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Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the High Commissioner and the Secretary-General

Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development

Study on the situation of the violations and abuses of human rights rooted in harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks, as well as stigmatization

Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*

Summary

The present report is submitted pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 47/8 on the elimination of harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks. In it the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights depicts the severity of human rights violations and abuses rooted in harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks. It also describes the adverse human rights impacts on persons in vulnerable situations and the factors that affect their vulnerability. The Office concludes that additional efforts, including more comprehensive data gathering and further research, are needed to develop a greater understanding of the various aspects of this complex problem. It recommends a number of actions, such as developing comprehensive frameworks for prevention.

* Agreement was reached to publish the present report after the standard publication date owing to circumstances beyond the submitter's control.



Introduction

1. In its resolution 47/8, the Human Rights Council expressed concern that harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks had resulted in various forms of violence, including killings, mutilation, burning, coercion in trafficking of persons, torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment and stigmatization, particularly for persons in vulnerable situations, including women, children, persons with disabilities, older persons and persons with albinism, and that these forms of violence were often committed with impunity. In that regard, the Council requested the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to organize an expert consultation with States and other relevant stakeholders to help her Office prepare a study on the situation of the violations and abuses of human rights rooted in harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks, as well as stigmatization, and to inform further action by existing mechanisms at the United Nations.

2. The present report is submitted in pursuance of resolution 47/8. In accordance with the resolution, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) organized an expert consultation, held on 18 and 19 July 2022 in Geneva, including in-person and virtual participation of experts from the Secretariat and relevant bodies, regional and subregional organizations, international human rights mechanisms, national human rights institutions, non-governmental organizations and academia.

3. For the preparation of the study, and in addition to the expert consultations, OHCHR also solicited written inputs from relevant stakeholders, including Member States, United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, national human rights institutions and civil society organizations. As of 30 November 2022, 24 replies had been received, including 5 from Member States. Non-confidential submissions are available on the OHCHR website.¹ OHCHR also reviewed recent studies and research.

4. Human rights violations and abuses related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks occur in all parts of the world, although manifestations may vary.² Such human rights violations and abuses have increased over time, including during the coronavirus disease pandemic (COVID-19).³ Women have been disproportionately affected, including older women, widows, women with disabilities and mothers of children with albinism. Data on respective human rights violations is underreported, incomplete and diffused across various entities. The secretive nature of such incidents makes it even more difficult to track them systematically. While data is hard to source, at least 20,000 victims, across 60 countries were reported between 2009 and 2019.⁴

5. Reportedly, accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks take place more often in conflict and post-conflict situations, areas affected by natural disasters and environmental degradation, regions with economic and public health crises,⁵ and settings where internally displaced persons and refugees are found, including reintegration initiatives.⁶ Conflict, instability, intercommunal hostility and an absence of State authorities have reportedly increased the occurrence of such practices.⁷ In some countries, accusations of witchcraft have been identified as the most dominant triggers for the outbreak of intergroup armed violence.⁸ In others, militia have used young girls, in the front line of combat, “believed” to have the

¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2022/call-submission-written-contributions-elaboration-study-situation-violations>.

² A/HRC/37/57/Add.2, para. 68.

³ See https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Albinism/COVID-19_and_Harmful_Practices.pdf.

⁴ See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/ie-albinism/witchcraft-and-human-rights>, concept note on the elimination of harmful practices.

⁵ Health problems often associated with accusations of witchcraft include epilepsy, malaria and HIV/AIDS

⁶ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “Breaking the spell: responding to witchcraft accusations against children” (January 2011), pp. 10 and 12.

⁷ A/HRC/30/59, para. 57

⁸ A/HRC/23/49/Add.2, para. 39.

power to intercept the projectiles of firearms in their skirts, while older and better equipped militiamen, even with automatic weapons, were placed in the line of combat furthest back.⁹

6. In some countries, being labelled as a “witch” is tantamount to receiving a death sentence.¹⁰ The various forms of violence related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks are often committed with impunity, related to the victims’ fear of reprisal and the lack of a law enforcement response.¹¹ Perpetrators include individuals, such as relatives and local community members, and in some instances government security forces, or non-State armed groups.¹² Sometimes, belief in witchcraft is spread across all sections of society, affecting also police officers and judges. That reportedly results in an unwillingness to investigate and prosecute the perpetrators.¹³

I. International human rights framework

7. Human rights violations and abuses rooted in harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks, as well as stigmatization, fall within the normative scope of different articles in several universal human rights instruments.¹⁴ Most such human rights violations and abuses pertain to the right to equality and non-discrimination, the right to life, the right to be free from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, the right to liberty and security of person, the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health and the right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence.¹⁵

8. Human rights mechanisms have raised concerns with regard to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks. They include the Committee against Torture,¹⁶ the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women,¹⁷ the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination,¹⁸ the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,¹⁹ the Committee on Migrant Workers,²⁰ the Committee on the Rights of the Child,²¹ the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities,²² the Human Rights Committee,²³ the universal periodic review,²⁴ and special procedure mandate holders, including the Independent Experts on the enjoyment of human rights by persons with albinism²⁵ and on the enjoyment of all

⁹ Conference room paper of the team of international experts on the situation in Kasai, para. 63.

¹⁰ [A/HRC/11/2](#), para. 43.

¹¹ [A/HRC/41/42/Add.2](#), para. 47, and [A/HRC/14/24/Add.3](#), para. 91.

¹² [A/HRC/11/2/Add.3](#), paras. 49–51.

¹³ Help Age International “Using the law to tackle accusations of witchcraft: HelpAge International’s position”, 2011, p. 6.

¹⁴ These include the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the optional protocols thereto, the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and the optional protocol thereto, the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the optional protocol thereto, the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families and the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.

¹⁵ For example, articles 2, 19, 24 (3) and 37 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child provide a framework for addressing violence against children, including witchcraft-related harmful practices. See also [A/HRC/37/57/Add.2](#), para. 32.

¹⁶ See, for example [CAT/C/KEN/CO/3](#), paras. 35–36.

¹⁷ See, for example [CEDAW/C/NPL/CO/6](#), para. 18, [CEDAW/C/VUT/CO/4-5](#), paras. 20–21, [CEDAW/C/IND/CO/4-5](#), para. 20, and [CEDAW/C/PNG/CO/3](#), paras. 27–28.

¹⁸ See, for example, [CERD/C/BEN/CO/1-9](#), para. 29.

