



Child Accusation of Witchcraft–Another Road into Trafficking

Ifeyinwa Mbakogu¹

ABSTRACT: Child accusation of witchcraft has been the focus of global media reporting however, with limited academic research. Several children removed from trafficking in West Africa that participated in a larger study were accused of witchcraft by Pastors invited for deliverance or revival programs in their towns. Based on these accusations, the children were brutalized by fellow church members, into confessing or revealing the source of their witchcraft powers. Guided by the narratives of affected children, this paper examines why and how children are increasingly accused of witchcraft, the impact on children’s reintegration to their communities, the unexplored link between child witchcraft accusation and child trafficking, while recommending curriculum content on the spiritual-religious-cultural foundations of social work practice.

Keywords: child witchcraft accusation; child witchcraft; child trafficking; stigma; faith-based abuse, child abuse, religion



©2020 This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

1. Introduction

There is a long history of belief in witchcraft in countries across the world (Ashforth, 2015; Edwards, 2013). Previously witchcraft accusations in Africa, targeted women particularly - successful women in society, widows who could be accused of killing their husbands or relatives (Crampton, 2013; Drucker-Brown, 1993; Eboiyehi, 2017), appropriating family inheritance; and old women or men (Eboiyehi, 2017; Ashforth, 2015; UNICEF, 2010) who could be accused of hindering the success of younger family members (Auslander, 1993).

¹ Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, Dalhousie University, Canada

Acknowledgment

The author acknowledges the contribution of child survivors of trafficking that participated in the study; and the support of Nigeria’s National Agency for the Prohibition of Traffic in Persons and other related Matters (NAPTIP).

Funding

The study was funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada

The focus has shifted to children with limited empirical literature on their experiences of witchcraft accusations (Simon, Hauari, Hollingworth & Vorhaus, 2012). Children in several parts of Africa have been implicated in the misfortunes of their family members across diverse contexts. Some unfortunate children are accused - when themselves and family members are displaced persons in conflict zones (Hanson and Ruggiero, 2013); when their parents die from complications attributed to Ebola and HIV/AIDS (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015); or when family members face occurrences defying rational explanations. The foundation for the accusation of innocent or innocent looking children is that a person who practices witchcraft is able to harm others by using the supernatural powers that they possess. The child witch in current discourse is considered a more angry, agile, vicious and fearful force. The child witch's anger or punishment is not confined to persons external to their family network, but the child witch is accused of wreaking havoc on their relatives - parents and siblings included.

The economic downturn in the country of focus, Nigeria also contributes to parents and community's gullibility to the authenticity of these child witchcraft accusations. Moreover, people would rather consult spiritualists, prophets and pastors on their health and financial concerns, than seek the services of medical and financial experts (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015). Several leaders of faith organisations or 'new Pentecostal churches' springing up across the country, aware of the role they are likely to play in marginalised communities lacking access to social and economic resources especially (Stepping Stones Nigeria, 2010), have devised ingenious ways to attract members and boost the church treasury. Additionally, there are indications that the storyline of some Nigerian movies that is watched across African countries are sometimes influenced by new revivalist pastors who reinforce the presence of evil children causing havoc in several homes which intensify infringements on the rights of children accused of witchcraft (Snow, 2017; Van Der Meer, 2013). Van Der Meer's (2013) study on child witchcraft in Malawi reiterated that stories about witchcraft are rife in the communities and are influenced by the themes resonating from Nigerian Pentecostal movies, rivalry, power tussle between communities and envy. Since their ministry is built on spiritual warfare that begin with prophesies and prayers of intervention leading to deliverance (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015), the pastors or prophets hold hugely advertised and patronised revival or exorcism sessions (Onyinah, 2002). During revival sessions, several children are identified as the cause of horrific acts and circumstances (examples are - death of family members, loss of job, inexplicable illnesses and childlessness) faced by their family members.

After children are identified as witches, children and their family members are invited to additional deliverance or exorcism sessions for which they pay a large sum to the pastors or prophets. In other words, the pastors or prophets are amassing wealth on the backs of innocent children. To deliver children from evil witchcraft possession, they are abused in diverse ways, beaten, flogged and disfigured with violent objects (Akhilomen, 2006). Children could be requested to drink acid-based concoctions that are guaranteed to cleanse and liberate them from evil forces (Houreld, 2009; Stepping Stones Nigeria, 2010). One of the expectations of the revival sessions is that the child witch has to point the congregation or pastor to the source of their malevolent power. The belief is that this object is hidden strategically, usually beneath the earth. When the child points to the spot, the congregation assist in digging out the object. Everyone is interested in this deliverance, because if the child witch is not stripped of their malevolent power, they could be the next target of the child's venom.

