

Safeguarding Children's Rights: exploring issues of witchcraft and spirit possession in London's African communities

Trust for London created the Safeguarding Children's Rights initiative to invest in community-based work tackling child abuse linked to beliefs in witchcraft and spirit possession. This is the summary of an independent evaluation, undertaken by the Centre for Social Work Research.

Key findings

1. Belief in spirit possession and witchcraft is widespread amongst many African communities but current knowledge indicates that the incidence of abuse linked to such beliefs appears to be low.
2. These beliefs occupy a broad spectrum, and the effects range from harmless to harmful. Belief in spirit possession and witchcraft is not of itself evidence of maltreatment.
3. Where there is abuse of children accused of possession or witchcraft, this abuse can be understood using one or more of the four identified forms of child abuse: physical, sexual and emotional abuse and neglect. Assessing for physical and emotional abuse is particularly important.
4. Using the existing child protection framework is effective when assessing cases where children have been accused of witchcraft and spirit possession.
5. Knowledge and understanding of culture and faith is critical to effective assessments of harm undertaken by professionals in this field. However, culture and faith should not be used as an excuse to abuse and must never take precedence over children's rights.
6. Faith organisations have a critical role in many African communities, where poverty, inequality and lack of access to key resources can impact negatively on children. While many offer help and support, some unscrupulous faith leaders are in a position to exploit vulnerable individuals.
7. Community organisations can be an important source of advice and support to London's African communities, and may counterbalance the power of some faith organisations.
8. Engaging communities in discussion and debate about human rights can be used as a touchstone for change. The promotion of young people as agents of change is particularly powerful.
9. Community-led approaches to promoting child safeguarding are scarce and have been shown to be critical in engaging socially excluded communities; and in changing attitudes and behaviour.
10. Faith leaders have a pivotal role to play in developing children's rights within African communities. A shared faith has been very valuable in engaging these leaders – cutting across ethnic and national boundaries.
11. Training has been effective in beginning to address a lack of knowledge of child protection principles and practice among many African faith leaders in London.
12. A broader approach – promoting child safeguarding and well-being – is more effective for engaging communities and churches than a narrow focus on witchcraft and spirit possession. This also led to improvements in wider child protection including through changed practice and disclosures.

Background

The Safeguarding Children's Rights special initiative

Trust for London^[1] created this initiative in 2007, in response to concerns raised by African community groups about faith-based child abuse linked to a belief in spirit possession and witchcraft in London communities. This followed several high profile cases, including Victoria Climbié and Child B, and the first Laming Inquiry. Research and consultation highlighted the lack of investment in grassroots work and a small number of community groups attempting to address this complex issue with very limited resources.

After careful consideration, the Trust decided it could have more impact with limited resources by focusing on African communities – although it recognised that faith-based child abuse happens in many cultures. It was African community groups who asked for the Trust's help and the principal research (Stobart, 2006) indicated that the majority of cases identified in the UK to date involved African communities. London is home to a significant and growing African population.

This initiative therefore aimed to **develop and strengthen community-based preventive activities to protect the rights and to ensure the safety of African children living in London, with a particular focus on tackling faith-based abuse linked to a belief in spirit possession.**

Through the initiative, Trust for London made grants totalling £450,000 to four organisations, alongside consultancy support, free training and use of meeting space. It was overseen by an Advisory Group, chaired by Baroness Howarth, and involving police, children's services and the London Safeguarding Children Board.

The Evaluation

The evaluation was undertaken by the **Centre for Social Work Research**. It focused on the work of the four organisations funded by this initiative and aimed to:

- assess the impact of the methods used by the organisations to engage with the communities;
- develop ways of working with the issues that appeared to be associated with the practices of witchcraft and spirit possession.

By working closely with the organisations, the evaluation aimed to support their work. It considered a wide range of evidence gathered through assessing the organisations' activities over three years.

Witchcraft: Historically, it was widely believed that witchcraft involved the use of supernatural or magical powers to inflict harm upon members of a community or their property, and that all witches were in league with the devil. Since the mid 20th century, witchcraft has increasingly been understood to include both malevolent and benevolent witchcraft, the latter often involving healing.

