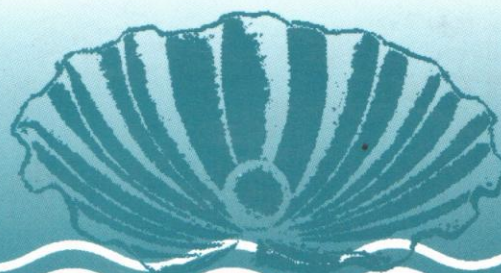


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THE LITERALLY EXEGESIS OF EXODUS 22:18 AND THE SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN SOUTHEAST NIGERIA

L'applicazione letteraria dell'esegesi dell'Esodo (22:18) ha delle rilevanti ripercussioni nel tessuto delle relazioni socio-familiari nel Sud-Est della Nigeria. Così, ad esempio, chi è accusato di essere uno stregone viene giustiziato senza nessuna verifica trovando l'unica giustificazione nelle parole dell'Esodo (22:18). In particolare si tratta di un'atavica pratica che coinvolge negativamente la vita di intere comunità. Secondo questa impostazione si ritiene che niente succede per puro caso, per esempio, la causa di ogni malattia viene imputata agli stregoni. Così, chi è sfortunato in questa vita o se un giovane muore l'origine o la causa della sua morte vengono spesso attribuite ad un presunto stregone anziano della famiglia il quale potrà essere accusato di pratica magica ed alla fine essere giustiziato. Per colpa di questa mentalità molti matrimoni falliscono e tante famiglie vengono distrutte.

INTRODUZIONE

In the 1980's, a self-acclaimed messianic¹ prophet, Akpan Ekwong, stunned most part of Akwa Ibom and Cross River States in Southeast Nigeria, with his witchcraft eradication movement. His mission was to sanitize the entire society of witches. He soon gathered disciples² and moved from village to village to eradicate witches from the communities. The suspected witches were forced to confess their evil acts of witchcraft and were often lynched. Many lives and property were lost during the years of his campaign for witches. Certainly, he won the admiration of many people who were traditionally predisposed to attribute every ill to witches. His 'messianic' ministry did not last long. He met his untimely death by hanging as a result of the murder of his driver. His followers scattered around the communities, practicing their witchcraft detection in small-scale level. In the course of this research, I met one of his former Aid-de Camp, who is still privately helping his numerous clients including Christians to detect witches in their families and Churches. In an interview with him, he claims his authority like that of his late Master, Akpan Ekwong, is biblical. He proudly quoted Exodus 22:18: *Thou shall not suffer a witch to live*, to justify his authority for continuing in helping his clients to rid the society of witches.

That aside, many independent churches and nativistic religious movements

¹ Akpan Ekwong at the time he initiated his Witchcraft eradication campaign made people believe he was divinely designated by God to sanitize the society of witches.

² The followers of Akpan Ekwong at the time considered themselves specially chosen for the ministry of eradication of Witches from the society.

in the area of study are overtly diagnostic centres for witches detection and subsequent eradication. In this 21st century, while the world is experiencing unprecedented advancement in science and technological development, self-styled prophets in Southeast Nigeria particularly those in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States are sending ripples of witchcraft-scare through towns and villages where people are already living under hard economic and insecure and unplanned social situations thereby causing incalculable difficulties and tortuous hardship. Spiritualizing the ills in the society and explaining them mostly in terms of witches activities divert attention from the major causes of the peoples social and health problems and leaves everything at the door step of Satan and the witches. Many leaders of the witchcraft eradication movements, certain categories of self-acclaimed spiritualists and leaders of religious movements have often referred to this text as their spiritual authority to kill and rid the society of supposed witches. The gruesome, shocking and repugnant murder cases in Southeast Nigeria traceable to the literally interpretation of this text is incredible, astonishing and mind-boggling. The various murder cases have led to unprecedented social problems in Southeast Nigeria. Recently, a Non-Governmental Organization³ has established at Esit Eket, Southeast Nigerian, to help ameliorate the plight of the children thrown out from their families on accusation of witchcraft.

The purpose of this paper therefore is to elucidate the enormous social problems associated with the literary interpretation of Exodus 22:18 and proffer possible solutions to this menace. It is pertinent however attempt the exegetical exposition of this Exodus text and also highlight milieu and the thought pattern of the people focused on in this research before proceeding.