Family members could also accuse children of practicing witchcraft. When this occurs, evidence for these accusations are grounded in: listening to stories told by others (social networks) about their children's activities; or meetings held with pastors, prophets, or traditional diviners. The latter is attributed with special powers to perceive the foul odour of a witch (Quarmyne, 2011). Since it is perceived that witchcraft powers could be consumed through drinks or medicines, or passed on from another (usually older person) witch, some children may be unaware of possessing witchcraft powers, until it is sniffed out by those gifted with this insight (Drucker-Brown, 1993).

1.2 Children and Witchcraft Accusation

The child that is more likely to be accused of witchcraft is the stubborn, active, promising, intelligent or strong-willed child which is relatable to Harries' (2012) association of jealousy or envy intended to get rid of rivals, as an unexplored basis for witchcraft accusations. Other, likely victims are: children from polygamous homes, children from homes experiencing economic hardships with parents suddenly losing their jobs or children facing suspicion and maltreatment from their step-mothers after the death of their mothers. A large percentage of children accused of witchcraft are from poor homes (Schnoebelen, 2009), are orphans, have experienced the loss of a parent or are in fostering care with extended family members (UNICEF, 2008; UNICEF, 2010). Some peculiarities associated with children themselves, endear them more to witchcraft accusations. These include their disability (UNICEF, 2010), unexplained or recurring illnesses and children that are albinos (Edwards, 2013; UNICEF, 2010). Undoubtedly, economic, social, political

and religious factors contribute to these witchcraft accusations. The new revivalist pastors also preach a new prosperity gospel, stressing that since Jesus Christ died on the Cross for humanity, everyone should be free from misfortunes that include poverty, ill-health and economic hardships (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015). In a country like Nigeria with several years of military rule, the upsets of structural adjustment programs, terrorist attacks, attacks by Fulani herdsmen and the present democratic leadership that is more vested in looting the Nation's treasury than providing social support to indigent families, it is probable, that families from marginalized communities will fall victim to mischievous stories about the root of their tribulations.

Children experience a lot of stigma when they are accused of practicing witchcraft (UNICEF, 2010). When a member of the family unit is accused of witchcraft, it unsettles or strains family relations (Akrong, 2007), by pitching people against each other and creating suspicion, caution and fear. Thus, the stigma of accusation of witchcraft is experienced by family members who are left with limited options: to sever relations with the child witch, seek deliverance for the child witch or face ostracization from their extended family or community. Due to the stigma of witchcraft, several parents have: abandoned their children in forests; travelled from Akwa-Ibom State to Abia State, Nigeria only to abandon their children by the road side (Stepping Stones Nigeria, 2010); watched helpless or abetting while their children experience harm during deliverance; or sent their children to seek help in distant cities hoping that deliverance will be successful and the children can return home when the community has only faint memories of their accusation of witchcraft. This latter approach leads to the narratives of children framing this paper. Discussions with the children during my research present how their accusation of witchcraft by a faith leader, led their parents to seek support that will prevent further violence or death at the hands of their community members. Unfortunately, this support led the children into trafficking.

Guided by the narratives of participating children, this paper will discuss why and how children are increasingly accused of witchcraft in Nigeria, how these impact children's reintegration to their communities and explore the unaddressed witchcraft accusation - trafficking link. The paper addresses the following research questions:

- 1) What reasons do children give for their accusation of witchcraft?
- 2) How does the labelling of children as witches make children susceptible to trafficking?

2. Method

Data guiding this paper is derived from a study of more than 50 children below 18 years removed from trafficking in Nigeria and resident in shelters managed by The National Agency for

the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP). Nigeria's anti-trafficking agency, NAPTIP was established in August 2003 to investigate, prosecute trafficking offenders and rehabilitate survivors of trafficking (NAPTIP, 2010, Nwogu, 2006). Within the period of the study, NAPTIP allowed the researcher to interact with children across its five Shelters located in five states in Nigeria. The purposeful sampling technique was adopted because it allowed the researcher to select children from diverse regions of the country where feasible, so that gender and age contrasts can be highlighted and assessed. The study used multiple qualitative tools that included personal interviews, focus group discussions and art-based forms (drawing and drama) to gather information from children across their removal from different exploitative activities (witchcraft accusation, stealing, prostitution, domestic servitude) to show different stages of their journey into and out of trafficking. Using multiple sources or ways of engaging with children enabled the researcher to gather basic demographic data from children during the interaction.

