



16 September 2022

Joint submission to the OHCHR 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.

The International Humanist and Ethical Union (“IHEU”, also known as Humanists International), has prepared this joint submission in consultation with the following of its members and associates: Advocacy for Alleged Witches (“AfAW”, headquartered in Nigeria), Humanists Malawi, the Social Development Foundation (“SDF”, headquartered in India) and Freedom Centre-Uganda (“FCU”).

IHEU is the global representative body of the humanist movement, uniting a diversity of non-religious organizations around the world. It currently has 130 member organizations located in all regions of the world. IHEU has held ECOSOC status as an NGO since 2000. It engages with UN mechanisms on human rights priorities based on humanist values, which include the right to freedom of expression, thought, conscience, religion or belief, the rights to equality and non-discrimination on the grounds of one’s race, caste, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity, reproductive rights, children’s rights, and the right to culture and science.

Key questions

I. Measures to ensure the elimination of harmful practices amounting to human rights violations related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks

1. What measures have been put in place, including legal and policy ones, to ensure the elimination of harmful practices amounting to human rights violations related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks, as well as stigmatization?

In Nigeria, the Criminal Code 2004 (Section 210) prohibits accusations of witchcraft against both adults and children.¹ In Awka Ibom state, specific legislation exists criminalizing the labeling of children as witches. However, as noted by **AfAW**, “these provisions are seldom invoked or enforced. There have even been cases² where State courts ruled and indicted the accused not the accusers.”³

According to **Humanists Malawi**, in Malawi there are “laws against owning human tissue which have helped in protecting people born with albinism, as their body parts are used for rituals in Malawi. Further, the Witchcraft Act⁴ also states that witchcraft does not exist and punishes anyone who accuses another of witchcraft or who calls a traditional doctor to cleanse witchcraft. However, there is currently a legal debate within Malawi, led by the Law Society, to change this law so that the State instead officially recognizes the existence of witchcraft, in line with ‘Malawian beliefs.’ Those pushing for the law to recognize the existence of witchcraft include actors such as the Malawi Law Society (a Constitutional body that recommends amendments to the Constitution), religious leaders (since the Bible says witchcraft exists), and common Malawians (they claim to have evidence of its existence).”⁵ **Humanists Malawi** argue that these legal changes would be a “policy set-back,” and will likely lead to the perpetuation of harmful myths and further victimization of those accused of ‘blood-sucking’ and other acts of witchcraft.⁶

Whilst in Uganda there exists a Witchcraft Act, created in 1957 to outlaw witchcraft in Uganda, the **FCU** reports that, “this law has done nothing to eliminate harmful practices amounting to human rights violations related to witchcraft”. Instead they observe that, “it promotes human rights violations against persons accused of witchcraft, by giving legitimacy to claims that witchcraft exists.” In 2020, the Prevention and Prohibition of Human Sacrifice Bill was introduced. It deals with ritual murders but does not apply specifically to persons accused of witchcraft. FCU has called for “the Ugandan government to pass legislation outlawing accusing someone of witchcraft as a specific offense.”⁷

According to **SDF**, in India, many individual States have legislation addressing witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks. This is the case in the States of Jharkhand, Maharashtra,⁸ Chhattisgarh,⁹ Assam,¹⁰ Bihar,¹¹

¹ <http://lawsfnigeria.placng.org/laws/C38.pdf>

² <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/01/strange-as-court-orders-adamawa-witches-to-heal-three-year-old-girl/>

³ Submission by AfAW to IHEU ahead of this joint submission to the OHCHR (September 2022)

⁴ Witchcraft Act Cap 7:02 of 1911

⁵ <https://mwnation.com/majority-want-legislation-to-criminalise-witchcraft/>

⁶ Submission by Humanists Malawi to IHEU ahead of this joint submission to the OHCHR (September 2022)

⁷ Submission by FCU to IHEU ahead of this joint submission to the OHCHR (September 2022)

⁸ The Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori practices and black magic Act, 2013.

⁹ The Chhattisgarh Tonahi Pratadna Nivaran Act of 2005

¹⁰ The Assam Witch Hunting (Prohibition, Prevention and Protection Act) 2015

¹¹ The Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act, 1999 .

Karnataka,¹² and Rajasthan¹³. However, no centralized legislation exists in India. Though an individual MP presented a bill in Parliament in 2010 there has since not been any progress in this regard. There is likewise a complete lack of State-wide awareness programmes to fight and eradicate belief in witchcraft or to help victims to recover from the consequences of witch-hunting.¹⁴

2. What measures have been undertaken to ensure that no one is deprived of the right to life, liberty or security of person because of religion or belief, and that no one is subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, or arbitrary arrest or detention on the account of accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks?