¹⁹ See, for example, [E/C.12/AGO/CO/3](#), para. 25.

²⁰ [CMW/C/HND/CO/1](#), para. 26.

²¹ See, for example, [CRC/C/GHA/CO/3-5](#), paras. 37–38, and [CRC/C/NGA/CO/3-4](#), paras. 67–68.

²² [CRPD/C/ZAF/CO/1](#), para.18, and [CRPD/C/KEN/CO/1](#), para. 19.

²³ See, for example, [CCPR/C/CAF/CO/3](#), paras.19, 20 and 23–24.

²⁴ See, for example, [A/HRC/46/6](#), para.103.138, and [A/HRC/29/12](#), para. 96.72–73.

²⁵ See, for example, [A/HRC/49/56](#) paras. 15–17, and [A/HRC/40/62/Add.3](#), para. 103.

human rights by older persons;²⁶ and the Special Rapporteurs on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions,²⁷ on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences,²⁸ on freedom of religion or belief,²⁹ and on violence against women, its causes and consequences;³⁰ as well as the Working Group on the issue of discrimination against women in law and in practice.³¹

9. Given that the requirement to effectively address harmful practices is among the core obligations of States parties under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, reservations to the articles prohibiting discrimination, requiring the elimination of prejudices and practices based on ideas of inferiority or superiority, ensuring equal property rights, guaranteeing the protection of children against violence and requiring the abolishment of traditional practices harmful to the health of children³² are incompatible with the objectives and purpose of the two Conventions and impermissible, pursuant to article 28 (2) of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence against Women and article 51 (2) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.³³

10. Revised joint general recommendation No. 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women/general comment No. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2019) includes accusations of witchcraft among harmful practices. The Committees note that harmful practices often involve violence and cause physical and/or psychological harm or suffering. The harm caused to the victims surpasses the immediate physical and mental consequences and often has the purpose or effect of impairing the recognition, enjoyment and exercise of human rights. Both Committees also emphasize that harmful practices have a negative impact on the dignity, physical, psychosocial and moral integrity, development, participation, health, education and economic and social status of victims. Victims seeking justice often face stigmatization and risk revictimization, harassment and possible retribution.³⁴

11. It should be noted that harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft include acts of violence, as well as discrimination that is harmful insofar as it results in negative consequences for individuals or groups, including physical, psychological, economic and social harm and/or violence and limitations on their capacity to participate fully in society or develop and reach their full potential.³⁵

12. With regard to the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, it is important to note that belief in witchcraft per se falls within the protective scope of article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, while any harmful manifestations fall within the scope of lawful limitations on that right.³⁶ In that context, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief has emphasized that “the serious harm inflicted on persons accused of witchcraft can never be justified” and that “if someone were to invoke the right to freedom of religion or belief in order to support harmful practices, such as the persecution and punishment of alleged witches, this would be a clear case for limiting the application of freedom of religion or belief”.³⁷ The General Assembly has also emphasized the need to address the misuse of religion or belief for ends inconsistent with the Charter of the United

²⁶ See, for example, [A/HRC/42/43/Add.2](#), paras. 46, 48, 53 and 96–98.

²⁷ See, for example, [A/HRC/14/24/Add.3](#), paras. 2, 88–89, 91 and 115.

²⁸ [A/HRC/45/8/Add.1](#), paras. 62–67 and 126.

²⁹ See, for example, [A/HRC/25/58/Add.1](#), paras. 40–42 and 58 (e).

³⁰ See, for example, [A/HRC/23/49/Add.2](#), paras. 31–40 and 64–66, and [A/HRC/41/42/Add.2](#), para. 47.

³¹ See, for example, [A/HRC/41/33](#), para. 28.

³² Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, arts. 2, 5 and 16, and Convention on the Rights of the Child, arts. 19 and 24 (3).

³³ Revised joint general recommendation No. 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women/general comment No. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2019), para. 14.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, para. 85.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, para. 16 (b).

³⁶ Article 18 (3) of the Covenant.

³⁷ [A/HRC/25/58/Add.1](#), paras. 40–42.

Nations, as well as other relevant instruments of the United Nations.³⁸ As emphasized during the expert consultation, cultural rights should not be used as justification for harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks.

13. The due diligence obligations of States to prevent witchcraft-related killings require Governments to take all available measures to prevent such crimes, including by actively countering harmful stereotyping, and prosecuting and punishing perpetrators, including private actors.³⁹ The Special Rapporteur on summary executions has also recommended treating witchcraft-related killings as hate crimes, demanding that States adopt additional legal, investigatory, sentencing and protection measures whenever there were suspicions that a killing could be related to witchcraft.⁴⁰ As noted by the Independent Expert on albinism, witchcraft itself should not be criminalized but ritual attacks and harmful acts related to accusations of witchcraft should be.⁴¹

II. Adverse human rights impacts

14. Accusations of witchcraft are often made to serve self-interest, explaining misfortunes and adverse events by identifying a scapegoat.⁴² Many cases are economically and personally motivated, triggered by envy, greed, personal dislikes, jealousy, rivalry or revenge.⁴³ In countries where witchcraft is practised, demand for body parts of persons with albinism reportedly increases prior to and during elections. As people who can afford the high prices of the body parts, business people and wealthy members of society are believed to be the ones fomenting ritual attacks.⁴⁴

15. Women, children, older persons, persons with disabilities, including persons with albinism, internally displaced persons, asylum seekers and refugees, victims of trafficking and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons are particularly vulnerable to human rights violations and abuses rooted in harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks. In most of the countries concerned, women and particularly older women are disproportionately impacted by accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks.⁴⁵ Many survivors have been forced to flee their homes, communities and countries, to seek protection.⁴⁶ Moreover, human rights defenders who have spoken out against these harmful practices put themselves at risk of attacks from community members and those who profit from such practices.⁴⁷

16. The relatives of persons accused of witchcraft are also often subjected to human rights violations and abuses.⁴⁸ Such cases often concern the offspring of a mother or a father accused of witchcraft, who, while not directly accused at that particular moment, may be persecuted because of their family association with the alleged “witch”. In that regard, some countries have granted refugee status to applicants, based on their association with

³⁸ General Assembly resolution 63/181, para. 16 (c).

³⁹ A/HRC/37/57/Add.2, para. 33, and A/HRC/11/2, para. 57.

⁴⁰ A/HRC/37/57/Add.2, para. 28.

⁴¹ A/75/170, para. 11.