Spirit possession: Spirit possession is understood to involve spirits, gods, demons, taking control of a human body, resulting in noticeable changes in health and behaviour. The concept of spiritual possession exists in many religions, including Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Haitian Voodoo, Wicca, and Southeast Asian, South American and African traditions. Possession may be voluntary or involuntary and, as with witchcraft, may be considered to have beneficial or detrimental effects.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

The UK is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The Convention's rights include the right each child has to protection from abuse (Article 19) and to support to recover from abuse (Article 39).

^[1] City Parochial Foundation and its sister fund Trust for London amalgamated on 30 June 2010. The new organisation is known as Trust for London.

The work funded through the initiative

In this summary, examples of key achievements from each organisation are briefly described as they relate to the outcomes (in bold) that Trust for London hoped to achieve through the initiative. The organisations worked together and contributed to many of the outcomes; this is an illustrative selection. For a full description of each organisation's extensive activities, please refer to the main report.

AFRUCA (Africans Unite Against Child Abuse) www.afruca.org

AFRUCA aims to promote the welfare of African children in the UK, by working with faith organisations, community groups, practitioners, policy-makers and children themselves.

AFRUCA trained around 600 practitioners, including social workers, teachers, health visitors, community and church leaders, in child safeguarding and African culture. The training has received significant recognition both locally and nationally, including commissioning from a London borough, Bedfordshire and Scotland. As participants identified increased knowledge and confidence, this made a contribution towards an **improvement in how statutory agencies identify and respond to cases of faith based abuse.**

By creating and hosting the African Safeguarding Children Network of community groups, and holding community consultation meetings on tackling witchcraft and spirit possession abuse, AFRUCA has **increased collaboration between community groups addressing this issue** as well as wider child protection concerns.

CCPAS (Churches' Child Protection Advisory Service) www.ccpas.co.uk

CCPAS provides professional advice, support, training and resources in all areas of safeguarding and for those affected by abuse in faith and non-faith organisations.

CCPAS developed and expanded its child protection support and training for African majority churches in London. It trained over 3,000 church leaders, children's workers and carers in UK law and best practice on child development and safeguarding. Evidence from participants suggests that this contributed to **target faith groups adopting and implementing child protection policies, good practice guidelines and demonstrating an increased awareness of child development issues.**

The training also led to significant numbers of disclosures of abuse (not related to spirit possession or witchcraft), suggesting that some African churches were **more confident in dealing with statutory agencies on child protection issues.**

Congolese Family Centre (CFC)^[2] www.congolesefamilycentre.org

CFC seeks to address the needs of the Congolese and other French/Lingala-speaking African communities through advice, information and support, in partnership with 4 other community groups.

CFC successfully developed a youth forum that has been active in promoting young people's awareness and understanding of children's rights, particularly relating to abuse linked to spirit possession and witchcraft. Alongside its parenting workshops, this has contributed to the creation of a **network of families and young people speaking out against abusive practices.**

CFC worked with Congolese TV in the UK (with an estimated audience of 15,000) to develop 48 programmes over the grant period, which meant that **constructive media coverage of this issue was generated.**

^[2] Bantu Welfare Future Builder changed its name to the Congolese Family Centre in October 2010.

Victoria Climbié Foundation (VCF) www.vcf-uk.org

VCF campaigns for the right of BME children to be protected from abuse and challenges crimes against children committed by families, communities, or by the inaction of statutory agencies.

VCF demonstrated **improved capacity and skills to provide support to families and children where there are child protection concerns based on belief related to spirit possession** through the development of its 'casework process' model. Through direct referrals from the community, statutory services and solicitors, VCF provides independent advocacy and assessments for the courts.

In addition, VCF created a community engagement model in partnership with Harrow Safeguarding Children Board which contributed **to improved communications and collaboration between statutory agencies and African community groups.**

Why does this kind of abuse happen?

The evaluation found that though the belief in witchcraft and spirit possession is widespread, it appears to lead to abuse of children in a relatively small number of cases. The organisations have emphasised that contexts of poverty, social exclusion and the experiences of migration appear to be important background stress factors that can lead in some circumstances to abuse and exploitation of children.