According to **Humanists Malawi**: “When someone has been accused and beaten, typically the police end up keeping the individual at the station to protect them from the community, which amounts to holding that person in detention for their own protection. The police currently take the leading part in community action where they negotiate with community and family members to have the accused brought back and reintegrated into the community. But from experience, they still face discrimination when they have been brought back.”¹⁵

3. What measures have been put in place to ensure equal access to justice, including effective remedy, as well as psychosocial support, rehabilitation and reintegration of survivors?

In Nigeria, **AfAW** reports that victims of witchcraft accusations experience difficulties accessing justice. It observes that whilst the law protects the accused and victims of witch persecutions and ritual attacks, “the challenge is in law enforcement and interpretation of the law by court officials. When victims try to use the existing laws, such efforts suffer delays and sometimes police and court officers compromise investigations and court processes after receiving bribes from the accusers or the victimizers. Police give excuses for refusing to arrest suspects or diligently investigate cases while courts adjourn the cases until the victims abandon the cases. In practice there are no effective measures to ensure equal access to justice. Poor and elderly persons with limited financial means are unable to report cases to the police and institute court actions. They cannot lobby or pressure politicians and access support and remedies.”¹⁶

Humanists Malawi similarly reports that: “There are no other clear measures apart from the policies and laws on remedy, psychosocial support, and rehabilitation. The challenge is that even the policy and lawmakers strongly believe that witchcraft exists and as such, they only pay lip service to the issues.”¹⁷

II. Accountability

1. What measures have been put in place to bring to justice all perpetrators of human rights violations related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks in compliance with applicable international law?

¹² The Karnataka Prevention and Eradication of Inhuman Evil practices and black magic Act, 2017.

¹³ The Rajasthan Women (Prevention and Protection from Atrocities) Bill, 2011

¹⁴ Submission by SDF to IHEU ahead of this joint submission to the OHCHR (September 2022)

¹⁵ Submission by Humanists Malawi to IHEU ahead of this joint submission to the OHCHR (September 2022)

¹⁶ Submission by AfAW to IHEU ahead of this joint submission to the OHCHR (September 2022)

¹⁷ Submission by Humanists Malawi to IHEU ahead of this joint submission to the OHCHR (September 2022)

N/A

2. Are there comprehensive accountability frameworks that go beyond criminal justice and courts?

AfAW makes reference to the existence of alternative dispute resolution mechanisms (with chiefs and human rights institutions) and out of court settlements. However, “due to the fact that abuses linked to witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks are usually perpetrated by those in stronger socioeconomic positions against those in weaker positions, these mechanisms are seldom explored and used. Perpetrators do whatever they can to ensure that justice is delayed and eventually denied.”¹⁸

FCU notes that informal traditional mechanisms are sometimes used to reconcile the accused with his or her family in Uganda.¹⁹

3. What measures have been put in place to ensure the full, effective and meaningful participation of victims, persons in vulnerable situations, including women, children, persons with disabilities, older persons and persons with albinism, as well as traditional and religious leaders, and faith-based actors in all stages of decision-making processes regarding elaboration and implementation of accountability measures at all levels?

N/A

III. Effective protection of all persons, particularly persons in vulnerable situations, including women, children, persons with disabilities, older persons and persons with albinism

1. What kind of measures have been put in place to prevent widespread discrimination, stigma, social exclusion and forced displacement experienced as a result of witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks?

N/A

2. What kind of measures, including safe shelters, psychosocial support and rehabilitation services, have been undertaken to ensure effective protection of victims of human rights violations rooted in harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks?

AfAW observes that whilst safe shelters exist in Nigeria, victims of witchcraft accusations often suffer discrimination within the shelters themselves when others become aware of the background to their case. In general, State facilities for support and rehabilitation are few and far apart.²⁰

¹⁸ Submission by AfAW to IHEU ahead of this joint submission to the OHCHR (September 2022)

¹⁹ Submission by FCU to IHEU ahead of this joint submission to the OHCHR (September 2022)

²⁰ Submission by AfAW to IHEU ahead of this joint submission to the OHCHR (September 2022)

FCU reports that, to its knowledge, there are no measures for shelter, psychosocial support and rehabilitation services to protect the victims.²¹

3. What kind of initiatives have been organized, focusing on, *inter alia*, gender equality, education, health, housing, livelihood, women's autonomy and decision-making, community mobilization and awareness raising, to prevent human rights violations rooted in harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks, particularly against persons in vulnerable situations, including women, children, persons with disabilities, older persons and persons with albinism?

N/A

4. Have you analysed human rights violations rooted in harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks, including key drivers, aggravating factors, such as unequal access to resources, poverty and socio-economic situations, climate change, humanitarian settings? If yes, what were the key findings?