Ethics approval was sought for the study from McGill University's Research Ethics Board. The researcher spent between one to two months in each NAPTIP shelter visited. During the initial introduction by shelter management, the researcher informed children about the nature of and intention of the study. Children were also allowed to ask questions about the study that assured them of their safety prior to giving assent to participate in the study. The personal interviews with the researcher lasted from 30 minutes to one hour. Personal interviews with children were held in private rooms in the shelter or other locations the children considered favourable for discussions with the researcher. The children had additional sessions to engage in drawings and share the stories behind these drawings with the researcher. The conversations between children and the researcher were audio-recorded with the assent of participating children. Children were not provided monetary remuneration for partaking in the study.

Data collected during the research were transcribed by the researcher and read through with main themes and sub themes/codes generated from the data that projected children's perspectives of their journey into trafficking. The coding was achieved with attention to main themes guided by children's narratives of: life and home before departure; how children left home; their experiences while away from home; and their experiences and plans after removal from exploitative circumstances.

3. Results and Discussions

While the traditional stories of motivators of children's departure from home are important for addressing child trafficking, empirical literature needs to recognize new triggers or situations

leading children into trafficking. One of these new triggers is children's indictment in witchcraft as amplified by the narratives of some children in the study. The discussions in this paper will align with the research questions to focus on: children's narratives on reasons behind their accusation of witchcraft and how children's accusation of witchcraft opens them to trafficking.

3.1 Children's voice: why children are accused of witchcraft

What is the place of children's voice when they are accused of witchcraft? When children are accused of witchcraft, they are stigmatized, traumatized, sometimes rendered homeless and made susceptible to trafficking. However, rarely are children allowed to voice their experiences to enhance academic discourse. More information abounds in sensational stories provided by the news media. When affected children speak, then policy makers have adequate information to design appropriate programs that enhance reintegration of affected children and prevent future occurrences that infringe on the rights of other at-risk children.

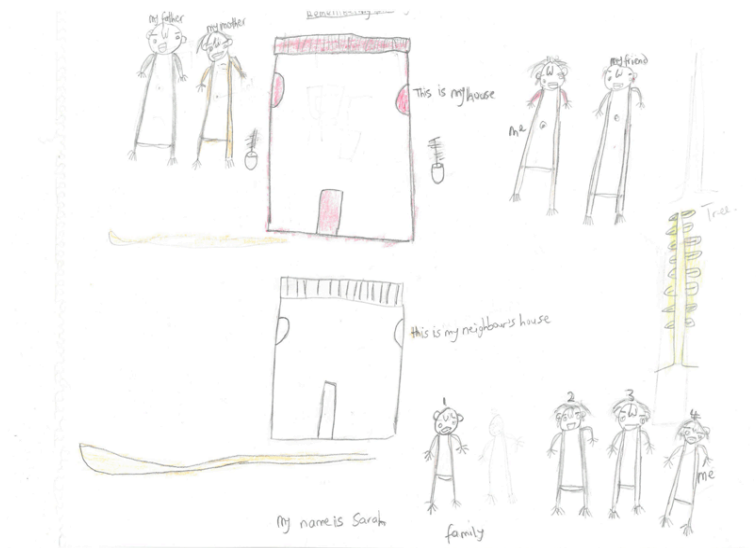
Children are traumatized when deceptive members of religious groups accuse them of witchcraft. Angel was 12 years old when the researcher visited the Shelter. She left her family in Taraba State about three years earlier after a Pastor identified her as a witch or member of a secret cult during one of the Church retreats in her native home.

Angel: ... it is one Pastor T that came to our church to pray that said we are in secret society and that we should confess.

Ifeyinwa: Did he actually point to you and say that you are a member of a secret society?

Angel: Yes.

Angel narrates the trauma of a 9-year-old child identified as a witch before a large congregation in her local community. The 'we' expressed here, refers to other children in the Church during that prayer session that were also identified as witches.

