# Safeguarding children's rights: voices and views from African communities

## Findings from a community-led education project

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**About APOReNet**
Africa Policy Research Network (APOReNet) aims to promote human rights for the benefit of the public, particularly African communities living in the UK

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*"Safety and security don't just happen; they are the result of collective consensus and public investment. We owe our children, the most vulnerable citizens in our society, a life free of violence and fear."*

**Nelson Mandela**
Former president of South Africa

*"Although Africa is a continent of great diversity, its people are the common thread that binds all Africa. Culture has been understood to be a foundation of society and development, integrating the values, customs and characteristics of a people, and promoting interaction and dialogue among people. Therefore culture should serve the great cause of holding Africans together and strengthen their unity in diversity: whether within families, public life, communities or organisations. Culture should help Africa make sense of itself in order to assert its roots, reflect on its troubled past, and forge a better, safer and prosperous way forward through a shared vision."*

**Bience Gawanas**
Commissioner of Social Affairs African Commission

## Acknowledgements

# Contents

# 1. Introduction

Child safeguarding is top of the agenda for a wide range of statutory and third-sector agencies. Great emphasis is placed on finding new and better ways of protecting children from those who would harm them and on supporting the victims of abuse. Yet 'bottom up' learning, drawn from communities affected by violations of children's rights, is too rarely available to inform decision making. This report seeks to help redress this balance. It captures learning from a community-based education programme designed to inform African communities about children's rights and engage them in open debate on traditional practices from a children's rights perspective. Led by Africa Policy Research Network (APORENet), this five-year project engaged with people from communities in North and West London representing 16 African nations from Southern, East, Central, West and North Africa, plus the Horn of Africa. Together, participants sought to identify human rights abuses against children and young people perpetuated in the name of traditional values and to explore community-driven solutions to these problems.

As a result of the project, APORENet has researched the views of nearly 900 people from African communities. Such a scale and diversity of African voices are rarely heard in the debate on traditional practices that violate children's and young people's rights. These are complex and sensitive issues which create challenges for professionals and touch the nerve of communities in a multi-cultural environment like London. Creating opportunities for communities to contribute their own ideas and solutions to issues affecting them adds an important dimension to this debate. By sharing this experience, we hope that professionals will be better equipped to identify incidences of abuse and to work with children, families and communities more effectively to protect children.

The report begins with a brief introduction to the need for the project, its aims and methodology. The main body of the report draws on the voices of participants, sharing their views and experience on what children's rights mean in an African context, which traditional practices may be identified as abusive and why they continue. It then looks at the solutions proposed by members of the communities who participated in the focus group meetings. The report ends with a summary of overall conclusions and recommendations.

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# 2. The need for the project

As a user-led community organisation, APORENet was receiving information from its clients suggesting that human rights violations against young people were taking place within African communities in the UK. Clients talked about direct or indirect experience of a range of abuses, including Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), child abuse, human sacrifice, corporal punishment, child labour, early marriages, dowry/bride price and denial of rights to girl children. Stories were circulating in communities about places of worship where young people were accused of possession by evil spirits and forced to undergo painful exorcism rituals in order to be cleansed. APORENet responded by developing an education project, creating opportunities for community members to learn about children's rights and to debate issues of abuse within their communities. The programme began at a time when abuse related to witchcraft and spirit possession had a high profile in the news, both in the UK and Africa. Participants' contributions were based on their personal experiences, what they had been told by others, and their reactions to media reports.

In day-to-day dealings with community issues, APORENet has found that identifying and tackling abuse against children is always a complex and sensitive issue – especially when it takes place in the home and is perpetuated by parents or carers, the very ones who are supposed to offer protection to children. This matter is further complicated when those responsible claim their actions are done for the good of the child and the community – and that failure to fulfil their traditional obligations as guardians would bring shame to the family and threaten community unity. Understanding and responding to this challenge therefore means understanding the nature of community within African culture and the role that traditional practices play in preserving and transmitting values and identity.

APORENet has, over the years, accumulated a wealth of experience working with African communities on various projects which address African cultural values. Our interactions have shown how deeply African traditions and culture are woven into the fabric of life. Working with families shows that children are expected to respect and participate in cultural activities right from birth, with rituals and initiation ceremonies marking significant stages of their development. This cultural bond between the individual and their community continues throughout adult life. Community is not restricted to friends, neighbours and family. It reaches into both the past and the future – and into the living and the spirit world. In some communities, even death does not herald the end of a person's involvement in the cultural welfare of the community. Through elaborate rituals, heads of families and ancestors are often consulted for their guidance long after their deaths. This is well summarised by the Nigerian writer Christopher Ejizu who wrote;

*For traditional Africans, community is much more than simply a social grouping of people bound together by reasons of natural origin and/or deep common interests and values. It is both a society as well as a unity of the visible and invisible worlds; the world of the physically living on the one hand, and the world of the ancestors, divinities and souls of children yet to be born to individual kin-groups. In a wider sense, African traditional community comprehends the totality of the world of*

