

Tackling child abuse linked to faith or belief

The belief in witchcraft has in recent years led to some horrific cases of child abuse and child-killing. **Justin Bahunga** reports on measures to tackle this growing problem.



The belief in supernatural forces, good or evil, that can control people and events is widespread across faith and culture. In many societies, where such beliefs are held, it is believed that those forces can be acquired voluntarily or involuntarily. The belief in witchcraft has sometimes led to harmful behaviours including emotional and physical abuse, infanticide and even sexual abuse.

While accusations of witchcraft have targeted old people in the past, particularly women, there has been a growing trend to accuse children of being witches or possessed by evil spirits, not just in war torn Democratic Republic of Congo and other poverty stricken areas of Africa, but also in the UK. Most of the cases reported in the UK have been within the black communities. They have included the high profile cases of Victoria Climbié (2000), Child B (2003), and Kristy Bamu (2010).

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The diagnosis of witchcraft is not based on any scientific or medical evidence. There is no other method identifying whether a child is ‘a witch’ apart from the words of faith leaders or other people. There is no method – scientific or otherwise - of proving that a child diagnosed as a witch is responsible for harming people in any way. Once a child is branded by a faith leader, everyone else in the particular community or congregation believes this is the case. For example some of the cases that AFRUCA has dealt with have included a child accused of making her step-mother barren and another child with a physical disability accused of demonic possession because of their physical state such as epilepsy, left-handed, a hand with extra finger, skull deformation etc. In the case of the 15 year old Kristy Bamu, the fact that he had wetted his pants was enough evince that he was a witch.

The accusation of witchcraft dehumanises and criminalises the child thereby opening the door for many forms of abuse including, physical, emotional abuse and neglect while at the same time putting the child at risk of sexual abuse.

Once a child has been branded as a witch or possessed by evil spirit, she/he has to go through a process of deliverance/exorcism. The exorcism rites may include prayer; fasting and when this fails the next stage is to resort to physical force by “beating the devil out of the child”. Cases of semi-strangulation allegedly to “squeeze life out of the devil”, stabbing to “create a way out for the evil spirit” have been reported. There also have been cases of beating, burning or putting pepper or chilli in the eyes of a child.

In extreme cases identifying a child as a witch is the first episode in a serious of incidents of escalating violence which can lead to death. In cases where children survive, the effects of branding a child as a witch are long-term and devastating and include post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and feeling suicidal.

The two cases studies below highlight the kind of abuse that vulnerable children can be subjected to following accusations of witchcraft.

■ Case Study 1: Child B

Child ‘B’ (name withheld for her protection) was brought to the UK by her aunt who passed her off as her daughter. The aunt, Child ‘B’ and two other adults lived in the same flat. An eight year old boy who lived with them one day accused the Child ‘B’ of being possessed and the adults agreed that this 10-year old girl was a witch and that she was practising an evil form of witchcraft. She was starved, cut with a knife, hit with a belt and shoes. She had had chilli peppers rubbed into her eyes and was repeatedly slapped, kicked and bitten. At one stage, she was put in a laundry bag to be thrown in a river and was told “this is the day that you are going to die”. She was eventually discovered by a street warden on the steps to the block of her apartment in East London covered in cuts, bruises and with swollen eyes. The police found an entry in the notebook of her aunt which talks about Child ‘B’ being branded as a witch at a church event.

■ Case Study 2: Kristy Bamu

Kristy Bamu, a 15 year-old boy came to visit his sister and her boyfriend in London along with his siblings for Christmas in 2010. During their stay the sister’s partner, Eric Bikubi accused all three children of having Kindoki (a word meaning witchcraft in the Democratic Republic of Congo).

However, it was Kristy who became the focus of Bikubi’s attention after he found a pair of wet pants belonging to Kristy. Wetting is an act popularly linked to witchcraft. Bikubi then accused Kristy of trying to harm his child. The child suffers from a congenital disease and was in hospital before Kristy and other siblings came to visit Bikubi family. He punched, kicked and head butted him before beating him with a metal weight-lifting bar as hard as he could and knocking out his teeth with a hammer.

Bikubi also ripped apart one of his ears with a pair of pliers and broke four floor tiles on his head and forced Kristy’s siblings to join in the violence and help clear the blood. On Christmas Day, with his face beaten to a barely recognisable pulp, Kristy was thrown into a bath and drowned because he was too weak to keep his head above the water.

The scale of the problem

The research done by Eleanor Stobart in 2006 reported 74 cases of abuse linked to a belief in witchcraft and spirit possession; 38 cases involving 44 children were confirmed as faith-related. Some of the cases involved semi-strangulation allegedly to “get life out of the devil” and a couple of cases consisted of stabbing of a child to create an outlet for the spirit to get out of the child. AFRUCA deals with around a dozen cases each year.