⁴² See Claire Princess Ayelotan, “Interpretation of Mark 9:14–26 and child witchcraft discourses in transnational Yoruba Pentecostalism: a theological reflection”, *Practical Theology*, vol. 15, No. 6, (2022) and <https://www.met.police.uk/advice/advice-and-information/caa/child-abuse/faith-based-abuse/>.

⁴³ A/HRC/23/49/Add.2, para. 35.

⁴⁴ A/HRC/24/57, para. 29.

⁴⁵ See African Child Policy Forum, “Uncovering our hidden shame: addressing witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks in Africa” (2022), p. 11.

⁴⁶ International Bar Association, *‘Waiting to Disappear’: International and Regional Standards for the Protection and Promotion of the Human Rights of Persons with Albinism* (June 2017), p. 12.

⁴⁷ Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network, “21st century witchcraft: accusations and persecution” (2014), p. 6.

⁴⁸ A/HRC/11/2, para. 51.

witchcraft.⁴⁹ Although it appears that association with those accused of witchcraft has not been explicitly addressed by universal human rights mechanisms, it is important to monitor related human rights violations and abuses and raise concerns related to protection gaps.

Women and girls

17. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has noted that in some countries persistent patriarchal norms confine women to their reproductive role and legitimize harmful practices, including the accusation of witchcraft and the social exclusion of women and girls accused of practising witchcraft.⁵⁰ Reportedly, women who do not fulfil gender stereotypes, such as widows, childless or unmarried women, are at increased risk of accusations of witchcraft and systemic discrimination.⁵¹ Other marginalized groups include older women, women with disabilities, mothers of children with albinism, Indigenous women,⁵² women belonging to minorities and lower castes,⁵³ women of African descent and women of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions and sex characteristics.⁵⁴

18. Research indicates that women are more often subjected to accusations of witchcraft than men.⁵⁵ Women accused of witchcraft have been subjected to various forms of violence, including being beaten, burnt, stripped naked, raped, mutilated, buried alive and killed.⁵⁶ Owing to the grave consequences of such accusations in some countries, it has been suggested that emergency procedures be put in place to rescue and resettle women who are at risk of suffering witchcraft-related violence in their communities.⁵⁷ In some countries, women have also been detained on grounds of witchcraft or charlatanism, often on the pretext of protecting them from mob justice.⁵⁸ There are also instances of women, in some countries, who have been sent to “witch camps” through a system that lacks minimal due legal process and from which the possibility of returning to society is uncertain.⁵⁹

19. Several of the root causes of accusations of witchcraft targeting women were outlined during the expert consultation, including patriarchy, cultural beliefs and structural challenges of conflicts and poverty. Participants also discussed other factors related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks. For example, inheritance practices mean that widows and wives in polygamous marriages without children, or without sons, are vulnerable because in many cases the land, house and other properties will pass on to the husband’s sons from other wives or the nearest male relative. Competition over financial resources, for attention, looks or children may trigger accusations of witchcraft and lead to acts of violence as a result of jealousy. Illness and death in the family or local community, as well as other misfortunes, are key factors in triggering accusations of witchcraft against and ritual attacks on women. The arrival of strangers/newcomers in a local community may be another factor. Women’s

⁴⁹ See, for example, *Katabana v. Chairperson of the Standing Committee for Refugee Affairs and others*, South Africa, High Court, 14 December 2012, p. 20, available from https://www.refworld.org/cases,ZAF_HC,539ab5144.html.

⁵⁰ See, for example, *CEDAW/C/AGO/CO/7*, para. 23 (a); *CEDAW/C/UGA/CO/8-9*, para. 21; *CEDAW/C/LBR/CO/7-8*, para. 21; and *CEDAW/C/IND/CO/4-5*, para. 20.

⁵¹ See Olivia Jenkins and Eunice Agbenyadzi, “Evidence review on people accused of witchcraft in Ghana and Sub-Saharan Africa” (May 2022), p. 5, and Action Aid, “Condemned without trial: women and witchcraft in Ghana” (September 2012), p. 8.

⁵² *A/77/514*, para. 50.

⁵³ United Nations Nepal, “Literature review on harmful practices in Nepal” (January 2020), p. 14, and Tanvi Yadav “Witch hunting: a form of violence against Dalit women in India”, *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion*, vol. 1, No. 2 (October 2020).

⁵⁴ Khali Mofuoa and Mathabo Khau, “Rethinking constructions of difference: lessons from Lesotho’s Chief Mohlomi’s activism against the gendering of witchcraft”, *Educational Research for Social Change*, vol. 11, No. 1 (April 2022).

⁵⁵ African Child Policy Forum, “Uncovering our hidden shame: addressing witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks in Africa”, p. 11.

⁵⁶ See, for example, *CEDAW/C/VUT/CO/4-5*, *CEDAW/C/CAF/CO/1-5*, *CEDAW/C/PNG/CO/3*, *CAT/C/GHA/CO/1/1*, *A/HRC/23/49/Add.2*, *A/HRC/26/38/Add.1* and *CCPR/C/CAF/CO/3*, *A/HRC/23/49/Add.2*, para. 89 (s).

⁵⁸ *CCPR/C/CAF/CO/3*, paras. 23–24.

⁵⁹ *CAT/C/GHA/CO/1/1*, para. 23.

agency and assertion of rights may also trigger accusations of witchcraft against independent and empowered women.

20. Older women accused of witchcraft have been reported to be subject to imprisonment, forced starvation, damaging “exorcism” ceremonies, such as forcing them to ingest hazardous substances, such as cement, and having nails driven into their heads with the objective of extracting confessions of witchcraft and forcing the evil spirit out. In some countries, such women are abandoned by their own children, family and community members and often the State does not provide alternative care facilities.⁶⁰ Due to extreme fear of witch-hunting or reprisal attacks, those labelled as “witches” are exiled to the margins of their communities and forced to remain confined in “safe” spaces, living in deplorable conditions.⁶¹

21. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has stressed that States should combat all forms of discrimination and violence against older women accused of witchcraft, including intimidation, isolation, abuse and killings, as well as expulsions from their homes and families, and ensure that the perpetrators are prosecuted and adequately punished.⁶²

22. Mothers of children with albinism have also been accused of witchcraft for giving birth to a child with albinism.⁶³ In some countries women with albinism have been victims of killings, mutilation, burning, torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment and stigmatization, as well as sexual violence, arising from the belief that sexual intercourse with a woman or girl with albinism can cure HIV/AIDS.⁶⁴

23. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has emphasized the need to take immediate and effective measures to investigate incidents of violence against and murder of women and girls based on accusations of witchcraft, and prevent their reoccurrence in the future; arrest, prosecute and adequately punish the perpetrators of such acts; strengthen the enforcement of relevant legislation; and criminalize accusations of witchcraft, while repealing provisions criminalizing witchcraft per se.⁶⁵

24. The Committee has also stressed the importance of undertaking public education programmes highlighting the negative impact of accusations of witchcraft, targeting both men and women, as well as community and villages chiefs and religious leaders, and raising awareness, particularly in rural areas, of the criminal nature of such attacks.⁶⁶ It has also noted the need for special programmes that address the psychological trauma, physical harm, social exclusion and impoverishment of women accused of witchcraft, and allocate adequate resources to victim support structures.⁶⁷

Older persons

25. During the expert consultation, concerns were expressed about accusations of witchcraft against older persons, and particularly older women, resulting in detention, abuse, violence, neglect and even killing. Older people are particularly vulnerable, as witchcraft is often used as an explanation for dementia and other cognitive health conditions. As a result, their assets are often confiscated or destroyed.⁶⁸

26. Accusations of witchcraft also lead to the imprisonment of older people. For example, further to one of its country visits, the Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment “was struck” by the presence in

⁶⁰ See Friday A. Eboiyehi, “Convicted without evidence: elderly women and witchcraft accusations in contemporary Nigeria”, *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, vol. 18, No. 4 (August 2017).

⁶¹ [A/HRC/41/33](#), para. 28.

⁶² See, for example, [CEDAW/C/TZA/CO/7-8](#), [CEDAW/C/MWI/CO/7](#), [CEDAW/C/BFA/CO/6](#) and [CEDAW/C/KEN/CO/8](#).

⁶³ [A/71/255](#), para. 48.

⁶⁴ [A/HRC/24/57](#), para. 17.

⁶⁵ See, for example, [CEDAW/C/VUT/CO/4-5](#), [CEDAW/C/CAF/CO/1-5](#) and [CEDAW/C/MOZ/CO/3-5](#).

⁶⁶ See, for example, [CEDAW/C/AGO/CO/7](#), [CEDAW/C/TZA/CO/7-8](#) and [CEDAW/C/PNG/CO/3](#).

⁶⁷ See, for example, [CEDAW/C/BFA/CO/6](#), [CEDAW/C/PNG/CO/3](#) and [A/HRC/43/11](#).

⁶⁸ [A/HRC/42/43/Add.2](#), paras. 48, 96–97 and 113.

detention of persons of very advanced age, 80 years old or more, who were serving fairly long sentences for alleged acts of witchcraft. The Subcommittee emphasized that defining witchcraft and charlatanism as criminal offences and ruling on the physical evidence of such offences is problematic.⁶⁹

Children

27. The participants in the expert consultation discussed the vulnerability of children to harmful practices resulting from accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks. Child abuse linked to accusations of witchcraft is a “hidden crime” that is underreported. Such child abuse is not confined to one religion, nationality or ethnic group.⁷⁰ Cases of children being harmed, abused or killed owing to being accused of being witches or of witchcraft practices have been reported in many countries around the world.⁷¹ Estimates suggest that each year in Africa hundreds of thousands of children are victims of accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks, and consequently suffer grievous human rights violations and abuses. Accusations of witchcraft almost always inflict psychological and physical violence on children, and could inflict further harm, including neglect, homelessness, physical disability and even death.⁷²

28. There have also been reported cases of children being accused of witchcraft who are internally displaced, are refugees or are newly arrived refugees in some European countries. In cases of child protection concerns related to accusations of witchcraft, in some refugee camps the affected children and their parents have been transferred to other locations. In that context, it has been pointed out that children accused of witchcraft could be legitimately considered as members of a particular social group at risk of persecution, in a specific country of origin, enabling them to seek asylum in another country.⁷³

29. Accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks cause a number of violations of children’s rights, including torture, abuse, abandonment and even killing, as a result of such stigma and persecution.⁷⁴ The act of telling a child that they are a witch or possessed by an evil spirit can be also emotionally abusive.⁷⁵ The Committee on the Rights of the Child has emphasized in two of its general comments that accusations of witchcraft, including “exorcism” constitute harmful practices, violating children’s rights.⁷⁶

30. Children with disabilities, including albinism and those with neurological conditions (epilepsy) or mental impairments (autism, Down’s Syndrome); children whose births were considered unusual (for example, twins); orphans; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex children; children whose families suffered economic or other crises after their birth; children living in foster homes; children who are gifted or exhibiting challenging behaviour; and even children who are thoughtful or withdrawn may be at greater risks of accusations of witchcraft.⁷⁷

31. Recent research identified six distinct forms of violence and/or harm that can result from accusations of witchcraft against children. They include severe psychological harm,

⁶⁹ CAT/OP/BEN/3, para. 74.

⁷⁰ See Nathalie Bussien and others, “Breaking the spell: responding to witchcraft accusations against children” (January 2011).

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 1, and United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), “Children accused of witchcraft. An anthropological study of contemporary practices in Africa” (April 2010), p. 1.

⁷² African Child Policy Forum “Uncovering our hidden shame: addressing witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks in Africa”, pp. iv and 36.

⁷³ Bussien and others, “Breaking the spell: responding to witchcraft accusations against children”, pp. 15 and 22–23. See also European Asylum Support Office, “Guidance on membership of a particular social group” (March 2020), p. 23.

⁷⁴ See, for example, CRC/C/NGA/CO/3-4, CRC/C/AGO/CO/2-4 and CRC/C/GNB/CO/2-4.

⁷⁵ See <http://nationalfgmcentre.org.uk/calfb/>.

⁷⁶ General comment No. 13 (2011), para. 29, and revised joint general recommendation No. 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women/general comment No. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2019), para. 9.

⁷⁷ Manfred Nowak, *The United Nations Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty* (2019), pp. 284–285; UNICEF, “Children accused of witchcraft. An anthropological study of contemporary practices in Africa”, p. 2, and <https://www.met.police.uk/advice/advice-and-information/caa/child-abuse/faith-based-abuse/>.

physical violence, especially when carried out to elicit a “confession”, corporal punishment, ranging from relatively mild attacks to extreme assaults that cause permanent impairment or death, forcible administration of cleansing “medicines” and procedures, expulsion from family homes and communities, and murder.