Poverty and socio-economic conditions

The proliferation of witchcraft accusations is a distinctly modern phenomenon, dating back 10 - 20 years. Increasing globalization and poverty, leading to growing inequalities in wealth and power, are partially responsible.²² In States which have witnessed decades of corruption, civil war, state-sponsored and militant violence, and widespread human rights abuses, and where life in general remains unstable and unpredictable, 'witches' are simply an easy target to blame for the frequent misfortunes that befall families and communities. **Humanists Malawi** notes that "situational analysis of cases of witchcraft accusation tend to demonstrate that this is a form of persecution linked to unequal access to resources, poverty and socio-economic situation. Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world and this is why we see these sorts of attacks happen so often."²³

Natural disasters and other public health crises

A rise in superstitious beliefs and practices has also been linked to periods of social indeterminacy generated by natural calamities, bad weather, diseases, epidemics, deaths and similar public crises. The anxieties and fears generated by such moments feed into fears and suspicions which may be targeted at vulnerable members of society. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has noted that, in the context of Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, "decades of war have led to the breakdown of family and social networks, contributing to the increase in witchcraft accusations against children."²⁴ Economist Edward Miguel proposed an explanation of witchcraft allegations based on information gathered in western Tanzania. He found that "there are twice as many witch murders in years of extreme rainfall [resulting in drought or floods] as in other years. The victims are nearly all elderly women, typically killed by relatives." The rainfall led to poor harvests and near-famine conditions, which provided the impetus for "households near subsistence levels of consumption [to] kill (or expel) relatively

²¹ Submission by FCU to IHEU ahead of this joint submission to the OHCHR (September 2022)

²² S. Dehm and J. Millbank, *Witchcraft Accusations as Gendered Persecution in Refugee Law*, Social and Legal Studies (2019), available at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0964663917753725>

²³ Submission by Humanists Malawi to IHEU ahead of this joint submission to the OHCHR (September 2022)

²⁴ J. Schnoebelen, *Witchcraft allegations, refugee protection and human rights: a review of the evidence*, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2009), available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/4981ca712.pdf>

unproductive elderly household members to safeguard the nutritional status of other members, in response to negative income shocks.”²⁵

Lack of healthcare support and facilities

The prevalence of witch-hunting is also closely linked to a lack of healthcare in rural areas. In parts of India, “witches” are selected by traveling tantric “healers,” who make a living from selling cures and conducting purification ceremonies. The lack of nearby doctors and health services effectively means that consulting a traditional healer may be the only option for families seeking medical advice.

In areas with low healthcare coverage, those with mental health conditions and psychosocial disabilities, such as depression, epilepsy, psychosis or dementia, are more likely to face stigma. At the same time, those with mental health difficulties are also at increased risk of being accused of witchcraft, which stems from a lack of recognition or support for their mental health condition.²⁶

Exploitative faith leaders

Witchcraft accusations are also exploited and fuelled by the actions of prominent religious figures. A study from Nigeria has highlighted the role played by Christian fundamentalists connected to the Pentecostal Church in fuelling witchcraft accusations, particularly against children. It notes that “case data from Akwa Ibom State in the Niger Delta shows that in 31 percent of cases the child was accused of witchcraft by a pastor.”²⁷

The persecution of alleged witches is a lucrative business. Religious leaders are able to charge exorbitant fees for the performance of exorcisms, and trumpeting witchcraft accusations brings not only money but serves as a form of advertising, attracting new congregants and clients. Some religious figures have attained immense wealth and large followings as a result of their witch-hunting services.

SDF notes a similar phenomenon in India, where “numerous Babas have emerged who claim to have miraculous power and exploit the innocent people.” It observes that, “most of these Babas or Godmen have a powerful network of politicians behind them and hence it is difficult to publically challenge them. With the growth of right wing politics the miracle mongers have actually got legitimacy now and have become law themselves.”²⁸

Human Rights Watch has noted that, in a number of countries including the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Kenya, and Liberia, children with disabilities can face accusations of witchcraft and that, in March 2019, six people with mental health conditions, including three children, were chained to logs in a Christian faith healing center in Montserrado, Liberia because they were accused of witchcraft.²⁹

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ O. Jenkins, E. Agbenyadzi, *Evidence review on people accused of witchcraft in Ghana and Sub-Saharan Africa*, UK Aid Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 81 (May 2022), available at: <https://www.sddirect.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-07/Query%2081%20-%20Witchcraft%20Accusations.pdf>

²⁷ E. Secker, *Witchcraft stigmatization in Nigeria: Challenges and successes in the implementation of child rights*, International Social Work (2012), available at: <http://www.whrin.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Witchcraft-stigmatization-in-Nigeria.pdf>

²⁸ Submission by SDF to IHEU ahead of this joint submission to the OHCHR (September 2022)

²⁹ Human Rights Watch, *Living in Chains: Shackling of People with Psychosocial Disabilities Worldwide*, October 2020, available at: https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/10/06/living-chains/shackling-people-psychosocial-disabilities-worldwide#_ftn48

Gendered nature of accusations

Entrenched patriarchal beliefs play a significant role in the practice of witch hunts. For a woman, the most dangerous situation in a society with witchcraft beliefs is to be viewed as transgressive of the cultural norm. Witch-hunting is essentially a legacy of violence against women in our society. Older women, widows, women who belong to a lower caste and children, are particularly vulnerable to persecution, particularly if they live on land by themselves.