Picture 1: Sarah's memories of home

The second child, Sarah, is 9 years old and the last of four children. Sarah's parents are farmers in Taraba state. Sarah explains why she left home for Abuja three years ago:

Ifeyinwa: *Please tell me why you left home.*

Sarah: *Because there are too many witches in that place that is why we left.*

Ifeyinwa: *Who did you leave with?*

Sarah: *I left with Angel and Pastor X and other children.*

We came for deliverance. Me and Angel and other children from Taraba, we come to Pastor X's house in Taraba... We stayed there and some of us have gone back to our parents. Pastor X now chose the person that is going to come to Abuja. That is how he came and chose us to come.

Ifeyinwa: *He chose you to come to Abuja for what?*

Sarah: *To come for prayers.*

Sarah had to leave home because Pastor T accused her of witchcraft. However, she travelled with Angel and a different Pastor X for deliverance and escape from the stigma associated with her identification as a child practicing witchcraft. Pastor X also appeared to engage in a screening process to determine who should travel with him to Abuja. Sarah seemed relieved that she was one of those chosen to travel to Abuja for the prayer session. Even her young mind, could discern the weight and pain of the witchcraft accusation. It was important that she rid herself of that accusation of witchcraft.

Picture 2: Sarah's Journey away from Home

Three years after their departure from home to seek deliverance from witchcraft possession, Angel and Sarah were brought to the shelter because Pastor X and his activities were investigated by NAPTIP. During our discussions, Angel said she is tired of living with other people. She did not understand why she should live with others, when she had a home to return to. She wanted to return home to her parents who had enrolled her in school prior to her departure from home. Angel also corroborates Sarah's story of '...too many witches...' by recalling the humiliating beating and maltreatment she endured from her church members after Pastor T accused her of practicing witchcraft:

Ifeyinwa: *And what did your parents say?*

Angel: *They did not do something, they said yes.*

Ifeyinwa: *They accepted that you are a member of a secret society.*

Angel: *Yes*

Ifeyinwa: *So, what did they do to you?*

Angel: *My father said they should tie my hand but my mother said I am not in secret society.*

Then the church members said that I should look for something. But I was just giving them anything I found. It is one thing that is always inside torch like a bulb. They said that one is the eye. I tried to find that thing but I did not see it inside the bush. The Pastor did not follow

us. A girl kept telling me to look for that thing. I was looking for that thing and they were beating me too.

Ifeyinwa: *The people from your church?*

Angel: *Yes, they were beating me any way they like. I found something and came and show them. But they asked is that it? They said it is a lie that it is not the thing. They now asked me to begin the search...*

When religion focuses on accusing helpless children of witchcraft, children are exposed to extreme violence by their accusers who in Angel's case were her church members, some of whom knew her as a baby. But when a child is accused of witchcraft they are no longer viewed from that realm of innocence but from the realm of evil that can only be turned around with prayers and deliverance, the first stage of which is uprooting their source of power, something Angel did not possess and could not produce to the violent crowd. Although Angel said she had to hurriedly think of something to dig up and offer them, the crowd comprising of mostly young persons, were certain she was lying to them. While Angel's mother stood by her daughter, adamant that Angel was not a witch, the child's father asked them to tie her hands. The father's action could be compliance to avoid punishment meted out to the accused and family members who could be banished from the community or barred from associating with members of their community. It is evident from Angel's story that the Pastor who identified her, as a witch did not provide evidence of – how Angel became a witch or the atrocities the child had committed justifying the negative label. Literature indicates that witchcraft can be learned or inherited (Quarmyne, 2010) with a mysterious process for the transference of these powers (Sanou, 2017). A study by Ering, Omono and Uyang (2014) with 562 respondents from 12 communities in Cross River State, Nigeria identified the most common factors leading to children's accusation of witchcraft as: pastors' revelations and the personal confession provided by children. While another study with children accused of witchcraft in the care of Child Rights and Rehabilitation Network (CRARN) Nigeria, reports that deliverance could occur in four locations: churches, prayer houses, shrines or through traditional medicine practitioners. And deliverance is deemed successful by naive clients when they vomit or pass stool (UNICEF, 2010).