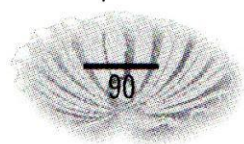
EXEGESIS OF EXODUS 22:18 FOR PROPER UNDERSTANDING

The Statement “thou shall not suffer a witch to live” in Exodus 22:18, falls within the social and religious regulations in ancient Israel. This law indicates that the knowledge and practice of witchcraft, magic and divination was common in ancient Israel as was in most ancient communities at the time. It is a major reference in the Old Testament prohibition of witchcraft which was against the true worship of Yahweh.

Clifford explains the text as follows:

The preponderance of such laws in the biblical codes seems attributable to the special role of Yahweh as sole God and hence authoritative lawgiver. Belief in one God means that the aid of spirits is not to be invoked. Concern with the problem elsewhere (Deut. 18:10, Jer. 27:9, and other passages) shows that the

³ Child Rights and Rehabilitation Network (CRARN) is Non Governmental Organization that has been established in Nigeria to cater for abused children who have been abandoned by parents on accusation of Witchcraft. It's national Headquarters is at Esit Eket in Akwa Ibom State, Southeast Nigeria.



problem was real in Israel. A prohibition found also in Lev 18:23; 20:15-16; Deut 27:2. Violators of the first commandment are to be proscribed (not utterly destroyed) i.e. set apart from the community.⁴

This ancient Israelites law is to be understood in its proper perspective. According to Jerome's commentary, this text is not to be used as a yardstick for gruesome murder. Offenders could be put away from the society, ostracized and banished. It is not to be interpreted literally and suspected witches arbitrarily killed as we currently experience in South East Nigeria. This is an ancient Israelite law which is not even enforced in modern Israel today. This Exodus text does not say how the witches are to be known and sorted out. It leaves room for present day self-styled prophets to take laws into their hands and eliminate people without reason or for the subjective reasons of being a witch.

It is important to note that Nigerian as a country has a legal provision against the practice of witchcraft that does not permit arbitrary killing. Section 210(a) of the nation's Criminal Code expressly states that: *any person who by his statements or actions represents himself to be a witch or have the powers of witchcraft is guilty of misdemeanour, and is liable to imprisonment for two years.*

The Nigerian law does not permit the taking of life of suspected witches. It is therefore illegal for any Nigeria to destroy life and property on mere accusation of witchcraft. Despite the country legal prohibition on unlawful killings, the literally interpretation of this biblical text: Exodus 22:18: is still the major cause of so many deaths, stigmatization and rejection and abandoning of children who are believed to be witches in Akwa Ibom and Cross River State of Nigeria.

STATING THE PROBLEM

The dawn of the 19th century, witnessed the arrival of Christianity into the soil of Southeast Nigeria. The people who received this *new religion* were not spiritually vacuumed. Their traditional religious beliefs and practices of consulting oracles, diviners, seeking the help of mediums, witch doctors, rainmakers, fortune-tellers etc had been the preferred way of life of the people. These traditional practices got deeper in their lives as a result of experienced insecure social conditions, lack of free or affordable medical services, economic regression, poverty, sickness, misfortunes of life, accident, injury, stillbirth, barrenness, internal pains. These social problems are often left at the doorsteps of witches and Satan. This is to say that most social issues found explanations through their religious experience. In the religious tradition of the people, witches are mostly feared. This thought-pattern and traditional beliefs of the people progressed into a substantial creed that all manners of evil, accident, deaths, still birth, sickness, internal pains, barrenness, deaths, injury etc are attributed to wicked spiritual

⁴ RICHARD J. CLIFFORD, SJ, *Exodus* (P. 54 NO 43. P 54) in "Jerome Biblical Commentary".

powers. Of all the spiritual powers that can cause human problems, witchcraft was mostly feared among the people. Witches are believed to prey nocturnally upon human soul and cause untold social problems for the people. All the misfortune listed above are most often believed to be caused by witches. The traditional religious functionaries: the priests, mediums, diviners, sooth-sayers, fortune-tellers, rain-makers, witch doctors, herbalists and others were often consulted and supposedly gave solutions however imperfectly to all these problems of life. To date, the traditional witch doctors that are believed to be the chief agents in curative campaign against witches are valued and respected.

