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**Statement for Witchcraft Accusations: Violence & Torture, Women & Children Panel**

**UN Commission on the Status of Women Session 59**

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Today, across the world, countless women, elderly people and children will face the horror of witchcraft accusations and persecution (WAP). In many ways, these could be considered to be the fortunate ones since those less fortunate may not still be alive. Women accused of witchcraft are beaten to death in India, mutilated in South Africa and Uganda, and burned alive in Papua New Guinea, while elderly women die in their burning houses in Kenya. Small children and even babies may be subjected to cruel treatment and violence because of these misguided beliefs.

Such beliefs may not be identical in form across all borders, but they resemble each other in that they lead to attacks, usually violent and often lethal, on the weaker members of society. Still, cases of WAP remain largely unrecognized—its extent and distribution is largely unknown.

Today also marks another important step in the fight to put a stop to such abhorrent practices and WHRIN wishes to warmly thank each of you attending this event for your participation and commitment to working on this challenging issue. We need to help make the world aware that the killings of women for witchcraft has not be consigned to the history books. Indeed, for all we know, more may be murdered today than any time before. We simply do not know the scale of this human tragedy and more, much more, needs to be done to better understand the scale and dimensions of these horrific human rights abuses.

The United Nations has a key role to play in combating this ongoing campaign of violence and terror against women, children and the elderly. However, there appears to be considerable reluctance to intervene in areas that impinge on people’s faith. While practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM), gender based violence (GBV) and the recruitment of child soldiers have been banned, and substantial funds have been invested in developing interventions to combat them, cases of WAP have slid beneath the radar. The fact that this issue is closely tied to religious beliefs and practices means that many in the international community fear being seen as contravening Article 18 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Article 18 guarantees freedom of belief, conscience, and religion. However, there must be greater understanding that this right does not supersede other human rights, such as the right to life, which is being violated daily across the world—largely because of the belief in witchcraft.

At the last UN panel to explore these issues at the 25th session of the Human Rights Council in 2013, WHRIN presented a report which documented over 400 cases of WAP in 41 countries of such abuses linked to beliefs in witchcraft, spirits, black magic, and other forms of evil. These cases represent the tip of the iceberg. Outside of Africa, witchcraft accusations and persecution of women are most prevalent in India, where accused women are shaved of body hair, daubed in paint, paraded naked through their community, and forced to eat excreta. As previously mentioned many, such as a 40-year-old widow, Laxmi Devi, are also murdered. She was suspected of using black magic to kill her neighbour’s son. When an exorcist confirmed this, the father of the boy waited for her to feed her cattle in a nearby field and strangled her to death. Similar cases are common in many parts of India.

Let us do more to understand why these abuses are still taking place, why so little is being done to stop them and why governments, UN bodies, NGOs and faith groups remain unaware and unresponsive. Let us do more to understand who the innocent people are that are affected by these practices, where they live and what is being done to protect them and prevent further abuses. Let us share our knowledge of what works and what doesn’t work to help stop further cases of WAP. Let us not lose hope that it is possible to do so.

The Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network (WHRIN) is a small NGO that is working hard to raise awareness of these issues, promote greater understanding and help provide solutions. We cannot hope to do so without your involvement and we implore you to visit our website – [www.whrin.org](http://www.whrin.org) – today and see how you may best be able to support our work.

Together we can place much more concerted pressure on governments, UN agencies, faith leaders, and civil society to ensure that the current scourge of WAP does not to continue. A global conference to convene key stakeholders working on the issue would be a good starting point here. Enacting and enforcing laws, improving literacy levels, and enabling access to public health may all contribute significantly to putting a stop to these forms of human rights abuses. We all need to play a more proactive role in bringing about this change and more compassion, stronger leadership, and greater courage are needed to confront this disturbing phenomenon.

Thank you all once more for providing this platform to share our thoughts with you and we look forward to hearing from you about the success of the day and more.