32. It has been noted that in some countries local communities often do not consider an accused child as the victim. According to local beliefs, the real victim is the person who suffered the detrimental consequences of the act of witchcraft. As soon as a child has been accused of witchcraft, he or she is no longer considered a child, but a witch.⁷⁸ The act of violence against persons accused of witchcraft is interpreted as socially acceptable not only by the family and the local community, but also by police forces.⁷⁹

33. Accusations of witchcraft often result in “confessions” by the accused victim, hoping to obtain forgiveness and avoid further harm. Children are particularly susceptible to being forced to make false confessions.⁸⁰ Reportedly, in some cases, children died during activities designed to extract a confession of witchcraft.⁸¹ Such “confessions” also make children more vulnerable to, inter alia, physical violence, forcible “administration of cleansing medicines” and abandonment. In some countries, where witchcraft is punishable by law, this could result in children being convicted for practising witchcraft.⁸²

34. A child who has been accused of witchcraft remains stigmatized for life, even after being forced to go through various “cleansing” rituals. The child is stigmatized within the family, village or community, depriving him or her of social support. The possibility that he or she will be accused again remains high. Stigmatization and discrimination lead to trauma and psychological and emotional suffering. They also make it more difficult to reintegrate children into families and the social life of the community.⁸³ In some countries, there are significant numbers of children living on the streets owing to accusations of witchcraft, made either by their parents, extended family, neighbours, pastors or soothsayers. After being accused and abandoned, owing to the stigma the children could not return to their school, village or community.⁸⁴

35. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has urged Governments to take effective measures to prevent children from being accused of witchcraft, including strengthening public awareness-raising activities, focusing particularly on parents and religious leaders, and addressing the root causes of the phenomenon, including poverty.⁸⁵ Community awareness-raising is also needed to prevent the “normalization” of violence. For example, there has been a case of a five-year-old boy who killed a one-year-old boy in a ritual killing because he had seen family members do the same thing.⁸⁶

36. The Committee also highlighted the importance, in some cases, of implementing legislative and other measures to criminalize the persecution of children accused of witchcraft and bring to justice persons responsible for violence against and ill-treatment of children accused of witchcraft. The Committee also suggested that recovery and reintegration measures be provided for children who have been victims of such practices.⁸⁷ In that context, the Committee also highlighted the key roles of civil society organizations and traditional and community leaders in the effective elimination of accusations of witchcraft.⁸⁸

Persons with disabilities

37. During the expert consultation, it was also emphasized that persons with disabilities were vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks, and consequently suffered

⁷⁸ UNICEF, “Children accused of witchcraft”, p. 41.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ African Child Policy Forum, “Uncovering our hidden shame”, p. 41.

⁸¹ [CRC/C/NGA/CO/3-4](#), para. 67.

⁸² See, for example, [CRC/C/MRT/3-5](#), table on other punishable offences, p. 6.

⁸³ UNICEF, “Children accused of witchcraft”, p. 44.

⁸⁴ See, for example, [A/HRC/7/10/Add.4](#).

⁸⁵ See, for example, [CRC/C/COD/CO/3-5](#), para. 30.

⁸⁶ [A/HRC/37/57/Add.2](#), para. 37.

⁸⁷ [CRC/C/COD/CO/3-5](#), para. 30.

⁸⁸ [CRC/C/AGO/CO/2-4](#), para. 54.

discrimination, stigmatization, disinheritance, eviction, banishment from families and communities and violence, including beatings, burnings, sexual abuse, cutting of body parts, including amputation of limbs, torture and murder.

38. The link between witchcraft and disability has been described as twofold: there are widespread beliefs that impairments are caused by witchcraft and that people with disabilities may themselves be “witches”.⁸⁹ In that context, the Human Rights Council has acknowledged that persons with disabilities are vulnerable to various forms of violence related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks.⁹⁰ That vulnerability has been recognized within the framework of the common European asylum system of the European Union. For example, in 2019, an Italian court recognized the threat to a person with disabilities associated with witchcraft and granted refugee status to an applicant from the Gambia.⁹¹

39. In some countries, individuals with conditions such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, depression, epilepsy or Down’s Syndrome, have reportedly been kept in appalling conditions, often starved, beaten and chained, owing to a belief that they are controlled by evil spirits and demons.⁹²

40. The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has expressed concerns about the extreme forms of violence carried out against persons with disabilities, especially persons with albinism and children with psychosocial or intellectual impairments, including kidnappings, killings and attacks for witchcraft practices, and the absence of measures to prevent such crimes, protect the victims and prosecute and convict the perpetrators.⁹³

41. In some urban areas, beliefs linking disability with witchcraft have reportedly increased, with urban “witch doctors” promoting the belief that individuals and families can prosper socially and economically if they perform rituals or sacrifices involving the abuse, mutilation or killing of persons with disabilities. Such beliefs are reportedly reinforced by some media and churches. The belief that people with disabilities have been “cursed” can also lead families to abandon or isolate children and adults with disabilities, preventing them from accessing education, social and health-care services, and pushing them to seek support from spiritual healers, rather than health-care providers.⁹⁴ People with disabilities are also at higher risk of “confessing” actions related to witchcraft that they have not committed.⁹⁵

Persons with albinism

42. During the expert consultation, the participants discussed the increased vulnerability of persons with albinism, who are also persons with disabilities.⁹⁶ In some countries, the physical appearance of people with albinism has been the object of false beliefs influenced by superstition, witchcraft or both. Reportedly, witchcraft-related myths have resulted in acute marginalization, social exclusion and physical attacks. Related harmful practices against persons with albinism include killing, maiming, rape, grave robbery, trafficking in persons and trafficking in body parts.⁹⁷

⁸⁹ See Nora Groce and Julia McGeown, “Witchcraft, wealth and disability: reinterpretation of a folk belief in contemporary urban Africa” (2013).

⁹⁰ Human Rights Council resolution 47/8. See also [CRPD/C/ZAF/CO/1](#) para. 18, and Brigitte Rohwerder, “Disability stigma in developing countries”, Institute of Development Studies (May 2018), p. 11.

⁹¹ <https://www.asylumlawdatabase.eu/en/content/italy-refugee-status-granted-gambian-citizen-affected-serious-mental-illness>.

⁹² See Human Rights Watch, “*Like a Death Sentence*”: Abuses against Persons with Mental Disabilities in Ghana (2012) and European Asylum Support Office, *Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Medical Country of Origin Information Report* (August 2021).

⁹³ [CRPD/C/ZAF/CO/1](#), para. 18.

