



COVID 19 AND IMPACT ON BLACK CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Exploring Child Witchcraft Abuse In BME Families Before and During COVID 19 Pandemic

**AFRUCA Briefing Paper 4: COVID 19 Series
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About AFRUCA

AFRUCA – Safeguarding Children is a national charity with offices in London and Manchester working to address child protection issues in Black and minority communities in the UK. We provide prevention and early intervention services to address child abuse issues, working with families and communities. We also provide educational services, working with practitioners in different fields to improve their skills and enable better intervention in families.

Since the onset of COVID 19, AFRUCA has experienced increased referrals into our child protection early intervention services from local authorities across the country. This shows an increasing number of children referred into the care system due to a variety of safeguarding reasons.

Our Child Protection and Social Work service aims to help reduce the number of children from BME communities in the child protection and foster care system. We provide a tailor made, culturally appropriate, intensive one to one training and support service for parents in the child protection system. We work objectively with families, ensuring parents receive new skills so they can provide a positive home environment for their children, free from abuse, exploitation and harm.

AFRUCA has developed a set of briefing documents to help draw attention to the range of child protection issues exacerbated by COVID and the impact on children in Black and other minority communities.

This short briefing paper examines the branding and stigmatisation of children as witches (also known as Child Witchcraft Abuse) in Black and minority ethnic communities, with instances drawn from community intelligence, AFRUCA case work, media reports and other sources.

Introduction

Child Witchcraft Abuse occurs when a vulnerable child is accused of using malevolent powers to harm others in the family or in the community. Such accusations can stem from cultural or religious beliefs in the supernatural, or in the power of supernatural beings to control and harm other human beings. Additionally, a child may be believed to have its mind and body “possessed” by a malevolent, non-physical being in order to harm others. Such a child is deemed an evil, malevolent child able to carry out harmful, destructive activities and is therefore subjected to abuse and harm as punishment and/or in the process of “exorcising” or to deliver them from the evil.

The belief in witchcraft is a global phenomenon occurring in many countries across the world, in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, South America, Europe and other continents. This is signified by the different names ascribed to it in different countries including Kindoki (Congo/Angola), Aje (Yoruba in Benin/Nigeria), Obeah (West Indies), Jinn (The Middle East and most of the Muslim World) or the “Evil Eye” in most of Middle East.

Witchcraft Abuse can have devastating impact on victims. There have been cases in the UK of children harmed and killed after being branded or stigmatised as witches. Examples are Victoria Climbié, Christy Bamu, Kyhra Ishaq and Ayesha Ali.

2. Why Children Are Stigmatised As Witches

Individuals and communities where belief in witchcraft is prevalent believe that any form of anomaly, negative occurrence, bad turns or misfortune is caused by the activity of a malevolent person. Events like job loss, unemployment, business failures, immigration problems, miscarriages and illnesses are triggers for child branding and stigmatisation as witches. Some communities believe children who are innocent and pure, are a target for possession by demons who can work through them to perpetuate evil. Once the child is thereby possessed (for example through food, drink, via dreams and so on), they are able to harm others. It is important to note that specific children are at risk. Within a family setting, the fact that one child has been scapegoated

through stigmatisation, this does not necessarily put other children in the household at risk of harm.

3. The Children Stigmatised As Witches

Children are stigmatised due to their vulnerabilities in many ways, including:

- Children living in families experiencing breakdowns, including domestic violence, or with complex structures, including polygamous families are at risk of stigmatisation.
- Where there is a power imbalance between carer and child – for example children in domestic slavery situation or in private fostering arrangements.
- Poverty is a key factor. In countries like the Congo, children stigmatised are ejected from the home, meaning one less mouth to feed.
- Children living with mental health or with families where there are concerns over the mental health of the carers.
- Children with disabilities (physical or learning disabilities)
- Children whose parents have been branded as witches, for example children in domestic violence situations where a parent has been stigmatised as a witch.
- Children with “challenging behaviours”
- Sleep-walking, bed-wetting, or night-mares are triggers for stigmatisation
- Children who have or are experiencing abuse in other ways are very much at risk of witchcraft stigmatisation.

