

Team takes steps toward historic United Nations Resolution to stamp out witchcraft atrocities

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A team, including Lancaster University academics, have taken the first crucial steps to stamp out the worldwide atrocities of witchcraft,

including ritual killings, with the successful acceptance of a United Nations Resolution.

Passed without a vote, the Resolution, which has been several years in the making, was tabled this month at the UN Human Rights Council by Kenya, with the support of the Africa group, composed of 54 Member States from the African continent.

Witchcraft-related beliefs and practices have resulted in serious violations of human rights including beatings, banishment, cutting of body parts, and amputation of limbs, torture and murder.

Women, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities including people with albinism, a genetic disorder that impairs the ability to create pigment in the body, are particularly vulnerable.

Professor Charlotte Baker, of Lancaster University, who has published widely on albinism in Africa together with UN Independent Expert on Albinism Ikponwosa Ero, international human rights barrister Kirsty Brimelow and Lancaster University honorary graduate and human rights advocate Gary Foxcroft have worked tirelessly, as part of a wider team, to ensure the extent of the shocking issue was heard at UN level.

The Resolution, in calling for the elimination of these harmful practices, affirms that everyone has the right to life, liberty and security and upholds the fundamental principles of equality, non-discrimination and human dignity that underpin human rights.

There are thousands of cases of people accused of witchcraft each year globally, often with fatal consequences, and others are mutilated and killed for witchcraft-related rituals.

In the last decade, more than 700 attacks on people with albinism have

been reported in 28 countries.

Trade in body parts of people with albinism is big business in certain African countries with a "going rate" of \$75,000 for a full set of body parts.

Professor Baker and the team first brought their work to the attention of the UN in September 2017 when they organized a Witchcraft and Human Rights Expert Meeting at UN headquarters in Geneva.

The workshop, which was cited specifically in the recent successful Resolution address, examined for the first time the large-scale human rights issue that had, by and large, slipped under the radar of governments, NGOs and academics.

The following year the team organized a powerfully moving and shocking photographic exhibition, funded by Lancaster University, at the Palais des Nations at UN headquarters in Geneva to coincide with the UN Human Rights Council meeting.

The exhibition, which subsequently traveled internationally, featured poignant images captured by four internationally-renowned human rights photographers.

In January 2019 the team organized an international conference on Witchcraft and Human Rights at Lancaster University to further highlight the grave human rights abuses taking place around the world due to beliefs in witchcraft.

The conference looked at witchcraft and human rights past, present and future, and in particular discussed the thorny question of terminology.

In numerous countries, witchcraft-related beliefs, which can lead to

some of the most challenging human rights issues of the 21st century, have resulted in serious violations of human rights including, beatings, banishment, the cutting of body parts, amputation of limbs, being set on fire, torture and murder.

Women, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities, including people with albinism, are particularly vulnerable.

Despite the seriousness of these human rights abuses, there is often no robust state-led response and, often, judicial systems do not act to prevent, investigate or prosecute human rights abuses linked to beliefs in witchcraft.

The ground-breaking move to bring this Resolution to the UN brings together, for the first time, witchcraft and human rights in a systematic and in-depth manner at the UN and international level.

The Resolution marks an important step in the continued collaboration of UN Experts, members of civil society and academics to tackle the violence associated with such beliefs and practices for groups that are particularly vulnerable.

Professor Baker said, "The extent of the threat to people vulnerable to harmful practices related to the manifestation of certain witchcraft-related beliefs means that we must act now to tackle this issue. Our collaborative approach means that we can work across sectors and at different levels to achieve positive, integrated and lasting change. The UN Resolution is a fundamental milestone in this process."

Ikponwosa Ero added, "The [resolution](#) carefully balances protecting the human rights of those accused of witchcraft and victims of ritual attacks, while also protecting traditional healers, along with the religious, indigenous and cultural beliefs and practices that do not amount to

harmful practices as defined by UN bodies.

"Resolutions are not magic bullets, but this one is a key turning point for all of us working to ensure human rights protection in this complex sphere of spiritual beliefs and practices. The resolution will also spur the work to combat the horrendous violence which characterize these types of harmful practices and which, for too long, have destroyed and taken too many lives."

Gary Foxcroft said, "The UN Special Resolution is an important step in helping to stop the often horrific [human rights](#) abuses that take place due to beliefs in witchcraft around the world. We needed as many governments as possible to support this Resolution and believe that our work inspired the action needed to do so. Much more remains to be done following this Resolution. However, we are moving forward in the right direction and there is hope that more abuses can be prevented."

Provided by Lancaster University

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