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Advocating for the Rights of All Women!

UN Human Rights Council Session 25 - Panel

WITCHCRAFT ACCUSATIONS - VIOLENCE & TORTURE

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Statement: Accusations of ‘Witchcraft’ – Women & Girls with disabilities
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Good morning. My name is Stephanie Ortoleva and I am the President of Women Enabled, Inc. I regret that I cannot join you in person for this important panel and thank all sponsors for their support. As we discuss the impact of accusations of ‘witchcraft and violence against women and girls, I implore you to include our forgotten sisters, women and girls with disabilities. We are women too!

The 2012 report of Rashida Manjoo, UN Special rapporteur on Violence Against Women, focused on gender-related killings of women and pointedly states: “Rather than a new form of violence, gender-related killings are the extreme manifestation of existing forms of violence against women. Culturally and socially embedded, these manifestations continue to be accepted, tolerated or justified — with impunity as the norm.” Additionally, in her 2011 Report Ms. Manjoo highlighted the impact of the multiple and intersecting dimensions of women’s lives on violence and discrimination. Then in her 2012 report on violence against women with disabilities, Special Rapporteur Manjoo noted that women with disabilities experience violence more frequently than other women, often for a longer period of time and that this violence may take on unique forms, have unique causes and have unique consequences. Guarantees of the rights of women with disabilities are in the provisions of both the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as both address violence against women and stereotyping. Many human rights violations, justified by traditional, cultural or religious values, are targeted against minority or disenfranchised groups, including women and girls with disabilities. In light of the myriad impacts of some traditional myths and cultural views of disability, combined with attitudes toward women in general, women and girls with disabilities are in a double bind. These linkages must be addressed from a gender-sensitive, disability-inclusive approach.

The notion that disability is a “curse” and that people with disabilities are “possessed” or “evil” and the societal views of women as “witches” or “demonic,” persists today, with origins dating from 1485 and earlier. Murder of women and girls with disabilities as witches is highlighted as a human rights violation by Philip Alston, Former UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions in his 2009 Report. The medieval notion that one can identify a “witch” by the fact that her offspring are children with disabilities still persists. Further, having an offspring with a disability is seen as a “curse” on the woman herself for some alleged “wrongdoing” or breach of a societal taboo. Some mothers in India told me they were beaten by husbands for bringing the “curse” of a disabled child into the family.

Sometimes the real causes for seeing disabled women as “witches” or “possessed” are seeing them as a scapegoat for another’s illness, death or a bad harvest. The dual “curse” of being a girl child and a disabled girl child at that is reason enough – thus, labeling her as “cursed” or a “demon” and killing her serves as a rationale to eliminate a perceived dual “burden” and something which is perceived as “useless” in the community.

Women and girls who challenge accepted socio-cultural norms, traditions, perceptions and stereotypes about femininity and the role, behavior and status of women and girls in society are often labeled with psychosocial disabilities and, thus, as “witches.” As a mechanism of control, they frequently are subjected to forced psychiatric interventions and treatment that are harmful and deprive them of legal capacity and autonomy, resulting in the erasure of personhood, which is often the objective in the first place. In other cases, she is being punished for refusing sexual advances or challenging the authority of community elders or because the disabled woman is participating in grass root politics to fight for her rights or as “punishment” to the woman for being a rebel.

Sometimes labeling her as a “witch” is just a blatant falsehood perpetuated simply because she has some property others want for their own. Special Rapporteur Alston notes that women and girl children with albinism are hunted and killed based on superstitious beliefs that their skin or body parts transmit magical powers which bring good health or prosperity. One colleague told me that she was followed in her village for this very reason and she feared for her life. In other cases, they are killed based on the belief that they are evil or cursed. It just depends...

Of course, many other violations also cross borders and cultures based on traditional values regarding the value of the lives of women and girls with disabilities, cloaked in notions of “witchcraft” or “curse” and due to both gender-specific and disability-specific harmful traditional practices, women with disabilities are more discriminated against, violated, marginalized and exploited. States have a due diligence responsibility to take systematic action, reflecting both disability and gender sensitive approaches, to modify or eliminate stereotypes and negative, harmful and discriminatory practices and attitudes justified by traditional values. Both approaches are required under the CEDAW and the CRPD. Additionally, to ensure that the rights of women and girls with disabilities are included as we embark on this discussion, the international women’s rights movement

must include our sisters with disabilities in analysis and advocacy. If you would like to explore these ideas further, please contact me at President@WomenEnabled.org. Thank you.

Resources:

Stephanie Ortoleva & Hope Lewis: "Forgotten Sisters - A Report on Violence against Women with Disabilities: & Overview of Its Nature, Scope, Causes & Consequences," available at: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2133332.

Rashida Manjoo, Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Its Causes and Consequences, Report on Violence Against Women with Disabilities, U.N. Doc. A/67/227 (August 3, 2012), available at: http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A%2F67%2F227+&Submit=Search&Lang=E

Rashida Manjoo, UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Report to the Human Rights Council: Gender-Related Killings of Women, 23 May 2012, A/HRC/20/16, available at: http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/A.HRC.20.16_En.pdf

Rashida Manjoo, Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its Causes and Consequences, (considering multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination) U.N. Doc. A/HRC/17/26 (May 2, 2011), available at <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/17session/A-HRC-17-26.pdf>

Philip Alston, UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, REPORT TO THE Human Rights council, 27 May 2009, A/HRC/11/27, available at: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/.../A.HRC.11.2.pdf>.

U.N. High Comm'r for Human Rights, Women's Rights and Gender Section, Responses to the Note Verbale on Human Rights Council Resolution 17/11: "Violence against women and girls and disability," <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/women/docs/A.HRC.20.5.pdf>.

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, G.A. Res. 34/180, U.N. Doc. A/RES/34/180 (Dec. 18, 1979), available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6b3970.html>.

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, G.A. Res. 61/106, U.N. Doc. A/RES/61/106 (Dec. 13, 2006), available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/45f973632.html>.