4. Mental Health And Stigmatisation

COVID 19 has impacted on the mental health of many children and young people due to the prolonged lock-down, impact on education and exam results. In some BME communities, mental health illnesses are viewed as a sign of the supernatural requiring unorthodox treatment including “spiritual” or traditional approaches:

- There is a general negative attitude towards mental health illnesses in many BME communities across the UK.
- Perception that mental illnesses are a result of witchcraft, obeah, the evil eye and juju or demonic possession is quite prevalent.
- Many people regard treatment for mental health as best delivered through traditional or religious means

- Mental illness has harmful stigma attached, including discrimination, ostracisation and being branded as witches. Sufferers can be shunned by their families and communities.
- Families might insist that rituals are carried out to exorcise the demons or evil spirits, which can be at odds with orthodox approaches.

5. Indicators of Child Witchcraft Abuse

Professionals working with children in schools, hospitals, social services, mental health and other provisions must be aware of the indicators of witchcraft abuse or stigmatisation. Children might not be able to verbalise what they are experiencing or might not know it to be child abuse. It is important to understand the signs so appropriate intervention are put in place:

- A child's body showing signs of physical abuse such as marks, bruises or burns.
- A change in a child's demeanour e.g.. becoming confused, withdrawn, disoriented or feeling isolated.
- A child going without food for days after being made to fast
- Deterioration in a child's personal care and well-being, e.g.. loss of weight, always hungry, looking unkempt, poor attendance or withdrawal from school.
- Mental health deterioration.
- Parent or carer not having a close bond with the child.
- Deterioration in a child's performance at school.
- A child reporting that they are or have been accused of being 'evil' or a witch.

6. Effects of Child Witchcraft Abuse

Witchcraft stigmatisation leads to different forms of child abuse putting children at great risk of harm. These include:

Emotional Abuse: verbal abuse, curses, knowledge by the child that he or she is hated by everyone because s/he is a witch. Self-torture because child thinks they are

a witch responsible for wicked acts on people. Also incitement by others to harm child because they are a witch. Dehumanisation of child.

Physical abuse: To beat the devil out, but also to punish. Beating with heavy implements, stamping on stomachs, kicking, punching, and starving in the form of fasting which can go on for days on end.

Neglect: Isolation and ostracisation from other members of the family and friends. Not cared for and denied any form of attention, including medical attention. Missing education or not able to concentrate at school because of the abuses highlighted above.

Sexual Abuse: Isolation makes victims prone to additional sexual abuse in the hands of opportunists within the family or outside, since no one cares what happens to them.

Death: Children have been killed here in the UK after being stigmatised and tortured.

Witchcraft Abuse is an Adverse Childhood Experience with long lasting implications into adulthood.

7. Addressing Child Witchcraft Abuse

There should be increased community awareness and education on how witchcraft stigmatisation constitutes child abuse, the different risks of harm involved, the impact on children and the role of agencies to intervene. Faith groups in particular should be educated on how witchcraft stigmatisation, exorcism or deliverance rituals can constitute a risk of harm to children.

Now that children have returned to school after the prolonged lock-down, it is important for services to identify the symptoms of witchcraft abuse and offer the right support. Services must not expect that victims would be able to disclose abuse, but work to enhance their own capacity to identify indicators of abuse. A child might not know that witchcraft branding is child abuse. They might not know to report it as such, but might mentioned being called “a witch” in passing. This must be investigated and children should be spoken to alone so they are able to talk about their experiences without distraction. Further, it is important that services are strengthened to address such specialist areas of child abuse and help meet the needs and priorities of Black and Minority Ethnic children. Referrals to AFRUCA Child Protection Service can be made via our website at www.afruca.org.

8. References

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