



Africans Unite Against Child Abuse (AFRUCA)

Submission to the General Discussion on

“The Rights of All Children in the Context of International Migration”

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**Title of the paper: Protecting the rights of migrant children branded as witches or
possessed by evil spirits: the case of the UK.**

About AFRUCA

AFRUCA - Africans Unite Against Child Abuse (UK) is an organisation concerned about cruelty against the African child. With our Head Office in London and a Centre for African Children and Families in Manchester, we are the premier charity promoting the welfare of African children in the UK. We also work in partnership with other organisations in Africa and across Europe.

My name is Justin Bahunga. I am AFRUCA's Coordinator for its projects and activities **Against the Branding of Children as Witches Project**. Over the past five years, our work to protect migrant African children in the UK against child branding has involved a national campaign for a change in legislation to help protect children at risk of witchcraft branding, a new pilot project in partnership with others to support families accused of witchcraft as well as a national training programme targetting UK practitioners to ensure they can gain the necessary skills to help protect at risk children. AFRUCA actively lobbied the UK government to act against this harmful practice – the result was the establishment of a National Working Group on the issue as well as the publication of a National Action

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Plan to help protect children at risk of witchcraft branding. This paper has been produced to share our work and experiences in this area to inform the UN's work on migrant children.

Introduction

The paper explores how the complex problems of immigration, poverty and exclusion can put children at risk of witchcraft abuse and suggests recommendations to address the 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 said 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. The belief is not a problem. 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 in extreme cases.

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). This is an issue of serious concern to AFRUCA (Africans Unite Against Child Abuse) and has led AFRUCA to campaign for a change in law and practice to better protect children suffering or at risk of suffering abuse linked to accusation of being witches or possessed by evil spirits. Below are 2 cases studies to highlight the kind of abuse that vulnerable children can be subjected to following accusations of witchcraft.

Case Study 1

Child 'B' (name withheld for her protection) was brought to the UK by her aunt who passed 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 in East London in 2003. She was found covered in cuts, bruises and with swollen eyes on the steps to the block of her apartment. The police found an entry in the notebook which talks about the Child 'B' being branded as a witch at a church event.

Case Study 2

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, an act popularly linked to witchcraft. He then accused Kristy of trying to harm his child and of orchestrating a series of other unlucky events. 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.

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 abuse 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.

In 2011, AFRUCA has dealt with 11 cases of children who were branded as witches including one child who was accused of making her step-mother barren and another child with a physical disability was accused of demonic possession.

Children at Risk

Children who are already vulnerable are more at risk of witchcraft abuse. They include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Children with disability including autism, epilepsy, down's syndrome, dyslexia etc
- Albinos

- Children living away from home in private fostering situations as well as 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 Issues

Families in the migrant communities are faced with so many problems that culture and religion become important 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, 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 & 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 to low self esteem; linguistic difficulties leading to lack of understanding of their needs especially children.

In addition, poor living conditions may lead to problems, such as poor health, that are easily associated with witchcraft for those who believe in it. For example, research (Shelter Report 2006) has shown that poor housing increases the risk of severe ill-health and disability by up to 25% and children living in poor housing are also up to 10 times more likely to contract meningitis and are more likely to be hit by a car. It further pointed out that homeless children are 3 to 4 times more likely to be absent from school and that living in a bad housing puts children at higher risk of low educational achievement. It also reported that poor housing condition and over-crowding may lead to the emergence of behavioural problems in children. These problems are interpreted by some families and faith leaders as manifestations of witchcraft.

Challenges

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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 remain therefore:

- 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 allowing them to better safeguard their children.
- 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.

AFRUCA's Response to the Issue of Witchcraft Branding and Spirit Possession

AFRUCA has identified key stakeholders in dealing with this issue and below are some of the strategies used by our organisation in dealing with the issue of witchcraft branding and spirit possession:

- **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 and exposes a child to a litany of abuses and is therefore an incitement to hatred and violence against a child.

- **Training of Practitioners:** 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. AFRUCA has been partnering with faith leaders to sideline few faith leaders who falsely brand children as witches in order to make money.
- **Partnership Work with Newham 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.
- **Active Involvement in the Work of the National Working Group:** 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.
- **Production/Dissemination of Education Material:** AFRUCA has 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.

Government Response

In response to AFRUCA’s campaign, 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.

While we praise the Government initiative, we still feel that there should be a form of legal provision that will provide an additional layer of protection for children who are victims of witchcraft branding.

This will act as a deterrent for unscrupulous people faith and healers who want to make money by exploiting the vulnerability of communities.

We are also lobbying government to provide resources to implement the National Action Plan to tackle abuse linked to faith or belief. We will also continue to lobby government 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.

Recommendations

The UN agencies responsible for the rights and welfare of children should be proactive in putting pressure on governments to do more to support children in migrant communities especially in these key areas:

1. Training of practitioners working with children to raise their level of knowledge and confidence about the impact of culture and religion on children upbringing.
2. Putting more resources in awareness raising programmes among migrant communities on child protection and safeguarding.
3. A coherent government policy and regulatory action in all countries to prevent harm to vulnerable children and families and to protect children branded as witches and at risk of harmful exorcism rites.
4. A nation-wide government strategy/action plan in countries most affected by witchcraft branding to address the branding of children as witches as well as harmful exorcism rites.
5. Providing appropriate support to families whose social and economic conditions put their children at risk of abuse.

References:

1. National Action Plan to tackle Child Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief:
<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DFE-00095-2012>
2. AFRUCA: What is witchcraft Abuse? <http://www.afruca.org/publications.html>
3. AFRUCA Proposal for changes in policy and the law to enable better protection for children at risk of being branded as witches:
<http://www.afruca.org/images/stories/documents/afruca%20proposal%20for%20change%20in%20the%20law%20re%20witchcraft%20branding%202.pdf>