However the experiences of both AFRCA and experts such as Eleanor Stobart suggest that the numbers are higher than those that are reported by the different agencies. There are a number of reasons for this. First, many practitioners are unable to detect faith-based abuse and so the incidents are often recorded under the usual forms of abuse i.e. physical, emotional, sexual abuse and neglect without ever finding the source of the problem; victims do not report faith-based abuse because they either believe the accusations that are made about them or they fear repercussions if they report the abuse. For example, they could fear that the evil spirit will turn against them or that the community will ostracise them for denouncing a faith leader.

Who is at risk?

Although it may seem that children are identified as ‘being possessed’ and therefore targets for faith-based abuse randomly, children are most likely to become victims if they are already vulnerable, unprotected or can be identified as outsiders. Children at risk include:

- Children with disability including autism, epilepsy, down’s syndrome, dyslexia etc
- Albinos
- Children living away from home in private fostering situations or in domestic servitude situations
- Children living with a step parent, with one of the natural parents absent or dead
- Children whose parents have been branded as witches
- Children who are seen as “naughty” or have challenging behaviour
- Precocious children and left handed children
- Children who are living within a polygamous setting

Key triggers to accusations and fraud

Families in the migrant communities are faced with many problems and culture and religion can become important to them as a coping mechanism. In situations where belief in witchcraft and spirit possession is very prevalent, fraudsters passing off for healers or faith leaders exploit the community’s vulnerability by promising miracles to fix their problems. In the process, vulnerable children are falsely accused of being responsible for their misfortunes and branded as witches or possessed by evil spirits, and of needing deliverance by faith leaders who are paid for the job.

The problems faced by new migrant families include: immigration status; lack of social support system enjoyed back home (child care, family mediation); lack of support for children with severe behaviour problems or with disabilities; people suffering post-traumatic stress disorder; unemployment and underemployment; former child soldiers needing special support; exclusion from school and underperformance; social exclusion creating a sense of powerlessness; child trafficking and exploitation; experience of harassment, racial discrimination leading to withdrawal from seeking appropriate services and low self-esteem; linguistic difficulties leading to lack of understanding of their needs especially children.

Key issue

Although awareness is increasing about faith-based abuse in the UK, there are still a number of hurdles to overcome. AFRUCA's 11-year experience of working with African Communities has demonstrated that education of the community on child protection is vital. Equally important is the training of practitioners. The key challenges are:

- Limited resources to carry out wide ranging awareness-raising programmes among the new communities regarding the laws and regulations relating to child protection and safeguarding.
- Limited resources to work with faith organisations to ensure that they comply with child protection guidelines in places of worship.
- Absence of appropriate regulatory and policy action to better protect children accused of being witches.
- Lack of adequate social and economic support for families to alleviate their social plight.
- Lack of a system of registration or monitoring for faith leaders. For example anyone can establish a church with responsibility for hundreds of people including children without an obligation to have child protection project policies in place.
- Lack of a uniform and systematic recording of abuses linked to accusations of witchcraft and spirit possession by government agencies nation-wide.



Many victims are also vulnerable to child trafficking. Children who are thrown on the street having been accused of witchcraft are vulnerable to trafficking while others undergo religious rituals before they are taken out of the country of origin to promise that they will not to give the identity of traffickers.

Tackling witchcraft-related abuse

The belief in witchcraft is not a problem in itself. However, it becomes a problem when it leads to accusations that trigger acts of persecution, including psychological, emotional and physical abuse (AFRUCA, 2009) and even death.

The vast majority of Churches do a great job for the community but there are rogue faith leaders who tarnish the image of religion by exploiting the most vulnerable for financial gains. African based churches are growing in the UK and while the overwhelming majority are legitimate and benefit their communities, the lack of regulation means that the rogue churches can develop unchecked.

There is need for appropriate regulatory and policy action to better protect children accused of being witches to supplement as actions taking place as outlined in the National Action Plan.

AFRUCA has identified key stakeholders involved in responding to witchcraft branding and spirit possession and has developed strategies to deal with the issue. These include:

Awareness Raising and Sensitisation: within the African communities and among the young Africans about children's rights as enshrined in the UNCRC and other international conventions and UK legislation promoting the rights and welfare of children.

