Geneva on 21 and 22 September 2017 and building on the work of the Independent Expert on the Enjoyment of Human Rights by Persons with Albinism and of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children on the protection of children from harmful practices, this side event will focus specifically on the impact of witchcraft beliefs and practices on children and how it often leads to violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation.

Belief in witchcraft is a deeply rooted reality, which is engrained in societies in all regions of the world and serves as a system of explanation of misfortune, as well as exploitation. It is often fuelled by misbeliefs in supernatural powers and misconceptions of public health issues. The Expert Workshop identified a wide variety of impact of witchcraft beliefs and practices amounting to serious human rights violations, including human trafficking, human sacrifice, violent attacks and mutilation as well as torture and killings. In this regard, many experts highlighted that the number of cases reported are often significantly lower than the reality, since many instances of these human rights violations go unreported or unmonitored by official entities. Furthermore, evidence suggests that these child rights abuses are at times spreading to areas which have never witnessed such harmful beliefs or practices before.

Being particularly vulnerable, children are often used as scapegoats for family or community misfortune and are victims of the violence associated with witchcraft beliefs and practices. As a result of fear and superstition, attacks against children are rarely reported and victims themselves do not know where to go and whom to call for help. Law enforcement officials may lack the needed training to deal with crimes related to witchcraft beliefs and practices and impunity prevails, despite the seriousness of these human rights abuses. In addition, children who survive the abuse as a result of being branded a witch rarely have access to redress, rehabilitation and social support. This has devastating lifelong consequences and impacts on their right to a healthy life and development, as well as to health, education and protection.

Early intervention to tackle risks, prevent violence and ensure the safeguarding of children’s rights is paramount. This includes supporting the protective role of families and working closely with religious and traditional leaders to prevent violence and protect children. Additional efforts are required for Member States to fully comply with international human rights standards protecting children against all forms of violence in private and public spheres. In this regard, the Convention on the Rights of the Child offers a clear framework to address violence against children, including those associated with harmful witchcraft beliefs and practices. Moreover, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides a unique opportunity to spearhead action at all levels to achieve target 5.3 to eliminate all harmful practices and 16.2 which calls for an end to all forms of violence against children in all countries.

¹Report of on the expert workshop on witchcraft and human rights A/HRC/37/57/Add.2, and for further information <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Albinism/Pages/Witchcraft.aspx>

Place and time

- Palais des Nations, Room XXV
- 7 March 2018, from 13.30 to 15.00

Organizers

- Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence against Children
- Independent Expert on the Enjoyment of Human Rights by Persons with Albinism

Panellists

- Ikponwosa Ero, Independent Expert on the Enjoyment of Human Rights by Persons with Albinism
- Marta Santos Pais, Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children
- Gary Foxcroft, Director, Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network
- Mardouche Yembi, Survivor of witchcraft accusation, Democratic Republic of Congo
 - Moderated by Mr. Karim Ghezraoui, Chief, Groups and Accountability Section, Special Procedures Branch, OHCHR
 - Opening remarks by State Sponsors

Objectives

- To continue the discussion started during the September Experts Workshop and address the violence associated with witchcraft beliefs and practices which affects children and impacts on their enjoyment of human rights
- To identify concrete steps and recommendations for effective prevention and response to these human rights violations
- To promote the further mainstreaming of this issue within the UN Human Rights System, and consolidate broader efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which seeks to eliminate all harmful practices and ensure that every child is protected from all forms of violence.

Participants

The side event is public and addressed to Member State representatives, UN actors and civil society organizations.

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