3.2 Labelling children as witches and vulnerability to trafficking

The paper also seeks to understand how the labelling of children as witches makes them vulnerable to trafficking. It appears that witchcraft and its interpretation is ever changing to reflect

social situations, conflicts, tensions and/or problems existing in contemporary African society. (Sanders 2003). Previously, witchcraft accusations were centered on women, which some attribute to their lowly positioning or social class in the society – as widows, single mothers or simply women in a male-dominated society. When women act in ways that align with the needs of society, they are viewed positively, but when they favour certain members of the household, in relation to wealth or inheritance allocation, then friction persists and the misfortune of others, is attributed to them. Witchcraft accusation within the last two decades has shifted to children and the extent of abuse and violence, often undocumented and unprosecuted leaves several children displaced, exploited and liable to trafficking far away from their original homes.

One of the markers of labelling children as witches, is that children's interaction prior to leaving home and after leaving home, marks children as different from others, especially their peers. The goal is to understand how children interpret their new label of 'child witches' and how this impacts the way they experience life after moving away from home and into trafficking. The interaction with affected children shows an attempt to come to terms with the unfamiliar - living away from parents and siblings, facing discrimination and stigma in social associations and dropping out of school.

Picture 3: Angel's journey away from home



When Angel's parents heard that Pastor X was well-known for providing deliverance to children accused of witchcraft, they handed their daughter to him. Angel travelled with Pastor X to Abuja and remained in his house with other children until she was handed over to a woman resident in Abuja. Angel was upset that the woman delayed in enrolling her in school. The woman's

defense was that Angel could not read. Angel reflected that if the woman enrolled her in school then her reading and writing skills would improve. She cannot improve on these skills, sitting at home without the support of a tutor. Angel was also upset with Pastor X who she claims takes children away from home without keeping in touch with their family members. She said that several families in Taraba State, Nigeria petitioned NAPTIP that Pastor X was selling their children.

For Angel, difference and discrimination were evident in the way she was constantly beaten and disallowed from attending school while her madam's children went to school:

She did not put me in school early... She was talking that there is no money but she put all her children in school. I used to wash plates and fetch water and sweep and wash cloth. If I do something she will beat me. ...She said I don't know how to read. I was thinking, that if you don't know how to read, when you go to school they will teach you

Children like Angel who questioned the role of school attendance and instructions in pupil's lives learned a lot about how different they were from other children within the new household because of their position as domestic servants and the maltreatment they experienced probably based on their history of witchcraft accusation.

When children are removed from trafficking and placed in temporary shelters, agencies are faced with deciding on appropriate forms of reintegration or rehabilitation. Should children be sent home to family or remain in agency care if home is not a safe place of return? From her narratives, Angel considered her trafficking from home a setback because Pastor X delayed her developmental progress. When Pastor X eventually sent Angel to live with a woman, she was beaten at the slightest provocation and delayed from starting school:

Ifeyinwa: *Do you want to go home to your parents or do you want to go back to the woman's house?*

Angel: *I don't want to go back to her house.*

Ifeyinwa: *You want to go home to your parents.*

Angel: *Yes.*

Ifeyinwa: *Were you attending school while with your parents?*

Angel: *Yes.*

Angel is adamant about not returning to the woman's house. She would rather return to more familiar settings with her parents and family. Moreover, with the movement away from home, she had lost several years of schooling and was apprehensive that though she was living in the city, she may find herself many classes behind her former classmates in the village. The child had

devised a way to deal with likely remnants of the witchcraft accusation that warranted her departure from home. Angel assured the researcher that with the prayer and spiritual fasts undertaken with Sarah at the shelter, she felt that God will assist with the process of reintegration. The aim of their fast was for God's intervention to enable them to be reunited with family members who they had not seen for three years. Ultimately, their prayers were answered and they returned home to their family in Taraba State. Though Sarah and Angel like other children were accused of witchcraft, they held on to their Christian faith and belief in God's intervention. The children believed that God was the ultimate Judge that will prove their innocence and return them home. Angel knew she was returning to a place where her parents could send her to school without needing to re-traffic and re-exploit her. She knew where she was headed because she was safe and happy at home with her family until Pastor T destabilized her world with accusations of witchcraft.