⁹⁴ Nora Groce and Julia McGeown, “Witchcraft, wealth and disability: reinterpretation of a folk belief in contemporary urban Africa”, p. 20.

⁹⁵ ActionAid, “Condemned without trial: women and witchcraft in Ghana”, p. 8.

⁹⁶ [A/HRC/49/56](#), para. 14.

⁹⁷ Ikponwosa Ero and others, *People with Albinism Worldwide: a Human Rights Perspective* (June 2021), p. 2.

43. It is very difficult to assess the real magnitude of the situation of human rights violations rooted in harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft against and ritual attacks on people with albinism. Such attacks are underreported, as the verification of cases is a challenge owing to the secret nature of witchcraft rituals, the inability and/or fear of victims and their families to report such incidents and the limited capacity of associations of persons with albinism to monitor human rights violations.⁹⁸

44. In some countries, there are beliefs that the body parts of persons with albinism possess magical powers capable of bringing good fortune and that these magical powers are more powerful if the victim screams during the amputation, so body parts are often cut live from victims. Children are even more vulnerable to such ritual attacks, as it is believed that their innocence enhances the potency of the magical powers. Also, they are easy to capture and do not have the physical strength to escape their attackers.⁹⁹ Body parts are not only used and traded locally but are often transported across borders to various countries where there is a reported demand.¹⁰⁰

45. Rituals involving the use of body parts of persons with albinism have been reportedly used by football teams, wrestlers and musicians. Similar practices have been reported for the purpose of winning an election, obtaining a job or promotion, or for business success.¹⁰¹ According to some civil society organizations, the demand for human body parts tends to increase in the lead-up to and during elections, thereby generating greater risks for persons with albinism during these periods.¹⁰² The African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child called on States parties to: “Identify and address the drivers and patterns of violent attacks, including seasonal risks such as those associated with elections”.¹⁰³

46. In the past, it was stated that “accusations of witchcraft constitute some of the most serious refugee protection problems encountered by UNHCR.”¹⁰⁴ In its guidance on working with persons with disabilities in forced displacement situations, UNHCR states that persons with albinism are frequently isolated and face significant protection risks, including sexual and gender-based violence.¹⁰⁵ The vulnerability and protection needs of persons with albinism have also been recognized within several asylum-seeking frameworks at regional and national level. In that regard, in its “Guidance on membership of a particular social group”, the European Asylum Support Office emphasizes that, depending on the context in the country of origin and on individual circumstances, persons with albinism may face the risk of serious human rights violations, including killing, torture or inhuman or degrading treatment, and severe discrimination and stigmatization that may amount to persecution.¹⁰⁶

47. Furthermore, the Asylum Support Office’s country guidance on Nigeria highlights several vulnerable groups, such as individuals with albinism, individuals accused of witchcraft and individuals fearing ritual killings, who might need protection and could be granted refugee status.¹⁰⁷ For example, France granted refugee status to a Nigerian woman who fled Nigeria after being blamed for the death of men in her clan because of her albinism. The court took into account the strong beliefs, traditions and customs relating to albinism in Nigeria, as well as the lack of protective measures for persons with albinism, in deciding that there was a real risk of persecution if she were to return to Nigeria.¹⁰⁸ Cases of persons with

⁹⁸ A/HRC/24/57, para. 9.

⁹⁹ A/HRC/24/57, para. 21.

¹⁰⁰ Under the Same Sun, “Children with albinism in Africa: murder mutilation and violence. A report on Tanzania with parallel references to other parts of sub-Saharan Africa” (2012).

¹⁰¹ A/71/255, para. 44.

¹⁰² A/HRC/24/57, para. 28.

¹⁰³ Resolution 19/2022 on the situation of children with albinism of the Working Group on Children with Disabilities of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

¹⁰⁴ See <https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2009/4/49dcb72/aid-worker-calls-action-protect-child-witches-abuse.html>.

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/manuals/4ec3c81c9/working-persons-disabilities-forced-displacement.html>, pp. 12 and 20.

¹⁰⁶ <https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EASO-Guidance-on%20MPSG-EN.pdf>.

¹⁰⁷ <https://euaa.europa.eu/publications/country-guidance-nigeria-october-2021>.

¹⁰⁸ <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Albinism/A-75-170-Addendum.pdf>, p. 15.

albinism who have been granted asylum have been documented in countries such as Belgium, Canada, Ireland, Israel, New Zealand, Spain, Tunisia, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America.¹⁰⁹

48. Mutilation of body parts of persons with albinism has been brought to the attention of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in two analogous communications. The first victim, Mr. X, had his left arm cut off, due to his albinism, while he was fetching firewood from the bush. The matter was reported to the police, but there has been no prosecution.¹¹⁰ In the second communication, the victim revealed that when he was 12, he was attacked by a man with a machete, who stole three of the fingers of his right hand. The State party initiated an investigation into the crime and three family members were detained and taken to court. During the following year, the Director of Public Prosecutions dropped the charges for lack of evidence.¹¹¹

49. In both cases, the victims pointed out that impunity characterizes most cases of violence perpetrated against persons with albinism, as the Tanzanian authorities consider that persons with albinism are linked to witchcraft and witchcraft is a cultural practice that is generally accepted, although many prejudices still prevail in society. In that regard, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities noted that the State party's authorities had not taken the necessary measures to ensure an effective, complete and impartial investigation and prosecution of the perpetrators, and that no preventive or protective measures had been implemented in that regard. Consequently, the Committee found that the United Republic of Tanzania had failed to fulfil its human rights obligations under several articles of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, including article 5 on equality and non-discrimination and article 15 on freedom from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. The Committee recalled the recommendations of the Independent Expert on albinism and required the State party to ensure that the practice of using body parts for witchcraft-related practices be adequately and unambiguously criminalized in domestic legislation.