As Dr. Leo Igwe, founder of **AfAW**, has said, “Witchcraft accusations have a female face in Africa. The accused are predominantly elderly women, or widows. Witchcraft accusers usually target persons in weak socio-political positions, and widows populate this segment of the society. When women lose their husbands, they become vulnerable and prone to being accused and persecuted for witchcraft. There have been cases where widows have been accused and subsequently attacked and killed in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Malawi, Zambia, etc.”³⁰

In the case of Uganda, **FCU** reports that “witchcraft accusations against older women are often instigated by family members, due to the low value placed on them within polygynous family systems. A majority of accusations are made by men, husbands, in-laws, children, and fellow co-wives as a pretext to banish them from their households and communities. Child mortality, miscarriage of pregnant women, eccentric behaviour, and outliving a husband are also key drivers for witchcraft accusations. We have analyzed that this unlawful violence is triggered by a few actors who serve as the accuser, judge and executor. These violations can be described as a sexist device, a weapon of power, socio- economic and a mechanism for the oppression of females who are in weak socio-cultural positions in patriarchal societies.”³¹

Relatedly, research by Ghanaian NGO Songtaba found that far fewer men are accused of witchcraft and those that are, often do not face the same mistreatment. If a man is believed to have magical powers, they are less likely to be accused as the community may be afraid of them. As they have more power in the community, a belief that they also have a magical power is not so irreconcilable with their community role.³²

IV. Data collection

1. Have you collected disaggregated data, based on gender, age, disability, ethnicity, religion etc. about human rights violations and abuses rooted in harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks, as well as stigmatization? How such data is collected? Please share available disaggregated data on the phenomenon.

Please refer to Appendix I: AfAW List of Cases. This log documents the cases of witchcraft-related abuse in which AfAW has intervened in between 2020-2022. The log details the characteristics of the victim and the nature of its intervention in each case. The list is being updated on an ongoing basis.

³⁰ <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2022/06/intl-widows-day-2022-stop-accusing-widows-as-witches-group-begs-nigeria-other-africans/>

³¹ Submission by FCU to IHEU ahead of this joint submission to the OHCHR (September 2022)

³² Songtaba Ghana, *Prevalence of Depression, Quality of Life and Gender Dynamics of Women Accused of Witchcraft in Northern and North East Regions of Ghana* (February 2022), available at: <https://www.songtaba.org/wp-content/uploads/Songtaba-Report-2.pdf>

V. Challenges and opportunities

1. What have been the key challenges to prevent and address human rights violations and abuses rooted in harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks, as well as stigmatization?

Poor enforcement of laws, often as a result of the widespread belief in witchcraft

Very few countries have the right legislation in place to monitor and tackle witchcraft abuses. Where legislation does exist, weak judicial systems often fail to prevent, investigate or prosecute abuses, in part because these crimes frequently occur in deprived areas where enforcement of the law is already weak, and the victims are often children or the socially ostracized. As noted by **Humanists Malawi** and **AfAW**, the deep-rooted belief in witchcraft itself presents a significant barrier, as witnesses and officials can be unwilling to play a role in investigations for fear of being seen as ‘protecting’ an accused witch.

Institutional weakness (including corruption at the level of police and judiciary), and a general lack of comprehensive strategies to address or understand underlying causes

Relying on a purely legislative approach to address the harms associated with a cultural phenomenon, such as witchcraft, insufficiently tackles the root causes of the problem. Criminalizing superstitious practices is just one dimension of the problem.

As noted by **FCU**, laws in Uganda which outlaw the practice of witchcraft itself are problematic because they provide legitimacy from the State that witchcraft exists, and do not provide any forms of protection to those accused of practicing witchcraft.