Children have been known to experience abuse and violence as a result of accusations of witchcraft. Diverse mediums are explored in the attempt to free children from the bondage of witchcraft – pastors, witchdoctors and traditionalists (Akhilomen, 2006). The torture experienced by children have been documented – drinking concoctions, forcefully removing certain body parts or introducing sharps objects in their tender body frames. The aim of these strategies is to force children to confess to their involvement in witchcraft and narrate the havoc they have caused in people's lives. In several cases, children have chosen the route of confession to end the torture they are experiencing. But with the acceptance of witchcraft come different setbacks. Children are not treated like their peers and they are avoided by others, are unable to attend school since their teachers and potential school mates would be afraid of them. When children are brutalized during deliverance or fall ill they are denied medical care because of prevailing rumour of their involvement in witchcraft (Stepping Stones Nigeria, 2010; UNICEF, 2010). In extreme cases, children are forced to live on the streets and at the mercy of alms provided by those courageous enough to provide them.

That children are also vulnerable to trafficking in the course of escaping or seeking deliverance from their afflictions remains unexplored (Mbakogu, 2015; Msuya, 2017). Because of the difficulty some families have in getting domestic servants in their homes (Akhilomen, 2006; Ebigbo, 2011; Mbakogu, 2004), diverse strategies are explored to ensure that such needed service is provided, in some cases exposing children to abuse even death at the hands of strangers (Mbakogu, 2004). Even when children are recruited to perform domestic work, they may be ill-

treated and experience huge differential treatment between themselves and the biological children of their employers (Akhilomen, 2006) which led to the late enrolment of Angel in school. The diversion of children promised deliverance from witchcraft to other exploitative economic endeavors becomes a new ploy of traffickers this time masquerading as Pastors. In a bid to seek justice for children labelled witches by pastors and spiritualists, Tanzania for instance, modified its anti-trafficking provisions to prescribe punishments to religious leaders implicated in deceptive or misleading practices promoting violence to children (Msuya, 2017). The fact that several parents complained to NAPTIP of lack of access to their children since their departure with Pastor X from home in Taraba state for deliverance in Abuja, is justification for their accusation that the Pastor is 'selling their children.'

There is also limited body of knowledge on survivors (Simon et al., 2012) and organizations that assist in the reintegration of children accused of witchcraft. Discussions on child accusation of witchcraft and violence to victims have been left to journalists and the few NGOs that are directly involved with survivors (Ciekawy and Geschiere, 1998; UNICEF, 2010). Because of children's lowly position in a society that is moderated on foundations of respect to elders and the decisions they make, children accused of witchcraft are unable to express their experiences of torture to anyone (Adebayo and Ogunbanwo, 2017; Akhilomen, 2006). Some children experiencing extreme torture are fortunate to be identified by NGO personnel in their locality who create awareness of their struggles while providing temporary and, in some cases, permanent shelter. It could also be that the stigma linked with witchcraft accusation prevents survivors from building cases against their accusers and reawakening their trauma.

Belief in witchcraft is not a new invention. It has been practiced in countries around the world and resurfaces in horrific forms when circumstances persisting in the present provoke its awakening; and this belief in witchcraft is not displaced by Christian or Islamic practices of present-day Africans, rather it appears to be integrated within the fabric of these religious practices. Besides, considering that the violation and abuse of the children, Angel and Sarah from the study, was carried out by young members of their church, one wonders if we can waive these trends away as simply cultural or social practices from the past that will slowly fade away.

It is important to differentiate between belief in the existence of evil, manifested in form of witchcraft and accusing one of practising witchcraft thus justifying violence meted out to the accuser (UNICEF, 2010). Sometimes, the explanations pastors give for witchcraft accusations are backed by limited information and fuelled by mischief or self-aggrandisement that cause the

suffering of others. Several instances where children were accused of remotely sending incurable ailments leading to the death of victims, or causing violent road accidents, fails to accommodate other rational factors. Ngong (2012) maintains the need to challenge the narratives of witchcraft accusations in Africa by asking if victims of witchcraft had access to medical services and if some road accidents could have been avoided if government had repaired the bad roads in affected countries or communities. These logical interrogations are omitted before pastors and spiritualists sanction the violent punishments children are exposed to. It is difficult to explain what Pastors, spiritualists, families or communities mean when they accuse children of witchcraft. It appears that witchcraft is a fluid term that accusers use to explain occurrences such as sudden loss of lives, investments or jobs, evil, violent accidents, illness or untimely death of loved ones (Simmons, 1980) that transcend human interpretation or comprehension.