Into this milieu and spiritual atmosphere, Christianity was introduced. The various forms of Christianity denominations spread very rapidly through the communities in southeast of Nigeria. It has even been observed that Churches are the main industries in Southeast Nigeria. This anecdotal reference shows the central place the churches have in the lives of the people. A bird's eye view of the society of Southeast Nigeria with its numerous churches would give an impression that that Christianity has succeeded in uprooting the traditional religious practices of the people. This is far from the truth. Rather the religious movements that abound in the area have attempted to maintain the practices of the traditional religious system especially in the area of witch-hunting, spiritual diagnoses of sickness and determining the causes of death etc.

In our present era, a lot of human problems are unduly associated with the activities of witches. Among these are:

1. HIV/AIDS:

Our Team once organized a workshop on HIV/AIDS at Uyo⁵ and was shocked at the input of one of the Participants:

HIV/AIDS is caused by spiritual agents- the witches. Further, she explained how this works: the witches use spiritual syringes in the night to siphon blood from infected persons to inject same into uninfected persons thus causing HIV/AIDS.⁶

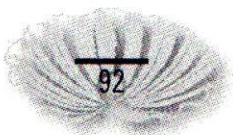
Globally, the cause of HIV/AIDS is known and there is absolutely no reason to raise this global health pandemic to the spiritual level of witches being involved. This explains why spiritual solutions are sought, people accused at the numerous circumstances of HIV/AIDS infections.

2. Illness/death

Most often than not, many illnesses, complicated health cases, miscarriages, barrenness, and death are associated with the malice of the witches. Accused

⁵ Uyo is the Capital City of Akwa Ibom State in Southeast Nigeria.

⁶ Mrs ALICE OKON explained that this was what her Pastor taught in their Church and she has no reason to believe something else from any other authority. In her views, her Pastor is the vicar of God on earth.



people have been arbitrary killed without authentic medical verification to ascertain the cause of death of the supposed victim. Causes of illness and death are multifarious in a developing society like Southeast Nigeria:

a. The medical care services in the country as Nigeria is not at its best. Aside from this, medical services are not affordable and available to all.

b. Coupled with this, the inability of our people in not cultivating the culture of regular medical check-up is another cause of death. Medical conditions that could be arrested early and on time can develop into bad complications due to irregular or no medical check up. For instance, a person with a very high blood can suddenly drop death. Often this situation of sudden death has been attributed to witches and persons accused suffer terribly for this.

c. Poverty: Many people and families in South East Nigeria live below poverty level. Poverty is a vicious circle and does lead to many complications in life. For instance, a poor person may prefer to seek health attention in spiritual churches because of not being able to have access to authentic health care resources.

3. Naturally occurrences:

In 2005, we visited a family to show our solidarity to them when we learnt of the flood disaster that damaged their fence and followed through their entire house. We were shocked when we observed that their elder brother was serious beaten and locked up because he was accused of using his witchcraft powers to pull down the fence. He went through incredible ordeal in the hands of his siblings and other family members. Eventually, the fence was rebuilt, but the very next year, a torrent of floodwater pull down the fence again. By this time, their elder brother was ostracized and banished from the family house. It was then obvious to them that a more concrete fence was the answer to the constant flood problem.

Numerous cases of this nature abound everywhere and every time. Mrs. Akon Akapan,⁷ was diagnose of cancer of the breast in the hospital and was booked for surgery but after consulting with her pastor, she preferred to believe that her health condition was caused by her brother who was believed to be a witch. Subsequently, she was admitted into a spiritual church for spiritual healing where she eventually died.

SOCIAL PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH THE EXODUS 22: 18 NIGERIAN INTERPRETATION.

A close study of the activities of those who engage in witchcraft eradication in Southeast Nigeria reveal that they employ very subjective methodology which to my mind are very doubtful. The traditionalist use series of ordeal to fish out

⁷ The real name of this person is conceal to maintain privacy.

witches. The religiously inclined groups rely chiefly on the reception of 'heavenly spiritual messages'⁸ from the 'spirited' members whose psychological state are never verified. During the prayer sessions, these 'spirited' members appear to be in a state of trance and semi-unconscious and prophesy to the clients the source of their problems or sickness often naming the witch responsible for the ailment suffered or problems encountered. Sometimes the religious leader can simply tell the clients who the witch is even without being in the state of trance or relying on the spirited members of the congregation.