Notably, in Malawi at least one prominent member of Government has actually *endorsed* the persecution of witches. In 2017, Malawi’s President Peter Mutharika made a call to village chiefs to “stamp down” on witchcraft, at the same time as mob violence against suspected “vampires” in two districts resulted in the deaths of six people.³³

In the context of India, **SDF** notes that many actors involved in humanitarian work, including NGOs, lack understanding of how witchcraft accusations are connected to patriarchal norms and caste-based discrimination and this limits their effectiveness. **SDF** notes that “most of the cases of women being declared as ‘dayan’ or witch, are indirectly or directly related to land and property cases or where a woman has exercised her choice in rejecting the demand to provide ‘sexual’ favours to any one demanding it from her.”³⁴

Lack of healthcare and specifically mental health support

Victims of witchcraft persecution have complex needs, particularly pertaining to mental health. **SDF** notes that, “while the provision of legal aid is extremely important, mental health support is often overlooked. Mental health issues are already highly stigmatized in our society and sometimes give rise to witchcraft

³³ https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-malawi-violence/malawi-president-to-crack-down-on-vampires-witchcraft-after-lynchings-idUKKBN1C125Z?fbclid=IwAR2W0uqIT3wJ5mbGcCg4fNude_GwmRpMGq4AOx1MkyACTZW2rrfnWJcDleo

³⁴ Submission by SDF to IHEU ahead of this joint submission to the OHCHR (September 2022)

accusations themselves. There remains little awareness of this issue or sensitization among local authorities, particularly schools and colleges, medical staff, government officials”³⁵

Similarly, **Humanists Malawi** notes that witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks “are not part of the mainstream discussion when it comes to issues of mental health.”³⁶

Conflation of advocacy against beliefs associated with harmful witchcraft accusations with the ‘imposition of foreign values’

Arguments around anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism are sometimes appropriated by anti-rights actors to delegitimize the work of advocates against witchcraft-related persecution and to shut down criticism of related harmful practices. This is a trend that has been noted in the context of resistance to LGBTI+ rights and advocacy, with certain religious leaders and anti-rights actors in African and Caribbean States painting LGBTI+ rights as ‘Western’ import, despite many bans on same-sex relations having their origins in colonial era laws.³⁷

The deployment of references to ‘Western vs African values’, imperialism, culture and religion to undermine human rights and equality renders the work of local activists who conduct anti-witchcraft advocacy more difficult. For fear of attracting criticism, governments may also be reluctant to become involved in or speak out about the issue publicly, including at the UN.

Universal human rights values, principles and language provide an effective means of challenging human rights abuses associated with witchcraft superstition, but in order to be effective it is essential that human rights are seen not as imposed from an external source, but as truly universal and accepted as meaningful from within communities themselves.

2. Have you identified some promising practices in this regard?

A study on ‘witch camps’ in Ghana from 2022 has found that the majority of witch-camp residents (73.3%) want to return to their families and be reintegrated into their communities.³⁸ If the reintegration of formerly accused witches is to be successful and sustainable, and for them to return home without fear of future retribution, the root causes of the poverty and exclusion of people at risk need to be addressed in a holistic manner by the State.

An example of good practice in this regard is the 2015 Sorcery and Witchcraft Accusation Related Violence National Action Plan in Papua New Guinea, which beyond criminalizing witchcraft accusations, also covers services (counseling, health sector and child protection), prevention through advocacy and communications, research, as well as legal protection and prosecution. The action plan is supported by local NGOs who have helped to establish crisis support services and to run programmes promoting peaceful conflict resolution in areas where government services are limited.³⁹

³⁵ Response to consultation from Social Development Foundation, India

³⁶ Submission by Humanists Malawi to IHEU ahead of this joint submission to the OHCHR (September 2022)

³⁷ <https://www.oursplatform.org/wp-content/uploads/Rights-at-Risk-OURS-ch2.pdf>

³⁸ Songtaba Ghana, *Prevalence of Depression, Quality of Life and Gender Dynamics of Women Accused of Witchcraft in Northern and North East Regions of Ghana* (February 2022), available at: <https://www.songtaba.org/wp-content/uploads/Songtaba-Report-2.pdf>

³⁹ <https://www.dfat.gov.au/news/news/Pages/supporting-the-png-government-to-end-sorcery-accusation-related-violence>

Many humanist organizations have been at the forefront of running educational programmes (both formal and informal) which build critical thinking skills and scientific literacy as a means of challenging harmful superstitions.⁴⁰ This includes **FCU**, who have conducted awareness raising programmes among community leaders, traditional and cultural leaders and the general public.⁴¹ Similarly, **SDF**, reports that they have carried out campaigns throughout India, and particularly among marginalized communities of Dalits and Adivasis, seeking to promote “develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform,”⁴² which is a fundamental duty of all citizens under the Indian Constitution (Art. 51A).