50. The African Union plan of action to end attacks and other human rights violations against persons with albinism (2021–2031) emphasizes the importance of accountability, as well as other areas, such as prevention and protection. It highlights the need to improve criminal justice and calls on member States to investigate, prosecute and punish perpetrators and provide remedies diligently within a maximum period of three years; create adequately funded specialized courts with simplified procedures to address and fast-track issues of particular interest to persons with albinism; review, amend or repeal and implement laws ensuring equal access to justice; and provide support services to victims and survivors and their families, without waiting for legal remedies and procedures to conclude and notwithstanding the judgment rendered in the case in question.¹¹²

51. Women and children with albinism are particularly vulnerable to harmful practices as they are exposed to intersecting and multiple forms of discrimination. One of the most extreme consequences is infanticide. Reportedly parents have killed their babies born with albinism for being “witches” and because of fear that they bring bad luck.¹¹³ It has been noted that killings of children with albinism, perpetrated by traditional leaders and family members, often go unreported, as they usually occur at home, where most children in rural areas are born, and where family loyalty prevails over duty to report a crime.¹¹⁴ Children with albinism who have not been killed at birth are often taken to a traditional healer to be “healed” through various forms of violent exorcism.¹¹⁵ Children with albinism and their mothers are also sometimes subjected to verbal and physical abuse, abandonment by other family members, including the father of the child, or banishment from the community. When this is reported

¹⁰⁹ International Bar Association, “*Waiting to Disappear*”. *International and Regional Standards for the Protection of the Human Rights of Persons with Albinism*, p. 25.

¹¹⁰ *X v. United Republic of Tanzania*, (CRPD/C/18/D/22/2014), para. 2.2.

¹¹¹ *Y v. United Republic of Tanzania*, (CRPD/C/20/D/23/2014), paras. 2.4–2.6.

¹¹² See <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/AU-Plan-of-Action-EN.pdf>.

¹¹³ A/71/255 paras. 30–32, and A/HRC/34/59, para. 37.

¹¹⁴ Under the Same Sun, “Children with albinism in Africa: murder mutilation and violence”, p. 31.

¹¹⁵ A/HRC/34/59, para. 37.

to the police, law enforcement officers rarely consider banishment to be a crime or do not prioritize the matter for investigation.¹¹⁶

52. The Working Group on Children with Disabilities of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child has recognized the violent nature and continued prevalence of acts targeting children with albinism, such as ritual killing and maiming across the African region. In that regard, it has called on States parties to adopt an intersectoral approach to tackling attacks on children with albinism, involving the justice sector, immigration and border agencies, health professionals and the education sector, and ensure appropriate capacity-building of those sectors. It has also requested that States amend or adopt national laws to criminalize discriminatory and harmful practices targeting children with albinism, and ensure that those that qualify as crimes are prosecuted as hate crimes.¹¹⁷

53. The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has expressed concerns about the absence of measures to protect victims with albinism and to prosecute and convict perpetrators.¹¹⁸ States have an obligation to criminalize and investigate acts of violence against persons with albinism, and prosecute perpetrators. Criminalization alone is insufficient to combat harmful practices effectively. However, it is important to strengthen the legal response to killings of, and attacks on, persons with albinism as it could serve as a deterrent. States need to clarify ambiguities in laws relating to witchcraft and traditional health practices, including through the effective regulation of the licences of traditional healers and “witch doctors” and a clear ban on the use of harmful practices. Attacks on persons with albinism should also be considered as an aggravated form of the crime of physical violence, incurring a more severe punishment.¹¹⁹ The Independent Expert on albinism has pointed out that hate crimes can also be included under harmful practices against persons with albinism and called on Member States to criminalize attacks against persons with albinism as hate crimes, with appropriate sanctions, including albinism as a protected characteristic against discrimination.¹²⁰

Internally displaced persons, asylum seekers and refugees

54. During the expert consultation, participants pointed out that very often accusations of witchcraft lead to the displacement of victims, who decide to flee their home, community or country owing to a fear of violence and a lack of trust in the Government’s ability or willingness to protect them.

55. Reports indicate that accusations of witchcraft are a cause of internal displacement in various countries around the world. Numerous instances of such accusations have also been reported within refugee camps and among refugee populations, including cases of assault and arson linked to them.¹²¹ Such accusations can be made at any time, whether while travelling, in a camp or an urban refugee setting, during repatriation or once resettled.¹²² Accusations of witchcraft between the host community, refugees and internally displaced persons may undermine the process of integration or reintegration, and endanger the return of refugees and internally displaced persons.¹²³

56. Accusations of witchcraft have also been taken into consideration within the framework of the common European asylum system of the European Union. Protracted conflict, absence of authorities and the exacerbated insecurity of people in some countries

¹¹⁶ A/HRC/43/42, para. 78.

¹¹⁷ See resolution 19/2022 on the situation of children with albinism.

¹¹⁸ See, for example, CRPD/C/KEN/CO/1, paras. 19–20.

¹¹⁹ A/HRC/28/75, para. 63.

¹²⁰ A/HRC/49/56, paras. 81 and 83 (d).

¹²¹ Gary Foxcroft, “Witchcraft accusations: a protection concern for UNHCR and the wider humanitarian community?” (April 2009), sect. 6.1.

¹²² Jill Schnoebelen, “Witchcraft allegations, refugee protection and human rights: a review of the evidence”, p. 3.

¹²³ See Ana Dols García, “Armed groups, IHL and the invisible world: how spiritual beliefs shape warfare”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, No. 915 (January 2022).

may induce accusations of witchcraft.¹²⁴ It has been noted that the acts to which individuals accused of witchcraft could be exposed are of such a severe nature that they would amount to persecution (for example, killing and physical or sexual violence). During individual assessments, several circumstances of potential risk should be taken into consideration including area of origin, gender, age (children and elderly women are generally at a higher risk), relevant events in the local community, (including, for example, the death of a child or a miscarriage), visible disabilities, “unusual” behaviour or attributes, (including for example, being intersex), family status, for example widows or orphans, and infertility.¹²⁵

57. Some reports have emphasized that in addition to asylum being sought owing to direct accusations of witchcraft, it is also sought because of victims’ associations with witchcraft, based on their family ties with parents labelled as “witches”.¹²⁶ For example, a national of the Democratic Republic of the Congo was granted refugee status in South Africa, based on a “well-founded fear of being persecuted”. The applicant feared that he might be associated with his mother, who was killed because of allegations of witchcraft. The High Court of South Africa stated that allegations of witchcraft manifested a cause of great harassment and worse, injury and death to those who were subjected to such allegations. The Court pointed out that witchcraft was inextricably linked to the category of a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of religion. The Court noted that a return to his country, would condemn the applicant to an excruciating set of dangers which seemed wrong, unjust and unfair.¹²⁷

Victims of trafficking

58. Women and children accused of witchcraft are often displaced from their communities, with limited options for survival, making them more vulnerable to trafficking.¹²⁸ During the expert consultation, it was recalled that in some cases traffickers have instrumentalized “voodoo curses” (juju) to force women and girls into sexual exploitation. During oath-taking rituals, in which body parts such as fingernails, blood and/or pubic hairs are usually collected, the woman is made to swear to repay her debt, not to report to the police or reveal the identities of her traffickers. Fear of breaking the oath is so strong that it prevents victims from seeking help and cooperating with law enforcement. In that context, it has been pointed out that ensuring the support of the community and religious leaders is of paramount importance for effective prevention, including the eradication of “oath of secrecy” rituals linked to trafficking activities.¹²⁹

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons

59. In some countries, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons are victims of harmful practices due to beliefs that they are possessed by demons or that they are “witches”.¹³⁰ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex children, among others, are also vulnerable to abuses related to such accusations.¹³¹ Reportedly, many religious

¹²⁴ https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2063478/2021_10_Q37_EASO_COI_Query_Response_Sorcery_DRC.pdf, p. 3, and <https://trafig.eu/output/working-papers/trafig-working-paper-no-4>, p. 30.

