

# Training Sessions on Human and Women’s Rights to address Violence against Persons accused of Witchcraft

## SGBV

*UNHCR supported women’s associations, local authorities and religious security forces to conduct training sessions on human rights and women’s rights linked to the issue of violence against persons, and particularly women, who are accused of witchcraft.*



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## Background

Hundreds of people - mostly women - in the Central African Republic are accused every year of practicing witchcraft. “Witches” are often accused of causing a wide range of misfortunes such as infected toes, collapsed granary roofs, and even bad weather. Witchcraft is included as a crime in the country’s penal code (even punishable by execution), which is rarely contested given that the belief in witches as a source of several misfortunes is deeply embedded in the Central African Republic’s society.

Women, particularly old single women, and girls who are accused of witchcraft are often subject to SGBV. Due to cultural stigmas and lack of knowledge on basic rights, SGBV cases are often not reported, consequently leaving survivors/victims unassisted and perpetrators unpunished.

**Location** Batangafo, Kabo, Bossangoa and Bouca (Ouham), Paoua, Bocaranga and Bozoum (Ouham-Pende) Central African Republic

**Time & Duration** 2010 - 2011

**Population Groups** IDPs and host population

**Actors** UNHCR, women’s associations, local authorities and local leaders, as well as health services, supported by UNHCR and its operational partner DRC

## Description

In order to reduce the incidence of violence against those accused of witchcraft – who are mostly women – UNHCR worked together with women's associations, local authorities and religious security forces in the design of training sessions on human and women's rights.

Given that violence against these persons takes various forms and is perpetrated by a wide range of actors including family and community members, social services staff, traditional healers, policemen, local chiefs and justice officers, UNHCR and its partners conducted training sessions specifically targeting each one of these groups. Although the training sessions and material covered the same contents, they were always tailored to the audience so that the messages conveyed were more easily assimilated by the attendants.

## Steps to Implementation

- Identify the forms of violence against persons accused of witchcraft and the types of perpetrators.
- Hold consultations with stakeholders on the reasons leading to violence against persons who are accused of witchcraft.
- Based on the information obtained during the consultations, design training sessions and materials were tailored to specific target groups.
- Conduct training sessions with the identified target groups focusing first on the broader topics of human and women's rights, and then introducing the issue of violence against persons accused of witchcraft.

## Impact and Results

- The incidence of violence related to accusations of witchcraft decreased through sensitization sessions conducted and advocacy role played by UNHCR, especially in Ouham Pende.
- Men and women were reached during the training sessions on human and women's rights.
- 320 people - including health and social services staff, policemen, justice officers, local chiefs and traditional healers were reached during the training sessions.

- The training sessions have helped raise awareness within the targeted population, including local authorities and armed groups, on the importance of respecting and protecting human rights.

2825 peer educators (relais communautaires) were trained in Kabo, Batangafo and Bouca. They play a role in raising awareness among the population, providing information on different services available and consulting medical services for diagnostic, as well as sensitize traditional healers and other community leaders on the need to have a first medical diagnostic before treating the person.

Setting up of sub-prefectures committees for fighting against traditional practices whose role is a relay between communities and the sub-protection cluster.

Setting up of 470 women groups for conducting sensitization sessions among the community with support received by WFP.

Some victims of witchcraft accusation benefited from legal services and advices as well as, when needed, a NFI kit was also provided.

## Constraints

The belief in witchcraft is so deeply embedded in the Central African culture that its inclusion as a crime in the country's penal code is hardly contested. Even some human rights lawyers and influent authorities support its criminalization.

## Lessons Learned/Keys to Success

Traditional beliefs and practices are very sensitive issues and thus, people may easily feel offended when these are challenged. Accordingly, in the context of awareness-raising and education programmes, is useful to deal with the issue of violence against persons accused of sorcery as part of a broader topic, namely human and women rights. In this way, audiences may be more receptive to the messages one tries to convey.