Bearing in mind the increased number of children affected by witchcraft accusation and the likelihood of children falling prey to human or organ traffickers in their bid to survive (Stepping Stones Nigeria, 2010), government or policymakers should re-assess its security and justice instruments (Ashforth, 2015), coordinate effective data of affected children across its States and strive to provide alternative support or reintegration programs for children and their families as the need may be. It is also a major violation of the human rights of accused children, a problem that is not given the attention it deserves based on the social, political, economic and educational positions of the accused persons or the lack of awareness of the offence as a human rights violation.

4. Implications for Social Work Practice

The experiences of children accused of witchcraft projected in this paper has implications for social work practice and service delivery to marginalized groups across different levels. This includes the benefits of - an inclusive curriculum, opening room for a range of global social issues and preparing students to engage in transformative learning.

With the increased number of social work students seeking opportunities to engage in clinical and community practice with marginalized groups, course content should promote diversity, equity and inclusion in service delivery. Can social work interventions be truly anti-oppressive if they do not accommodate the voices of marginalized persons in decision making? Moreover, how do social work students address clients traditional, spiritual or religious belief in witchcraft for instance, with limited curriculum content on the spiritual-religious-cultural

foundations of social work practice? Discussions with Angel and Sarah show that though labelled as witches by members of their faith-group, the children were relentless in upholding their Christian faith by engaging in several days of fasting and abstinence. The children maintained that their belief in God will see them through their ordeal, project their innocence and take them home to their parents. The children did not require an all-knowing social worker with a different world-view, likely solely concerned with modifying their beliefs. The children required a social worker able to guide them in that journey of healing within cultural, religious and spiritual frames by beginning from a position of ignorance, waiting for them to provide answers to questions that shape their stories (with links to family, church and social networks), understand their circumstances, identify services they have explored, validate their identified needs, and document these to ultimately inform practice decisions. In essence, more attention should be placed on the social worker as an investigator, with affected children as experts while allowing room for respectful sharing of knowledge rather than pressurizing children to model their beliefs to align with that of assigned social workers. With limited content on and reference to alternative models that will allow students interact with religion and spirituality (Furness & Gilligan, 2010), several social workers are ill-prepared to discuss religion, spirituality and traditional beliefs as it impacts the experiences that some children and families bring to service delivery agencies.

Children are likely to be protected from abuse when social work students are more aware of diverse forms of abuse that could be faced by ethnically diverse clients. The starting point can be - attention to readings and curriculum content on social issues facing minority population with strategies for addressing them within indigenous foundations (rather than Western-centrism or Americentrism), opening up social work classrooms to first voice encounters that create familiarity and acceptance, group and school-wide discussions on topical issues, special papers on social issues affecting previously unfamiliar populations and engaging with movies and novels on topics that introduce students to new learning, new issues, new voices and new interventions.

Ultimately, instructors should arm students with effective critical reflection skills that form the basis of social work learning. Classroom reflections should strategically promote learning across students encounters within their diverse identities as privileged or marginalized persons; and introduce different processes where students can identify the nature of their transformation within the course. This builds from requesting that students position themselves effectively at the beginning of the course; identify the new learning; how that new learning disrupted an earlier, familiar and accepted practice or belief and; how based on the new learning, they arm themselves

for social change that encompasses – self, family, institutions of practice, clients and social structures. With a more diverse curriculum, social work practitioners will be visible across social institutions (educational, health, social, policy), will be able to identify and categorize the nature of children’s abuse (emotional, physical, sexual) when they are accused of witchcraft for instance, and apply appropriate practice models to isolate cultural, religious, spiritual, historical issues, affecting children that predispose them to witchcraft accusations and violence.

