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Forum titled: Witchcraft Accusations-Violence & Torture -Women and Children:

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Firstly, I want to thank God for His traveling mercy to enable us to gather here today to celebrate challenges and accomplishment of women globally. I want to express appreciation to the leadership of the International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse (INPEA) for proving me this opportunity to join other distinguished panelists to discuss one of the dehumanizing practices of women, secret societies and witch craft.

As we celebrate International Women's Day and bask in the euphoria of the accomplishments and gains we have made for women's rights in the context of social and political mobility, socio economic status and education advancement, it is also disheartening that there still exist practices such as witchcraft accusations that are not only oppressive to women, but also dehumanizing both to the human spirit and self-esteem.

The practice of witchcraft accusations tends to reinforce a culture of male dominance, lack of the political will to dismantle those discriminatory and oppressive structures and adopt policies that elevate women from the role of victims and care-taker.

On November 25, 1981 the UN adopted a declaration recognizing the International Day for Elimination of violence against women inspired by the brutal murder of the Mirubal sisters in the Dominican Republic... But despite this symbolic action taken over 30 years ago by the international community to condemn this act of gender –based violence, we continue to witness millions of women being subjected to gender-based violence, including witch craft accusations . It is unimaginable that such a practice continues today in our "civilized culture" and modern society of some of our nations, especially on the Continent of Africa. While some men are also falling victims to this practice of witchcraft accusations, the majority of the victims are women and children.

Most of the victims of the witchcraft accusations are not only women, but older women who are usually blame for an epidemic or virus and calamity in communities in Africa. These women once accused can be ostracized by their families and communities and subject to two kinds of jungle justices, which are "mob justice" and "voodoo justice."

In the case of "mob justice," these women are beaten mercilessly sometime murdered, if not rescued by other community members. In the case of "voodoo justice," they accused undergoes a trial by ordeal where they are given a concoction of toxic herbs to drink to exonerate themselves from the accusation. The "innocents" would are luck to survive these herbs with high toxicity are declared not guilty, while those who do not survive this toxic substance due to low tolerance level and other health complications are considered guilty without any other scientific evidence.

The death of the so-called accused does not end this ordeal rather it is the beginning of a life of shame, humiliation and stigmatization for the families of these victims. These are emotional scars and stigmas that these families have to carry for the rest of their lives until they leave these communities.

What is the profile of these victims of witchcraft accusation?

Most of the victims of these bad practices seem to fit the same profile despite which country they reside:

- They are poor (low economic status); they are widowed; they are childless; older women who are easy targets; illiterate; they do not have any male protector (such as husband, son, brothers and male figure); disabled and most time live in rural communities.

- they are accused by people who are ignorance, full of greed and malice.

The consistent targeting of women with such characteristics seems to amount to what I would like to consider as "gender profiling." But the profile of these witchcraft victims should in no way justify the abuse of their rights and lack of protection from perpetrators. As part of the human race, they should be given the same equal protection by the international community in the form of an international convention, rule of law and due process in a court of competent jurisdiction in their respective countries.

In West Africa, the situation seems to be visible in Ghana and Nigeria where so-called "witch camps" are designated for the women and children accused of witchcraft. In Ghana where until recently there were six "witch camps" located in isolated communities in the Northern rural parts of Ghana where older women accused of "witch craft" forced to reside to avoid continued practice of witchcraft. Some of these camps are said to be hosting between 300 -500 women and about 200 children living in inhumane conditions. The women residing in these camps are the ones who are lucky to make it there.

In Nigeria, mostly children are accused of witchcraft and subject to inhumane treatment. These children, according to Dr. Eleanor Nwadinobi, are not only accused by their own families of being witches, but also killed, mutilated, burned, starved and abandoned. They are later then forced to live in "witch camps" located in isolated villages.

The condition of the camps not matter where they are located, they are depicted as: mud hut, lack of safe drinking water, lack of electricity and no access for education for the children. Women and their children have to sometime walk several miles to fetch water and most times get a meal at the mercy of surrounding villagers and NGOs who are now providing services to these camps. The average stays in these camps range between five to ten years.

It is disheartening that most of these women have lived in these camps that they feel more protected in these "witch camps" with all the stigmas than return to their communities and fully integrate into society. They have internalized their fear and no longer trust their government and communities to protect them. But as their global family, we can and must change this narrative.

In Liberia, for example the community reaction to witchcraft can be both of "mob justice" and "voodoo justice" described earlier. The voodoo justice is perpetrated through a system known as "sassy wood" and implemented through several means, including:

- the use of hot knives, which are rubbed on the foot of the accused to get a confession of the crime. the drinking of a concoction of herbs to also get a confession.

But Liberia has since abolished this practice and expects the rule of law to prevail in these circumstances.

What the drivers of this witch craft practice:

There are many factors that continue to perpetuate this practice even in our modern times today, including, but not limited to, the following:

- Lack of a UN Convention to protect older people since most of the victims of this practice are not just women, but older women. Hence, it is very imperative that the on-going campaign to adopt a UN Convention be seriously considered by the policy makers of the UN. We want to commend the consolidated groups such as the Open-Ended Working Group for keeping this issue on the radar of the UN. Also commendation goes to the Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People (GAROP) for leading the charge to galvanize “our voices” from across the globe to manifest the pains and sufferings older people endure every day in their respective countries due to the lack of an international-binding instrument to protect them.
- Images constructed by the media (films and documentaries especially from Africa) that portray older men and women as witchcrafts. These negative images tend to reinforce the stereotypes of older women as Witchcraft and entrenched the level of violence being perpetrated against them.
- Lack of political will and rule of law in many countries to dismantle these practices and persecute those responsible under a due process to ensure justice for the victims.

Finally, in conclusion we have a moral responsibility to ensure that all women live their lives without fear and this can be manifested through the adoption of UN Convention and other policies that protect older people, especially older women no matter which continent they live. Governments must take the lead to ensure all their citizens enjoy equal protection under the law. We of the civil society community must also not relent in our advocacy for policies and instrument that protect every person irrespective of their gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion and political persuasion as well as their geographical location.

Thank you

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