

Poor Documentation of PWA Related Discrimination and Attacks in sub-Saharan Africa:

UTSS holds with ever increasing confidence that many attacks & killings of person(s) with albinism (PWA) in sub-Saharan Africa are not documented or reported. UTSS is certain that crimes of colour against PWA are common in various parts of almost all of these countries. Legends and myths abound, and we have yet to hear of one that is humanizing. Most myths reduce PWA to ghosts, magical beings or curses, etc. Many African countries have stories about the mysterious disappearance of PWA. There is growing, documented truth to these rumors. We know that PWA have “disappeared” due to abduction, then mutilated and killed by fellow citizens (sometimes family members “friends” or neighbours) for the purpose of witchcraft related rituals. Muti murders or “medicine” killings have a deep, longstanding history, and are familiar to most Africans through oral tradition. We also know that many PWA receive private burials by their families after they die to prevent grave robberies. Between the unexplained disappearance due to kidnappings and the secrecy surrounding PWA deaths and burials, the myth that declares; “they don’t die, they simply vanish” is reinforced.

While there are exceptions, most PWA in sub-Saharan Africa suffer from profound stigma and some from “fatal discrimination”. Most Africans “know” that PWA “disappear”, that they are sacrificed to volcanoes, that they are kidnapped prior to elections, that a tribal chief may “keep a few” in his village to be buried alive with him when he dies to ensure his transition and power in the afterlife, that their hair and body parts bring power, prosperity and luck, etc. This is not news to most Africans. Why then is so little of it documented by police and media or served with justice in local courts? The easy answer is because it is urban legend and in fact not really happening. UTSS is finding it increasingly difficult to accept the easy answer.

If we wait for “proper documentation” before offering the protection of justice to PWA in sub-Saharan Africa, we will withhold justice and rightful protection until these developing countries have become developed countries like North America or Europe. Even in developed countries we struggle with proper documentation (especially as it relates to albinism or satanic ritual crimes). Most African countries are not developed enough to have proper documentation in a variety of areas, let alone on an issue as “taboo” as witchcraft related discriminations that support ritual mutilations and killings. “Oral tradition” is still the cultural form of documentation in most of the places where the attacks, killings or disappearance of PWA occur. Sadly, in many African countries there are still some government officials who consult with witchdoctors prior to elections, and there are successful business people and highly educated citizens who consult with witchdoctors for prosperity and success. Some of these are also involved in making and enforcing the laws. This is one of the players in the “lack of political will” around proper documentation and good human rights laws and practices in these countries. Another player is the lack of social will due to a general indifference to the wellbeing of their “sub-human” fellow citizens with albinism.

Thankfully the freedom of press in some African countries like Tanzania has increased the reporting and public documentation of atrocities committed against PWA. There does seem to be a correlation between freedom of press and the reporting of these crimes (see Press Freedom Index for 179 countries surveyed). This does not; however, always seem to be the case. We are left to speculate what contributes to the silence around reporting and documenting in these countries. Is it the shroud of secrecy surrounding witchcraft; is it the fear of power held by the witchdoctor or the consumer; is it the profound lack of social and political will as it relates to their “sub-human” fellow citizens with albinism; is it the familiarity with this age old phenomenon that renders it normal and not news worthy; or is it something else? Of one thing we are sure; it is happening much more than it is being reported. In Tanzania, the police only started documenting the attacks & killings of PWA in 2006. We believe that in various sub-Saharan African countries, this sometimes fatal discrimination is still not being documented by police, courts or media.