References

- Adebayo, K., & Ogunbanwo, A. (2017). ‘Children without a family should come out!’: sociocultural barriers affecting the implementation of interventions among orphans and vulnerable children in Nigeria, *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies*, 12(4), 375-383
- Akhillomen, D. (2006). Addressing child abuse in Southern Nigeria: The role of the Church. *Studies in world Christianity*, 12(3), 235-248.
- Akrong, A. (2007). A Phenomenology of Witchcraft in Ghana. In *Imagining Witchcraft: Witchcraft Beliefs and Accusations in Contemporary Africa*, edited by Gerrie ter Haar, 53-66. Asmara, Eritrea: Africa World Press.
- Asamoah-Gyadu, J. (2015). Witchcraft accusations and Christianity in Africa. *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 39(1), 23 - 27.
- Ashforth, A. (2015). Witchcraft, justice, and human rights in Africa: cases from Malawi. *African Studies Review*, 58(1), 5-38.
- Auslander, M. (1993). Open the Wombs": The Symbolic Politics of Modern Ngoni Witch-finding. In *Modernity and its malcontents: Ritual and power in postcolonial Africa*, edited by Jean and John Comaroff, 167-192. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ciekawy, D., and Geschiere, P. (1998). Containing witchcraft: conflicting scenarios in postcolonial Africa. *African studies review*, 41(3), 1-14.
- Drucker-Brown, S. (1993). Mamprusi witchcraft, subversion and changing gender relations. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 63(4), 531-549.
- Ebigbo, P. (2011). The state of Nigerian Children in the last 50 years. *International Journal of Medicine and Health Development*, 16, 57-76.
- Eboiyehi, F. A. (2017). Convicted without evidence: Elderly women and witchcraft accusations in Contemporary Nigeria. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 18(4), 247-265.
- Edwards, S. (2013). The genocide and terror of witchcraft accusation, persecution and related violence: an emergency situation for international human rights and domestic law. *Journal International Family Law*, 4, 322-330.
- Ering, S., Omono, C., & Uyang, F. (2014). Child-witch phenomenon and its social implications in Nigeria. *American Journal of Social Issues and Humanities*, 4(4), 208-219.
- Furness, S., & Gilligan, P. (2010). Social work, religion and belief: Developing a framework for practice. *British Journal of Social Work*, 40(7), 2185-2202.
- Harries, J. (2012). Witchcraft, envy, development, and Christian mission in Africa. *Missiology*, 40(2), 129-139.

- Mbakogu, I. (2004). Exploring the forms of child abuse in Nigeria: efforts at seeking appropriate preventive strategies. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 8(1), 23-27.
- Mbakogu, I. (2015). Understanding child trafficking from the point of view of trafficked children: The case of 'rescued' children in Nigeria. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). McGill University, Montreal, Canada.
- Msuya, N. (2017). Tradition and culture in Africa: Practices that facilitate trafficking of women and children. *Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence*, 2(1), 1-36
- Ngong, D. (2012). Stifling the imagination: A critique of anthropological and religious normalization of witchcraft in Africa. *African and Asian Studies*, 11, 144-181.
- Onyinah, O. (2002). Deliverance as a way of confronting witchcraft in modern Africa: Ghana as a case history. *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies*, 5(1), 107 -134.
- Quarmyne, M. (2010). Witchcraft: A human rights conflict between customary/traditional laws and the legal protection of women in contemporary Sub-Saharan Africa. *William & Mary Journal of Women and the Law*, 17(2), 475-507.
- Sanders, T. (2003). Reconsidering witchcraft: postcolonial Africa and analytic (un) certainties. *American Anthropologist*, 105(2), 338-352.
- Sanou, B. (2017). Witchcraft Accusations: Destroying Family, Community, and Church. *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*, 13(1), 33-44.
- Simmons, W. (1980). Powerlessness, exploitation and the soul-eating witch: an analysis of Badyaranke witchcraft. *American ethnologist*, 7(3), 447-465.
- Simon, A., Hauari, H., Hollingworth, K., & Vorhaus, J. (2012). A rapid literature review of evidence on child abuse linked to faith or belief. Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre. Retrieved (http://www.cwrc.ac.uk/projects/documents/Oct2012_CWRC_Child_Abuse_linked_to_Faith_or_Belief_Report_FINAL.pdf)
- Snow, S. (2017). Explaining Abuse of "Child Witches" in Africa: Powerful Witchbusters in Weak States. *Journal of Religion and Society*, 19, 1-21.
- Stepping Stones Nigeria. (2010). Witchcraft Stigmatisation and Children's Rights in Nigeria. 54th Session of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. Geneva, 25.
- UNICEF. (2010). Children accused of witchcraft: An anthropological study of contemporary practices in Africa. WCARO, Dakar. Retrieved (https://www.unicef.org/wcaro/english/wcaro_children-accused-of-witchcraft-in-Africa.pdf)
- UNICEF. (2008). The causes and prevalence of accusation of witchcraft among children in Akwa Ibom State. Retrieved (https://cdn.modernghana.com/images/content/report_content/unicef_nigeria_child_witch_report_and_carn_work.pdf)
- Van Der Meer, E. (2013). Child witchcraft accusations in Southern Malawi. *Australasian Review of African Studies*, 34(1), 129-144.