

Violence against older women: tackling witchcraft accusations in Tanzania

In many parts of the world, older women are still persecuted and accused of witchcraft. Recent media reports have highlighted the problem in Burkina Faso, Ghana, India, Kenya, Malawi Nepal and Tanzania though the problem is much more widespread than this.

In most of these countries, belief in witchcraft is common, with people from all sections of society sharing this belief regardless of their level of education, socio-economic group or ethnic origin.

It is usually the most discriminated against and marginalised in society who are accused of witchcraft because they are either least able to defend themselves from attack and are therefore easy targets or because they are considered of little value to society and therefore a burden to it in times of hardship.

Although older men and younger women are sometimes targeted, in many cases, those accused are older women.

“Why is it always older women that are pointed out? Because they think we are not useful in the community, they don’t value us; they think we have no benefit. Older men are never pointed out, because no-one believes older men use harmful medicines.”

Doto, early 70s, Tanzania

Thousands killed in Tanzania

Reliable data on the number of witchcraft accusations and physical attacks on older women in Tanzania is hard to come by. The relevant government departments tend not to give the actual figures of attacks and killings. It is commonly accepted that these crimes are underreported. However, according to Philip Alston, the Special Rapporteur on extra judicial summary or arbitrary executions, the murder and persecution of people accused of witchcraft in Tanzania is better documented than in most countries. The figures vary widely but it is estimated as many as a thousand, mostly older Tanzanian women are targeted and killed annually.¹

According to a 2009 Tanzania Legal and Human Rights Centre report there was a total of 2,585 killings of older women, in eight regions where the practice is predominant, between 2004 and 2009. This means an average of 517 killings per year. Statistics for Mwanza region alone, which has the highest older women killing rates, indicate that 698 older women were killed as a result of witchcraft allegations during that period making an average of 140 killings per year.²

Witchcraft accusations are a critical factor in the violation of women’s rights in Sukumaland, and are often generated by wider problems in the community.

For example, limited understanding of the nature, cause and transmission of HIV as well as other illnesses, such as childhood diseases, can result in the belief that a family has been “bewitched”. In cases where husbands have

died, widows are often blamed, providing a pretext for relatives of the deceased to deny them the right to inherit family assets.

Allegations are often linked to personal jealousy, and disputes between neighbours or family over land and inheritance. To exacerbate the problem, traditional healers have often been requested by those who have had misfortune, illness, or death in the family, to point out whom in the community has been “bewitching” them. More often than not, the traditional healer points to an older, vulnerable woman in the village.



Nyamizi, 73, was accused by a neighbour of bewitching his child. (Jeff Williams/HelpAge International)

“I received a threatening letter which said, ‘You must leave this village, move 15 villages away from here. If not, the sungu-sungu [a group of men, given the role by their communities of guarding the people and their property] from this village will do something that you will never, ever forget.’ Some time later I was returning home at night. Suddenly, someone came running towards me – he struck me with a machete and chopped off my arm and slashed my head.”

Nyamizi, 73, Tanzania

In 2008 the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) urged the Government of Tanzania to challenge the traditional views regarding older women, particularly accusations of witchcraft.³

Dangers of using witchcraft-specific legislation

Introducing or reforming legislation to criminalise accusations as witchcraft is often put forward as a solution. HelpAge International requested, through the organisation Advocates for International Development, *pro bono* guidance from lawyers on the use of legislation to address accusations of witchcraft and related violence. The resulting research on legislation relating to witchcraft in a number of different countries highlighted the inadequacies of specific witchcraft related laws.

Very often witchcraft legislation fails to prevent accusations of witchcraft and subsequent violence against those accused. Nor does it protect those who have been accused, or provide redress for the victims of violent crimes. Witchcraft-related laws are rarely enforced and there are concerns around whether people are getting fair trials or being unlawfully imprisoned under this type of legislation. HelpAge International believes that acts of violence against people accused of witchcraft should be prosecuted under existing criminal laws, such as assault, theft, damage to property or murder. HelpAge believes that community interventions that empower older people and address the conditions that lead to accusations have more likelihood of success than concentrating on legislative change.

However, more does need to be done to strengthen justice systems and make them more accountable to those who seek

recourse. Police, magistrates and lawyers need to be trained.

Local-level solutions

HelpAge and local NGO partners have focused on community interventions. Village committee members have been trained in women's and widow's rights, and awareness has been raised of the harmful consequences of witchcraft allegations, misconceptions about HIV and other illnesses. Influencing the behaviour of traditional healers and local militia, and working with local government officials, religious leaders and the Tanzanian media have been a priority. Community members have been trained as paralegal advisers to provide advice on land, inheritance and marriage rights.

On a practical level, local communities can be mobilised to build houses and improve sanitation facilities for women who have been threatened, attacked or who have simply become isolated by the rest of the community. Making fuel-efficient stoves helps to demonstrate that red eyes, often associated with witchcraft, are actually caused by a lifetime of working over smoky cooking fires.

These community-based programmes have shown the positive results. There has been a 99 per cent reduction in the killing of older women in the programme areas, a significant reduction in disputes over land rights, inheritance and matrimonial issues, and over 30 per cent improvements in living conditions of older women.⁴

National level solutions

HelpAge recommends that:

- Killings related to witchcraft are investigated, prosecuted and punished as murder by the police and judiciary.
- All laws dealing with inheritance are reviewed and revised if found discriminatory.
- Widows' property-grabbing is treated as crime under existing provisions under the criminal code.

International level solutions

Violence and abuse against older people rarely commands the same attention as a violation of human rights as violence against younger or other groups. Data on violence against women over the age of 49 is rarely collected. What attention there is to elder abuse is almost exclusively confined to high income countries.

- More data is needed on different forms of violence and abuse against women over 49 in low and middle income countries.
- States Parties to CEDAW should take recommendations 37 & 38 on violence against older women in General Recommendation No. 27 into account in their implementation of CEDAW.
- The Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences should prepare a report on the impact of ageing on violence against women.
- The Human Rights Council should hold a half-day discussion on the impact of ageing on violence against women.
- International human rights standards protecting older people's freedom from violence and abuse need to be strengthened.

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¹ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Witches in the 21st Century*, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NEWSEVENTS/Pages/Witches21stCentury.aspx>, 2009 (Visited 21 June 2011)

² Legal and Human Rights Centre, *Tanzania Human Rights Reports 2009*, <http://www.humanrights.or.tz/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/Tanzania-Human-Rights-Report-2009.pdf>, April 2010, p.21 (Visited 21 June 2011)

³ CEDAW, *Concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women*, CEDAW/C/TZA/CO6, 18 July 2008

⁴ HelpAge International, *Final project evaluation TAN 133*, 2007, HelpAge International, unpublished