Throughout our field work, we were unable to record spiritual prophecies that centred on means of progress, scientific discovery or way of improving governance for common good. But nearly every prophecy was around witchcraft activities. The detected 'witches' are always close family members: parents, brothers, sisters, mother-in-law, father-in-law, old people in the kindred etc. Our extensive field-work on the subject matter revealed that the social problems caused by these self-styled 'spirited' people and religious leaders in Southeast Nigeria are enormous. This moving true life story of a child is an example of the many numerous situations of the social problems in Southeast Nigeria:

I was attending a fasting and prayer service at Church with my parents when the pastor identified me as a witch. He then beat me in front of the congregation and sent me out from the Church. When I got home my father also beat me and then sent me away from the house. I wandered the streets for more than a month surviving on stream water and scraps from the market. I felt so sorrowful and sad. Eventually my father came and took me back home where he locked me up in a room with some goats. He then tied my arms and legs with twine rope and seriously beat me for weeks on end telling me to confess to being a witch. When I refused the beatings continued. I often begged him for food and drink but he refused. Eventually one day, my brother set me free. I ran to the village where someone took pity on me, feed me and took me to CRARN⁹ to avoid being murdered.¹⁰

This is only but an iceberg at the tip of the ocean. Many such occur everywhere in many communities in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States. Our field staff recorded the following incident at Okpok Ikpa Village in Cross River State: There were two brothers who both owned their families. One of them was unable to secure any employment and had no training in any trade for a livelihood. Maintenance of the family was pretty difficult for him with no steady income. He was noted to be constant client to a nearby spiritual church. On consultation with

⁸ Most people in Southeast Nigeria believe that God must of necessity speak through special persons he has endowed with his Spirit. At every religious service or prayer sessions, they long to hear the voice of God and use the special traditional terminology 'Uyo Oduo' literally meaning the divine voice has arrived.

⁹ CRARN - a Non-Governmental Organization cited in no 3.

¹⁰ Confession of a Child at Child Rights and Rehabilitation Network" (CRARN) in "Stepping Stone Nigeria Newsletter", 2 (2007) 1.

his pastor in the spiritual church, he was told that his brother was a witch, whose spiritual manipulation hindered his progress in live. On the morning of 18th August, 2007, he decided to take a revenge on his brother. As he did not meet his brother at home, he killed the brother's wife and a baby she was suckling. The eldest son of his brother narrowly escape death with severe injury of cuts inflicted on him too. On completion of his assignment, he shouted: "witches are not meant to live". The culprit is cooling his feet in the Police custody.¹¹

Our team visited the Prison at Uyo and met a young lady who was serving a life sentence for killing her mother in cold blood. According to her, the prophecy that the mother was a witch and marring her progress angered her to the point of murdering her mother. Mother victim serving a life sentence too was interviewed at Ikot Ekpene prison, like the first case, he murdered a relative whom a religious movement prophesied to be a witch. In April 2006, our team was briefed of a pathetic incident about witchcraft accusation. Our informant told us that the men of the Police force swept through the sleepy village of Ikot Inyang, Ikot Ekpene Local Government Area and made a number of arrests in connection with the murder of a man, accused of being a witch by a church in the village.¹² We have interviewed many young wives¹³ who are completely cut off from the marital families for fear of being bewitched. Children are known to abandon their parents when they have been prophesied to be witches.

There are lots of information in our national papers and periodicals on the problems of witchcraft. The *Insider*:¹⁴ records blood chilling murders that have accorded in South East Nigeria as a result of the prophecies from Religious Movements and witch doctors. These murders have cost untold social problems for the victims' families. The following episodes are just but a tip of the iceberg in the ocean.

1. In Afaha Atan, in Ibiono Ibom Local Government Area, Innocent Edem Effiong, 29, hacked is aged father Donald Edem Effiong to death and later hauled the corpse into a wheel barrow and emptied it into a deep well near the village primary school and took to his heels. The police arrested him later. When our team visited him in the police custody, he confessed that he received the prophecy from a spiritual church that his father was a witch.
2. In June 2002, Effiong Akpan, 33, from Obong in Abak Local Government Area murdered his 70 year old father in cold blood prophesied by a Church to be a witch.