Policy and Advocacy: AFRUCA has been campaigning for a change in law and practice to safeguard children suffering or at risk of suffering significant harm from witchcraft abuse. We would like to have a legal provision that would make it an offence for someone to brand a child as a witch. This is because in some communities, particularly in the African community, branding a child as a witch implies that she/he is an evil person which is not only emotional abuse but also exposes a child to a series of abuses. Therefore branding a child as witch is emotional abuse which opens up opportunities for further abuse taking place as a result the false accusation of the faith leader.

Training: AFRUCA provides specialist training courses on African cultural and religious practices to raise the skills level and confidence of frontline staff allowing them to provide better services to families where there are concerns of abuse linked to belief or faith. We also provide expert advice on cases of witchcraft abuse.

Working with faith groups on child protection training and support services: Faith services are a key audience. AFRUCA has been partnering with faith leaders to sideline few faith leaders who falsely brand children as witches in order to make money.

Working with local authorities to support victims of witchcraft abuse: currently, there is a gap in the existing service provision to support children who are in care following accusation of being branded as witches or are still with their parents but have been accused of being witches. Equally, there is no support to families going through the traumatic experience of having children taken into care or living with children accused of being witches. AFRUCA, in partnership with Newham Council (Newham Children and Young People Services) and Newham Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), has initiated a project to support children and families who are victims of witchcraft abuse.

In addition, AFRUCA is actively involved in the work of the National Working Group on Child Abuse linked to faith or belief. AFRUCA is playing a key role in the implementation of the National Action Plan to Tackle Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief. AFRUCA has also produced a series of booklets to inform the community on issues of child abuse and Child Safeguarding. With regard to witchcraft abuse, we has published and disseminated over 10000 copies of "What is Witchcraft Abuse?" in both English and French to educate and inform communities and others.

What's the Government doing?

The UK Government has established a National Working Group on Child Abuse linked to Faith or Belief. In August 2012, the Group published a National Action Plan to tackle child abuse linked to faith or belief.

The plan of action sets out 4 key areas of work

1. Engaging communities: engaging key stakeholders (parents, community and faith leaders) and listening to the voices of young people.
2. Empowering practitioners: raising their knowledge and skills level to understand the issue and to gain the confidence to detect such abuses and to better protect children at risk of suffering from abuse linked to faith or belief; to promote greater contact between communities and Local Safeguarding Children Boards
3. Supporting Victims of abuse linked to faith or belief and witnesses. This has been a missing point which is partly responsible for underreporting
4. Communicating key messages: better rapport between communities, practitioners and the media and general public in order to build better understanding of the rights of children as well as having better responses and responsible public discourse when abuse happens.

The Government's decision to establish a National Working Group on Child Abuse linked to faith or belief and drawing an action plan is very welcome. It covers most of the areas that need to be addressed such as engaging the community, training practitioners and supporting victims of abuse. New developments such as supporting witnesses and communicating key messages are welcome developments.

What more needs to happen?

However there are gaps. The government has still not committed itself to provide resources to implement the plan and there is no room made for a legal provision that will provide an additional layer of protection for children who are victims of witchcraft branding. This provision would deter unscrupulous faith and healers whose problem is not being aware but are in for cash.

Although nothing can justify child abuse, there is a need to acknowledge the impact of social economic conditions that make communities vulnerable to rogue faith leaders. The Government needs to provide more social and financial support to families in order to increase their capacity to raise their children in an environment that allow them to optimise their life chances.

Children branded as witches or possessed by evil spirits can lead to the worst abuse and neglect of unimaginable proportions. In a world of increasing mobility and political instability, where refugees are likely to escape violent and traumatic circumstances, there is always an added risk that vulnerable and disoriented people can become exploited by dangerous fraudsters. Focusing merely prosecuting the immediate perpetrators is only part of the solution. Conditions and systems need to be put into place to tackle some of the issues that leave people open to exploitation. The racial, religious and cultural issues that surround witchcraft-related abuse are complex and sensitive matters that require careful consideration and close working with the communities involved. Providing support and working within these communities is key to resolving this issue at an early stage and preventing more of these tragedies occurring.

Knowledge Trails

A Rapid Literature Review Of Evidence On Child Abuse Linked To Faith Or Belief – This research paper reports the findings from a review of previous research on 'child abuse linked to faith or belief', and details recommendations for those who work with children at risk of abuse. Available with Leadership Briefings.

References

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- About AFRUCA

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(Africans Unite Against Child Abuse) UK, an organisation concerned with combatting cruelty against the African child. It works in partnership with other organisations in Africa and across Europe.

AFRUCA has campaigned among other things for a National Action Plan to tackle child abuse linked to accusation of witchcraft and spirit possession. This has led to the establishment of the National Working Group on child abuse linked to faith or belief which has drawn a national action plan to address this problem.