

Witch-Hunts in the 21st Century

If you think those bad old days are over, take a look at these news items.

In Tanzania, older women are leaving their communities in fear of being killed, and, if not killed, rejected by their own families. "Women are now wandering in towns living as beggars with nobody else to care for their sustenance... they are subjected to sexual harassment. They feed on bread crumbs thrown in dumps, sleep in corridors, threatened by cold and other types of diseases," according to the African News Service.

The Tanzania Media Women's Association (TAMWA) estimates that over 100 such women live in the streets, driven away by their families and communities. In response, TAMWA has begun a project aiming to stop the "witch killings" by prosecuting offenders. To date, 134 out of 235 suspects are facing formal charges.

The police in Tanzania and Uganda report that over 350 people in the past 18 months have been beaten or burned to death by gangs—most of them older women.

In India, the Free Legal Aid Committee revealed to the Associated Press (AP) that at least 200 women are killed every year on suspicions of being a witch. The report relayed how the assailants attacked a suspected witch's husband to death, stabbed her son's arm, and cut her forehead with a sword.

It is sad to say that in spite of the burgeoning women's rights movement

worldwide, many older women—poor and nowhere to get help—suffer and are killed for mere suspicion of witchcraft.

Most witch-hunts occur during times of crisis and increasing poverty, when more people get sick and frustrated, and community values break down. Because no one wants to be blamed for such misfortunes, people turn their anger towards old, "wrinkled," widowed and solitary women. This is much like the husband who is fed up with poverty and hardships at work and vents his pent-up emotions and anger on his wife.

Once revered for their knowledge on healing and affinity to Mother Earth, older women in some communities have been turned into scapegoats for sickness, poverty and underdevelopment, which should have been the responsibility of governments.

There may be more unreported incidences of witch-hunting, especially in the third world. But whatever the cause, it is a women's issue and a blatant violation of their right to freedom of religion and rights under the law.

In a young, Christian, scientific, so-called "rational" and still male-centered world we have now, being old, 'pagan' and woman might really be reason enough to fear for one's life.

Sources: *Elderly Women Targeted Over Claims of Witchcraft* by Daniel Benno, *Masangya*, Africa News Service, 4 October 2000; *Witch Killings in India*, Associated Press, 5 September 2000.

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