AfAW carries out direct advocacy interventions in individual cases of witchcraft accusation (see Appendix I), notably in instances where local justice systems are lacking. Its work has included helping to provide safe shelter and funds for the accused, issuing public condemnations and advocating for authorities to take action to stop the persecution and trial by ordeal of an alleged witch, as well as to report and sanction ‘faith healers’ and community leaders condoning such practices. For example, in Cross River State, **AfAW** called for the arrest and prosecution of a local advisor to the governor, Thomas Obi Tawo, who had ordered the burning of 20 alleged ‘witches’. **AfAW** lobbied for the government to compensate the victims in the case.⁴³

AfAW has also underlined the need for stronger media literacy in Africa, as popular media frequently publishes views that reinforce belief in witchcraft and magical thinking. **AfAW** advocates have visited media agencies across Nigeria to inform them about its mission and vision, visits which sometimes include debates with journalists on the existence or non-existence of witches.⁴⁴

FCU report that they have also conducted direct advocacy interventions to assist those accused of witchcraft, and run programmes supporting family reintegration and strengthening violence prevention mechanisms, providing livelihood enhancing incentives, and legal and psychosocial support to victims of witchcraft accusations.⁴⁵

3. What kind of further action could be undertaken by existing mechanisms at the United Nations for the elimination of harmful practices amounting to human rights violations related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks, as well as stigmatization?

Encourage States to design a relevant national action plan in consultation with civil society activists

The approval of the UN resolution on the elimination of harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks at the 47th session of the UN Human Rights Council (A/HRC/47/L.9) provides, for the first time, an international human rights framework for States and regional organizations to develop and implement national policy measures aimed at eliminating witchcraft accusations and the harmful superstitions that give rise to them.

⁴⁰ <https://humanists.international/2022/03/at-un-humanists-highlight-role-of-critical-thinking-in-combating-harmful-superstitious-attitudes-towards-persons-with-albinism/>

⁴¹ Submission by FCU to IHEU ahead of this joint submission to the OHCHR (September 2022)

⁴² Submission by SDF to IHEU ahead of this joint submission to the OHCHR (September 2022)

⁴³ <https://www.modernghana.com/news/1034395/quarterly-report-advocacy-for-alleged-witches.html>

⁴⁴ <https://newhumanist.org.uk/articles/5616/call-witchcraft-belief-in-africa-by-its-name-superstition>

⁴⁵ Submission by FCU to IHEU ahead of this joint submission to the OHCHR (September 2022)

The UN should clearly signal to States that legislation criminalizing witchcraft accusations is not enough. We would like to see the UN and relevant Special Procedures encourage States to use the framework of Resolution A/HRC/47/L.9, and the results of the upcoming report by the OHCHR, to design responsive programmes that tackle the root causes of violence associated with witchcraft and ritual attacks, with a specific focus on socio-economic rights, including improving access to healthcare, poverty reduction, building community resilience to environmental disasters and the promotion of education for all.

The design of programmes and national action plans should invite the contribution of local human rights advocates campaigning to end ‘witch’ persecution, and must involve the communities most affected by these rights violations.

Recognize the importance of education as a fundamental means of empowering communities to reject harmful superstitions leading to witchcraft accusations

While Resolution A/HRC/47/L.9 affirms the relevance of “the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health and the right to access to information [...] the lack of which being likely to facilitate harmful practices against persons with medical impairments,”⁴⁶ the right to education itself is overlooked. As many advocates in this submission have made clear through their work, education is key to ending witchcraft persecution.

In consultation with local advocates, we encourage UN mechanisms to take an approach which integrates child’s rights and the right to education in their response to witchcraft-related persecution. The UN should encourage school curricula and teaching methods to focus on human rights and secular values, such as building a scientific temper, critical thinking skills and logical reasoning, in accordance with Articles 28-29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Imparting these tools through education will help empower communities to reject dogma, encourage rational explanations for crises, end negative stereotypes against persons with albinism, those who have disabilities or poorly-understood mental health conditions, as well as help to shake the unmitigated trust which communities place on witch-doctors, faith healers and other malicious actors seeking to exploit a widespread belief in witchcraft.

Embedded in the dynamics in witchcraft accusations are also high-levels of illiteracy and poverty, particularly among women. Knowing one’s rights and entitlements is an essential basis on which to claim one’s rights and to pursue a life of dignity outside the influence of harmful or stigmatizing attitudes. As such, States must also prioritize inequalities in access to education for girls.

Continue to promote a human rights based understanding of the right to freedom of religion or belief

As stated in Resolution A/HRC/47/L.9, it is imperative that States “carefully distinguish between harmful practices amounting to human rights violations related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks, and the lawful and legitimate exercise of different kinds of religion or beliefs.”⁴⁷

Within UN fora there are actors, including States and faith-based organizations (FBOs), who misuse the right of freedom of religion or belief to prevent proper scrutiny of harmful traditional practices, including by making arguments that appeal to “religious or cultural specificities” to justify turning a blind eye to practices antithetical to human rights, such as child early and forced marriage. We encourage the UN,

⁴⁶ A/HRC/47/L.9, p.2

⁴⁷ A/HRC/47/L.9, OP 6.

and all those who engage with its mechanisms, to firmly reject the idea that there is any conflict between the right to freedom of thought and belief and the rights of children, women and other vulnerable groups.