¹²⁵ See https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/Country_Guidance_Nigeria_2021.pdf.

¹²⁶ Gary Foxcroft, “Witchcraft accusations: a protection concern for UNHCR and the wider humanitarian community?”, sect. 6.2.

¹²⁷ See *Katabana v. Chairperson of the Standing Committee for Refugee Affairs and others*.

¹²⁸ Gary Foxcroft, “Witchcraft accusations: a protection concern for UNHCR and the wider humanitarian community?”, sect. 6.6.

¹²⁹ A/HRC/41/46/Add.1, para. 71.

¹³⁰ See <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/10/07/every-day-i-live-fear/violence-and-discrimination-against-lgbt-people-el-salvador> and https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/Res/cameroon_lgbt_cat_loipr_tahr_ac_160620%202.pdf, para. 42.

¹³¹ <https://www.met.police.uk/advice/advice-and-information/caa/child-abuse/faith-based-abuse/>.

institutions describe homosexuality as a perversity and contribute substantively to the belief that homosexuality is a form of witchcraft.¹³²

III. Conclusions and recommendations

60. Human rights violations and abuses rooted in harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks, as well as stigmatization, are predominantly committed against persons in vulnerable situations, including women, children, older persons, persons with disabilities, persons with albinism, internally displaced persons, asylum seekers and refugees, victims of trafficking and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons. Women are disproportionately affected, including older women, widows, women with disabilities and mothers of children with albinism. Multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, including age, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, sex characteristics, disability, religion and ethnicity are threat multipliers.

61. The sense of mysticism and deep-seated secrecy surrounding this phenomenon has led to major underreporting of such incidents. There is a pressing need to collect more comprehensive data and develop a greater understanding of this phenomenon, including its prevalence, in order to prevent human rights violations related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks. Further research beyond the present study is also needed to review responses at different levels, including policy and legal measures and to identify promising practices with regard to prevention and protection.

62. It would also be beneficial to explore behavioural barriers that undermine the responses of national and local authorities to incidents involving accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks, and identify approaches to address those constraints. A comprehensive and consistent human rights approach to the issue must be applied systematically and reinforced by all stakeholders and at all levels, prioritizing the meaningful participation of victims and survivors, with a view to ensuring that any preventive action is effective and that they are protected.

63. Enactment of legislation alone is insufficient to combat harmful practices effectively. Legislative efforts need to be complemented with additional measures, such as systematic awareness-raising among the population and capacity-building initiatives for local authorities, the security forces, members of the judiciary and civil society actors to prevent and respond to harmful acts linked to accusations of and associations with witchcraft and ritual attacks, the provision of protection mechanisms for persons at risk and victims, including emergency procedures to rescue and resettle such individuals, and sustainable macroeconomic investments in programmes that promote gender equality throughout all sectors and decision-making processes, and address poverty reduction.

64. Effective empowerment of marginalized groups, including women and girls, in all their diversity is an important step towards meaningful discussions of measures that aim to prevent and address harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks. The full, equal and meaningful participation of victims and survivors in social dialogues and decision-making processes, at all levels, is fundamental for transformative change. It is also vital to ensure the meaningful engagement of traditional and religious leaders and faith-based actors, enabling them also to contribute to and benefit from awareness-raising initiatives. Paying attention to the local context is also critical.

¹³² UHAI EASHRI, "Landscape analysis of the human rights situation of lesbians, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex people and sex workers in the Democratic Republic of Congo" (2017), p. 31, and Redress, *Unequal Justice Accountability for Torture against LGBTIQ+ Persons in Africa* (2022), p. 63.

65. Recalling recommendations made by human rights treaty bodies, the universal periodic review and special procedure mandate holders, OHCHR recommends that States undertake the following actions:

(a) Develop and implement comprehensive frameworks, at national and local levels, focusing on the prevention of human rights violations and abuses rooted in harmful practices related to accusations of and associations with witchcraft and ritual attacks, as well as stigmatization. With a view to ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of such efforts, further research should be conducted on the design and implementation of policy and legal measures, including lessons learned from responses to hate crimes, prevention efforts, protective measures and responsive services;¹³³

(b) Address and promptly investigate human rights violations and abuses rooted in harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks, prosecute and adequately punish the perpetrators of such acts, and in that regard enhance the capacities of relevant stakeholders, including police officers, prosecutors and judges;

(c) Collect and publish information, including updated disaggregated data, exploring the behavioural barriers that prevent law enforcement officers from fulfilling their obligations to promptly investigate harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks, and identify strategic entry points for pilot interventions;

(d) Review and update relevant asylum policy guidance, including country guidance notes, to include all countries that have increased vulnerability to harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft, as well as associations with witchcraft and ritual attacks that potentially threaten the life and safety of persons in vulnerable situations, pushing them to flee their countries and seek asylum;

(e) Ensure that national authorities, as well as all human rights mechanisms, effectively address both human rights violations and abuses rooted in harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and to association with witchcraft;

(f) Conduct further research on prevention and responses, including an assessment of the risks related to a variety of settings, including conflict, intercommunal hostility, political and economic instability, elections, natural disasters, environmental degradation and public health crises;

(g) Ensure that authorities identify, document and disseminate promising practices for combating human rights violations and abuses rooted in harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks;

(h) Organize systematic awareness-raising campaigns targeting both men and women, as well as community and villages chiefs and religious leaders, particularly in rural areas, with a view to tackling the root causes of harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks, as well as stigmatization.

¹³³ Revised joint general recommendation No. 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women/general comment No. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2019), paras. 82–87.