However, parents and others, including faith leaders, abuse children from a range of motives. These include, at one end of the spectrum, a conscious wish to exploit or harm children through to actions stemming from beliefs that a child will benefit from punishment or deliverance, without recognising the degree of harm that this can cause to the child. Abuse of children occurs in complex family and cultural group contexts, and not simply from believing in witchcraft and spirit possession. For all parents (and carers), understanding children's rights – including protection under UK law – and having a realistic view of children's needs are therefore important in preventing abuse.

The 'scale' of abuse is unknown. The initiative did not aim to discover scale, prevalence or to systematically account for individual cases and the evaluation did not aim to reach conclusions in these areas. The evaluation has found that there is the potential for abuse from beliefs in witchcraft in some individual and group contexts. It is clear from this evaluation, as seen in the key findings, that abuse can be understood using one or more of the four identified forms of child abuse (physical, sexual and emotional abuse and neglect) and responded to through professionals applying the child protection framework, in a way that is consistent with sensitivity to cultural issues, in order to achieve a sound, holistic assessment in each case.

Recommendations

Embedding understanding in mainstream child protection practice

1. Protecting children from faith-based abuse should be located first and foremost in ensuring application of the existing child protection framework.
2. Protecting children from abuse linked to beliefs in witchcraft and spirit possession should be part of mainstream child safeguarding and the harm to children located under one of the four recognised categories of abuse: physical, sexual and emotional abuse and neglect.
3. In order to protect children from faith-based abuse, the existing UK child protection policies and procedures should be applied with knowledge and understanding of spirit possession and witchcraft.

Local Safeguarding Children Board training and practice

4. Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) should offer training on knowledge and understanding of African culture including faith practices.
5. LSCBs and practitioners should draw on expertise from community and faith-led organisations (such as those in this initiative) to deliver training and to advise on individual cases where there are concerns about spirit possession and witchcraft.
6. Holistic assessments of potential abuse need to address the motives of the alleged perpetrators. In line with existing child protection practice, children who may be affected need to have the opportunity to describe their experience and express their views.

Children's rights to protection and recovery

7. Work with communities to change the harmful practice of witchcraft and spirit possession should position this issue within promoting a wider understanding of children's rights, child development and protection.
8. A model of treatment and rehabilitation for children who have been labelled as witches or spirit possessed, including having experienced prior or subsequent physical, sexual and emotional abuse and/or neglect, should be developed and promoted.
9. Ways of ensuring effective enforcement when abuse or other criminal activity by faith leaders is identified should be developed and put into practice, through on-going work with the Metropolitan Police and the Crown Prosecution Service.

Sharing and funding to promote safeguarding

10. LSCBs should map and maintain contact with all local churches and other faith organisations, in order to ensure that appropriate systems are in place to protect children in their congregations.
11. Learning from this initiative, including models of engagement, should be shared with other communities who have identified similar issues regarding abuse linked with faith and religious practices
12. Statutory and independent funders and commissioners should support community-led activities to promote understanding of child development and child protection – and to raise awareness of abuse. Funding is critical for community organisations which act as alternative sources of support for new migrant communities affected by poverty – and they are important in generating a more inclusive society.

13. Mainstream children's charities need to work with community organisations to embed abuse linked to witchcraft and spirit possession within their training and services.
14. Faith leaders trained through this initiative should take a lead in communities by speaking out against child abuse and encouraging churches to meet their legal child protection responsibilities.
15. Other leaders and activists in African communities, including women, parents and young people, need to continue to speak about children's rights and to challenge abuse.
16. There is a need for a continued programme of training and education for African faith leaders about child development, children's rights and UK child protection law.

Improving social work practice

17. The national guidance for working to protect children where there are suspicions of witchcraft and spirit possession should be updated to take account of the findings of this report.
18. The expertise gained by the organisations in this initiative needs to be maintained in order to continue the important work in this field, for example through the establishment of a group with expertise gained from the initiative. This recommendation needs further discussion amongst stakeholders to provide a base for future leadership and direction.

Trust for London

www.trustforlondon.org.uk

Trust for London is the largest independent funder tackling poverty and inequality in the capital. Established in 1891, the Trust makes grants totalling £7 million a year, supporting around 400 voluntary and community organisations in London at any one time.

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