APPENDIX : Advocacy for Alleged Witches List of Cases between
2020-2022

	Name of Victim	Country/Contact	Accusation	Action Taken	Date
1	<i>[90 year old woman murdered by being beaten to death and set on fire]</i>	Ghana	Accused of being responsible for several misfortunes in her community.	<p>Issued a statement of condemnation and tasked the Ghanaian Police Force to arrest her killers.</p> <p>AFAW urged the government of Ghana to put in place effective and proactive mechanisms against witchcraft allegations and witch persecution.</p>	1/8/2020
2	<i>[Woman murdered after injecting toxic drink]</i>	Liberia	Accused of killing her husband	AFAW asked the authorities in Liberia to take measures to stop persecution and trial by ordeal of suspected witches and wizards, and sanction community leaders who condone such unhealthy practice.	26/8/2020
3	Two children burnt in Jos	Plateau State, Nigeria	Accused of witchcraft	AFAW worked with the family of the victims to support and rehabilitate the children and make them less vulnerable to allegations of witchcraft and the practice of witch persecution. The support program focused on two areas- medical treatment and education. AFAW helped defray the costs of the medical treatment and support the education of the children.	8/1/2020
4	<i>[83 year old man murdered by son]</i>	Zimbabwe	Accused of witchcraft	<p>AFAW urged the government of Zimbabwe to take urgent steps to stop the killing of persons accused of witchcraft in the country. The government was asked to consider subjecting witchcraft accusers and witch hunters to medical examination in order to ascertain the state of their mental health.</p> <p>In addition, the government must sanction and call to order prophets, pastors, traditional medicine</p>	24/2/2020

				practitioners, priests and priestesses and all who sanctify and validate the belief that misfortunes could be caused by occult means.	
5	Victims of child witchcraft allegations in Akwa Ibom and Cross River states.	Akwa Ibom and Cross River states, Nigeria	Accused of witchcraft	AFAW provided assistance for the training of this children.	14/4/2020
6	<i>[Man targeted by mob]</i>	Imo State, Nigeria	Accused of stealing destinies.	AFAW took care of the medical bills of Mr. Nlebedum and facilitated his relocation to a safer place. AFAW also contacted the Police who took up the case. AFAW urged the government of Imo state to confirm the identity and eventual fate of the man (in the photo) accused of stealing the destiny of others. The government should investigate this case of persecution of a destiny-thief and ensure that the perpetrators are brought to justice.	4/4/2020
7	A dozen unnamed people set ablaze in Oku Community by Thomas Obi Tawo (aka General Iron).	Cross River state, Nigeria	Accused of witchcraft	AFAW called for the arrest and prosecution of Thomas Obi Tawo and others accused of perpetrating this horrific violence. AFAW helped paid some of the costs of victim's medical treatment. AFAW also provided humanitarian support to those affected by this horrific attack in pursuant to its objective of eradicating witch persecution in Africa by 2030	4/4/2020
8	30 witches held hostage in Mzimba by a local priestess and witchcraft exorcist, Bernadette Tembo	Malawi	Accused of witchcraft	After causing a journalist in Malawi to investigate the matter, AFAW took the following decision; 1. Condemned witch-hunting activities and other human rights abuses linked to the belief in witchcraft in Malawi	30/4/2020

				<p>2. Called on the police and government of Malawi to arrest and prosecute Bernadette Tembo and others involved in witch-hunting activities including assault, abduction, extortion, kidnapping, and hostage-taking of alleged witches in Mzimba and other regions in Malawi</p> <p>3. Appealed to the government to convene a meeting of Sing'anga and community leaders in Malawi and get them to commit to stopping witch finding activities nationwide</p> <p>4. Suggested that the government of Malawi organizes training sessions for judges, magistrates and police officers on the enforcement and interpretation of the Witchcraft Act and other relevant provisions</p> <p>5. Urged the government of Malawi to increase police presence in the communities especially in areas prone to witch persecution and murder</p> <p>6. Asked the government of Malawi to establish community clinics/health centers that provide evidence-based diagnosis and treatment of diseases, and put in place health education programs that provide evidence-based explanations of dreams, diseases, and deaths.</p>	
--	--	--	--	--	--