¹¹ Ete Okonkon Udo an eye-witness to this event narrated this to one of Staff Mr Emmanuel Akpan in November, 2007.

¹² This information was obtained from an oral interview with Mr. Udosoro Akpan, and eye-witness of the events that occurred in that village on 26th April 2006.

¹³ On 15/3/2006; 3/6/2007; 11/08/2006; 1/12/2007; the following women respectively granted us interview: Mrs Alice Udo, Mrs Imaikop Udofia, Mrs. Arit Effiong, Mrs Uwem Udom. They narrated their sufferings in their marital homes on the accusation of witchcraft.

¹⁴ Insider is one of Nigerian's weekly magazine (see September 1, 2003, No. 35 P. 18).

3. Also at Ibiakpan Nto Akan village, Ikot Ekpene LGA, a middle aged man Archibong Udo Essien, was picked up by the Police in June 2002 for causing the death of an 80 year old woman, Nkwa Nkwo Inyang, after cutting off her right hand, and inflicting two deep cuts on her head for being a witch.
4. At Mbak Etoi in Uyo LGA, a 30 year old man hatched his grey haired old mother to death and also killed his younger brother, who were both accused of being witches. He received the prophecy from a spiritual church.
5. A 15 year old Enefiok Sylvester of Utu Ikot Ekpenyong in Ikot Ekpene LGA according to Police report was tied to an electric pole and burnt to death in 2001 by his uncle, Udemé Akpan Adiauke on accusation of being a witch.
6. In February 2002 at Obio Etoi in Uyo LGA, where Sunday Edo, 50, reportedly tied his son to a stake, poured petrol and set him ablaze. The reason for his death being that the deceased became a 'born again Christian' and was fond of accusing his father of practicing witchcraft.
7. Markson Akpan Udom, 67, of Ikot Idiong village in Ukam, Mkpat Enin LGA was accused of being a witch and that he was responsible for the death of his step son. He was abducted from his village by youths to a distance bush where he was severely beaten and injected with a lethal substance suspected to be acid on the neck and on other part of the body which resulted in his death.
8. Again in 2002, in Abiakpo Ikot Essien in Ikot Ekpene, LGA, the Village Head reported to the Police how 20 irate youths stormed the village hall where a meeting of the village council was going on, dragged out three young men whom they had previously accused of being witches stabbed them continuously, before setting them ablaze.
9. A house -to- house search for witches took place in 2002 at Ikot Ewang in Ikot Ekpene. This was ignited by the mysterious death of a child, the third to die within a year in one particular family. In a suspected sanctuary of a witch, some pictures, under wears and other fetish items were discovered. The suspected witch was a brother to the father of the deceased child, he was lucky to have escaped unhurt to the police station. Mother suspect of this case was apprehended, cut into pieces and his remains exhibited alongside the sanctuary which was publicly displayed before it was burnt.
10. In 1997, the state-owned Weekend Pioneer published an incredible story of how an aged woman was lynched in Uyo, the State Capital of Akwa Thom State, on Suspicion that she was a witch because she merely strayed into an unfamiliar residence to request a cup of drinking water" the Residents of the compound, a superstitious set having heard of a roving sorceress with the power to kill through accepting drinking water from somebody" the paper wrote, raised an alarm 'witch', 'witch' witch...', minutes after that, the innocent woman lay sprawled on the road side, lynched'.

PSYCHOLOGICAL INJURIES

It is worth noting that some killings on the accusation of witchcraft are not mere physical but psychological. Issues and examples abound where people though let alive have been psychologically tormented because they have been accused of being witches. Mr. Jones¹⁵ whom we contacted during our fieldwork informed us that for he has not had contact with his mother for the past ten years because his Pastor prophesied that his mother is a witch. One can only imagine the agony of a mother not having contact with a son she brought up and educated only to be abandoned at old age just for being accused of being a witch without basis. Mrs. Mfon Isiona¹⁶ also told our team of field workers that she has succeeded in stopping her husband from seeing her mother whom she said was prophesied to be a witch.

Aside from this, younger people also suffer a lot, Mrs. Ekaette¹⁷ sent away her housemaid because it was prophesied in her Church that the housemaid is a witch.

