**Women with albinism**

**Intersecting racial and gender based discrimination**

**(Inputs from the Special Rapporteur on Albinism - Mandate of the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of human rights by persons with albinism**

**Ms. Ikponwosa Ero**

**Human Rights Council resolution 28/6**

**Special Procedures Branch**

**E-mail: albinism@ohchr.org**

**Tel: +41 22 917 9188)**

Contribution from the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of human rights by persons with albinism for the report of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on addressing the impact of multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and violence in the context of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance on the full enjoyment of all human rights by women and girls, pursuant to resolution 32/L.25 of Human Rights Council.

**Introduction**

Women with albinism are particularly vulnerable as they are exposed to intersecting and multiple forms of discrimination. The Committee on the Elimination of racial discrimination, in its Concluding Observations on the latest periodic reports of South Africa express concern about the racial discrimination faced by persons with albinism because of their colour.

In this framework, and because of their colour, myths have been construed around albinism, leading to various forms of discrimination against women. Women with albinism are reportedly victims of targeted acts of sexual violence spurred by the myth and misbelief that sexual intercourse with a woman with albinism can cure HIV/AIDS. Furthermore, women who give birth to a child with albinism may face ostracism and discrimination. They are also exposed to rejection by their husbands or partners, accused of adultery or infidelity and blamed for giving birth to a child who is generally seen as a curse or a bad omen. The rejection of mothers of children with albinism exposes them to poverty and isolation and increases the vulnerability to attacks of both mother and child with albinism.

**Discrimination against persons with albinism as racial discrimination**

One of the factors at the origin, or facilitating attacks against persons with albinism is their visibility, due to the colour of their skin. The appearance of persons with albinism makes them stand out, particularly in environments where the majority of the population have darker pigmentation and the contrast between the two groups is stark, as is the case in all countries where attacks were reported.

Persons with albinism are therefore a visible minority group whose appearance and colouring has made them subjects of instantaneous discrimination. Their stigma, the lifelong social exclusion and general discrimination they face, is a similar experience to that of vulnerable racial minorities because of their skin colour.

The definition of "racial discrimination" under article 1 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination is that it “shall mean any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.”

In its Concluding Observations for South Africa in August 2016, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has shown that discrimination against persons with albinism falls under the Convention as it constitutes discrimination on the basis of colour. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of racial discrimination is therefore another ground for protection persons with albinism in addition to other frameworks such as on disability, on the right to health, on economic and social rights, etc.

**Gender specificity of attacks against persons with albinism**

In its Concluding Observations on the report of the United Republic of Tanzania on 9 March 2016, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women expressed concern for harmful practices against women including: “the practice of prescribing sex with girls or women with albinism as a cure for HIV, ritual killings and attacks on persons with albinism, including women and girls, the use of their body parts for purposes of witchcraft, and the stigma and social exclusion suffered by mothers of children with albinism”. It also expressed deep concern “about the discrimination, stigmatization and social exclusion faced by persons with albinism, including women and girls, and the severe threats to and attacks on their physical integrity, such as ritual killings, abductions, mutilation and sexual abuse”.

1. Blame and Abandonment after having a child with albinism: A significant lack of awareness on how albinism occurs - that it is a genetic condition transferred by both parents - has a detrimental impact on parents of children with albinism with a disproportionate impact on the mother. The mother is often blamed for causing the pale colouring of the child with albinism. She is often accused of infidelity in her marriage or having contracted a curse embodied as the child with albinism. Consequently, mothers are often abandoned by their husbands on grounds that they have been unfaithful since the child is of a different skin colour. Isolation and expulsion from the community is also commonplace due to the belief that the child with albinism is a curse upon the community. Self-removal from the community also takes place in some cases to avoid hostility from the community.

2. Heightened Vulnerability to Attack: Expulsion and isolation often leaves the mother and her child with albinism vulnerable to attacks as a significant number of attacks tend to occur on those who are removed or isolated from the community.

3. Poverty Confinement: Due to abandonment, mothers of children with albinism often face poverty upon having the child with albinism. This exposes their child with albinism to further poverty confinement because the child is generally unable to receive education to a level whereby the child can eventually seek gainful employment.

4. Sexual Violence Risk: Women with albinism are often targets of sexual violence. This is owing to the prevalent myth that sexual intercourse with them can bring a cure to HIV / AIDs and confer good luck. This myth not only exposes them to violence but also to contracting various sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies.

5. Health Risk: Due to a general lack of sufficient education to find indoor employment, women and girls with albinism take on various menial work outdoors. Long term work outdoors in the sun also means that women with albinism are at high risk for contracting skin cancer. Research shows that only 2% of people with albinism live beyond the age of 40 in Tanzania with similar alarming rates reported in samples from neighbouring countries. A majority succumb to the preventable disease due to lack of education on prevention, education and the related ability to secure work indoors.

6. Reprisals: Women whose spouses were involved in attacks against their child with albinism often face actual and threats of reprisal after testifying against their husbands in investigations of cases of attacks. Reprisal often comes from both the family of her husband and the community at large.

7. Displacement: Both women with albinism and women giving birth to children with albinism have been displaced in light of physical attacks against people with albinism particularly in Tanzania. Hundreds have gone into several shelters set aside for them by the government to provide temporary safety. Some entered these shelters voluntarily and others entered through government and community intervention.

These shelters are mostly boarding schools in the Lake Zone region of north-western Tanzania and one in the north-eastern part of the country. They are a mixture of government-owned and faith based organizations, designated by government for children with various disabilities or conditions warranting some level of special care.

These shelters were not designed to absorb hundreds of people with albinism fleeing their homes. However this is what they have done in the past 6 to 7 years and they continue to do so. As found by an early assessment of these centres by Under The Same Sun, and UNICEF, these camps furthers segregation and enables abuse of multiple forms on both the women and the children. A psychosocial needs assessment carried out by Standing Voice at these centres found poor living conditions and care, severe levels of depression and a high rate of trauma symptoms among camp residents and no plans from the government for reintegration back into society.

Women and children with albinism constitute a significant number of the residents at these centres where minimal care is provided to them particularly in the area of psycho social support, education, health to prevent skin cancer, and low vision support to enable education.

8. Impunity: Women, and therefore women with albinism particularly affected by attacks, often face various barriers to access justice. This situation is enhanced by the low rates of conviction in cases of attacks.