				<p>7. Requested the government of Malawi to compensate and rehabilitate victims of witch persecution in the country.</p> <p>8. AFAW reminded the government of Malawi that it is their primary responsibility to protect the lives and property of Malawians and end rampant cases of witch persecution and killing in the country.</p> <p>9. At the end, there were released.</p>	
9	Unnamed woman in Akamkpa	Cross Rivers, Nigeria	Accused of using magic to kill her relatives.	AFAW provided some funds for her to rent an apartment while her case was processed in court.	5/9/2020
10	Unnamed woman in Afikpo	Ebonyi State, Nigeria	Accused of using charms in her community	AFAW traced the woman who has been scapegoated by people in Ezi Akani and supported her and her children	15/9/2020
11	Hassan Patigi's Abusive Healing and Witch-hunting Activities in Mokwa	Niger state	Hassan Patigi's uses inhuman and unhealthy methods of exorcism	AFAW urged the governor of Niger State, Abubakar Sani Bello, the Etsu of Nupe, Yahaya Abubakar Kusodu, the Commissioner of Police, the chairman of Mokwa to stop Hassan Patigi's abusive healing practices	28/9/2020
12	6 year old girl	Liberia	Expelled from school (Tyneceploh Education Foundation) and accused of possessing magical powers and can kill or harm other pupils and staff through occult means.	AFAW wrote a powerful letter to the management asking them to re-admit her and also berated them for trying to truncate the education of a child on account of baseless accusation. AFAW also contacted the head of the school to see that the contents of the letter is followed through. Lastly, AFAW contacted [the victim] and her grandmother to see how she can further her education in another school.	17/3/21

13	Two women and five minors	Adamawa state, Nigeria	Accused of using demonic powers to afflict the three-year-old girl with a strange disease. Also, ordered by the court to restore her health.	AFAW engaged lawyers to respond to this unfortunate court decision.	25/4/21
14	[Male]	Abia state, Nigeria	Accused of engaging in witchcraft and killing one Professor Chike Ubani through that means.	AFAW has contacted the Police Public Relations Officer to take up the case. As usual, AFAW provided material assistance to the accused, and his relative.	28/5/21
15	Okechukwu Nweke	Ezza North in Ebonyi state, Nigeria	Accused of harmful magic and tortured to death	Given the Police reluctance to arrest the suspects, AFAW contacted the commissioner of police who pledged to look into the matter. AFAW petitioned the Inspector-General of Police, Usman Baba, over alleged torture and murder of a man. Finally, the Commissioner of Police (Ebonyi) invited and met with AFAW contact person in Abakiliki to authorize the investigation of this case.	11/1/21
16	Unnamed woman	Anambra state, Nigeria	Accused of Killing her husband during sex at night.	AFAW contacted the police in the location who intervened and arrested some of the suspects.	12/3/22
17	[Teenage girl]	Lagos state, Nigeria	Accused of killing a 10 month old baby through witchcraft	AFAW intervened by contacting the Lagos state police command to defend her. The police wanted to charge to court however; the Director of Public Prosecution (DPP) insisted that the offence being charged (allegation of witchcraft) is unknown to Nigerian laws and therefore had no legal basis. Since the police insisted on holding her, AFAW took up the matter to see to her release.	14/3/2022
18	[Elderly woman]	Shangev-Ti ev Konshisha Benue state, Nigeria	Accused of killing her grandson who died of cancer. Members of her community destroyed her house. Her family	AFAW contacted her family to render any legal support required. AFAW notified the National Human Rights Commission to	14/8/22

			moved her to a safe location.	intervene in the case to see that her rights are no longer violated.	
	<i>[grandmother and retired lab scientist suffering from dementia]</i>	Port Harcourt, Nigeria	<p>Accused of being a witch.</p> <p>Stripped naked and forced to drink concoction.</p> <p>Timely intervention of her family saved her from been lynched.</p>	<p>AFAW strongly condemned the attack on an old woman suffering dementia.</p> <p>AFAW kicked off an online campaign to educate the public that old age, dementia or any other disease should not be interpreted as witchcraft and people within the category above should be treated with love, respect and patience.</p> <p>AFAW visited the family of the accused recently.</p>	24/8/2022
19	<i>[Widow]</i>	Nkpa Bende Local Government, Abia state	<p>Accused of witchcraft by her late husband brother's wife.</p> <p>Publicly filmed and flogged with her hands and legs tied.</p>	<p>AFAW reached the family of the victim. On behalf of AFAW, Dr. Leo Igwe spoke to the victim and is working to assist the victim on all front. AFAW reported the matter to the PPRO in Abia state.</p> <p>AFAW also reported the matter to the DPO in Uzuakoli, the president of the Town Union, and staff from the office of the wife of the governor of Abia state.</p> <p>AFAW also reported the matter to the NHRC contact person in Abia who promised to connect AFAW with the victim or her relatives.</p>	28/8/2022
20	Unnamed boy	Rumuokoro, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria	<p>Accused of shapeshifting from a rat to a human being.</p> <p>His hands tied while been interrogated.</p>	<p>AFAW reported the case to the police.</p> <p>AFAW contact persons visited the boy and reported the following; He was afraid and psychologically unstable. He needs care, attention, and medical examination for him to be able to trust and then give out the needed information about his background.</p> <p>For now, AFAW has taken the responsibility provide the above-mentioned steps to</p>	29/8/22

				restore hope, trust and love in his life. AFAW will also try to reunite him his family (provided they have no hands in his present condition).	
21					