Again, Mr. & Mrs. Shadrach¹⁸ refused to let their in-law into their house because of a prophecy they received in the church that he was a witch.

NEW POSSIBILITIES IN CURBING THE PROBLEMS OF WITCH-SYNDROME

Challenging unwholesome doctrine: (i) Dualism. Christians that are dualistic prefer to frame issues in terms of simplistic alternatives: for example either God or Satan. Most often than not, Satan is found behind most problems people have and the real cause of the problems are focused on. The social problems experienced in Southeast Nigeria are reflections of the true situation of a developing milieu. If the people continue in the present thought-pattern of spiritualizing everything and leaving preventable ills at the door step of Satan and Witches, then, development and progress may remain miles apart from the people. This harmful doctrine must be challenged by stake holders.

(ii) Faith Gospel is one of the doctrines that must be seriously challenged if progress is to be made. This doctrine is very commonly emphasized in many churches in Southeast Nigeria. It teaches that:

Jesus' death redeemed us from sin and from all and from all the curses of the law among which poverty. To be poor is to have

¹⁵ The real name of the person involved in this story has been dropped for privacy reason since he is still alive.

¹⁶ The real name of the person involved in this story has been dropped for privacy reason since he is still alive.

¹⁷ The real name of the person involved in this story has been dropped for privacy reason since he is still alive.

¹⁸ The real name of the person involved in this story has been dropped for privacy reason since he is still alive.

sinned or to lack faith. As one of the founders of this doctrine says, God want his children to eat the best, he wants them to have the best of everything. A Christian prospers by merely confessing his or her faith, or alternatively- by giving to God first, for he has promised to repay abundantly. Here they cite Malachi 3:8-11; Mark 11:24, Mark 10:30. Prospering is reduced to a matter of faith or faith and generous giving... This form of Christianity ignores all political and economic causes of poverty and reduces everything to a question of faith. It diverts attention from the economic order and leads to no political activity whatsoever. ..The insistence that health is exclusively a consequence of belief or that healing is to be obtained through God's miraculous intervention, diverts attention from the immediate causes of Africa's health problem: inadequate access to safe water, deficiency of diet, lack of medical care and drugs, lack of education, poverty, unemployment. Many of these are consequence of more basic causes: corruption and mismanagement, disorder of international relations.¹⁹

Some people in Southeast Nigeria have added another dimension to the Faith Gospel doctrine by believing that witches can make them poor. This also diverts attention from the true causes of poverty and leaves the problems at the door steps of witches. A radical plan of action is needed to change peoples' mind set and to challenge doctrines that are perpetrating the problems of the people. To my mind, education that is geared towards influencing the mind-set of the people is the answer to this problem. This type of education need not be formalized. It could be arranged informally at village centres so that everyone could have the opportunity of benefiting from it.

Provision of important health care and social services: It is important for the government to provide necessary health care and social services to the people. For instance, health care delivery system must be made affordable and available to people and those who can secure jobs or who are too old to work for a living should be supported by the government until such a time they can get means of livelihood.

Monitoring Team: The Government can set up a monitory and supervision unit in groups of villages to concretize the people on the ills of arbitrary killings going on in the state. Any spiritual church noted for having tendencies for 'detecting witches' should be seriously sanctioned. It closure may also be recommended because most of the roots of killings originated from prophecies they give to their clients. Preliminary legal curriculum can be included in our educational system

¹⁹ Documents On New Christian Movements in Africa and Madagascar in Doctrine and Life Vol. 44 January 1994 Bernard Treacy (ed) p9. 38-39 Dominican Publications, Ireland.

at all levels. Also, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) should take this issue serious and collaborate with Government agencies to check abuses of the human person under of guise of witch hunting.

Conclusion

The killings that have occurred in Akwa Ibom State under the guise of witchcraft are enormous. Among the Christians, the methodology of detecting the witches in the society is very subjective. Sometimes the religious leader upon hearing of the problems narrated by the member of his or her religious group just decides who the witch is among the family members. In the traditional society, the method too of detecting witches is subjective as well, suspects are often made to go through inhuman and subjective ordeal. The social problems compounded by these issues are indescribable. Children have been orphaned, families separated, parents and children part ways for life, wives and husbands separate and lots more. This situation should not be allowed to continue. To succeed, strong decisive actions are needed on the part of the government and a will by the people to change the situation.

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