*African experience including the physical environment, as well as all spirit beings acknowledged by a given group.*[1]

This deep respect for tradition and culture goes hand in hand with a strong sense of community rights and the individual's role in respect of his or her community. The individual does not exist outside the community. '*Whatever happens to the individual is believed to happen to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual…*'[2] The individual is able to enjoy their rights within the boundaries set by the community in which they belong. Mbiti, the celebrated Kenyan philosopher and theologian, encapsulates this relationship in the principle, '*I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.*'[3] For traditional African communities, children's rights are enjoyed within a community context – and they may, in some circumstances, put community rights above those of the individual child. It is therefore the duty of the head of every family to ensure that children respect the cultural norms of the community in which they are growing up. Any deviation may lead to punishment and, in some cases, ostracism.

While working with members of the African Diaspora during the implementation of this project, APORENet observed that geographical separation does not sever the link between the person and their culture. Most Africans living in the UK retain a strong bond with Africa and regard its culture as an integral part of their lives. Wherever they may be, it is incumbent upon the head of the family to ensure that children are brought up to respect and maintain African values. Some return to Africa whenever they can so that their children can connect with and understand their cultural heritage. Many traditional rituals performed in Africa continue to take place among Africans in the Diaspora and some African parents send their children back to Africa to undergo rites of passage rituals, such as FGM, male circumcision or marriage ceremonies where bride price is exchanged.

Whereas the bond between Africans in Diaspora and the continent is an act of pride that should be encouraged, unfortunately, some of the traditional rituals performed on children put them at serious risk of harm. There is no doubt that traditional practices are the means by which cultural values are passed on from generation to generation. As such, they play a critical role in preserving community life. Without them, rich cultural values would certainly be lost, to the detriment of future generations. However, and sadly, some of these practices violate individual human rights and can do considerable harm to individuals who undergo them. It is usually the most vulnerable members of the community, such as women and children, who have, over the centuries endured these kinds of abuse and continue to have their lives blighted in the name of preserving African cultural values.

Our experience working among African communities has revealed that challenging the status quo is hard. Discussion of many practices is taboo, preventing open debate within families and communities. Any approach from outside the community is strongly resisted and may lead to abuse going underground, becoming even more dangerous and difficult to detect. Those who are against harmful traditional practices may risk being ostracised if they report their concerns to the authorities. Even where abuse is clearly outside accepted community norms, members of the family often close ranks around the perpetuators because of fear of reprisals within their own communities. Young people themselves are brought up to respect the authority of their elders and have been taught that traditional rituals are an important part of growing up and taking their place in the community. As such, they often participate willingly, only learning too late of the consequences for their health and well-being.

[1] Ejizu, C: African Traditional Religions and the promotion of community living in Africa. http://www.afrikaworld.net/afrel/community.htm

[2] Ibid

[3] Mbiti, J. S: African Religions And Philosophy (London; Heinemann, 1990 ed.)

To compound the matter, APORENet's research found no structures within local authorities to sensitively address such issues at a community level. While the government has responded with legislative measures, handing out severe sentences to those involved in abuse, little effort has been put into engaging communities in evolving community-driven solutions to the problem. Interactions with local authorities identified that many staff lacked knowledge and training to deal with such issues. It also highlighted the dangers of creating a conspiracy of silence, where key government workers feel unable to take important decisions for fear of being accused of racism or cultural insensitivity.

As a human rights organisation, APORENet strongly supports the right to take part in cultural life as enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights of the United Nations. Children and young people have the right to participate in the cultural activities of their communities in order to fully integrate within them. The challenge is to ensure that cultural activities always recognise and respect children's rights, protecting the most vulnerable members of the community against practices that are harmful to their lives. APORENet believes that this is a challenge that can only be fully addressed from within the very communities where the violations are taking place. As a result, this project was designed to engage communities in finding solutions that respect tradition while protecting children's rights, rather than closing ranks against 'outside interference'. Community discussions touched on many important and sensitive issues and explored ways in which some of the traditional practices that violate human rights in general – and children's rights in particular – can be tackled.

This interaction has again shown the value that African people place on their culture. Culture is the cornerstone on which African communities are built and involving people in finding solutions to community problems is an old and tested way that African communities have used over the centuries to fight against ills that afflicted them. This project demonstrates both the value of creating space for communities to debate these critical issues and practical ways in which professionals and others might support them in protecting both their culture and their children.

# 3. The education programme

## Aims

Since its inception, APORENet has been engaging members of African communities in human rights discussions. This has involved using skills and techniques that people can relate to in order to address issues such as truancy, graffiti, vandalism, bullying, alcohol and drug abuse, racism, domestic violence and child abuse. APORENet decided to use this experience to engage communities in looking at traditional practices that violate children's and young people's rights in order to get their views and proposals for a way forward. The task involved gaining community members' trust and offering them opportunities for discussion without feeling that they are being watched or spied upon. Those who felt strongly about the importance of a practice were given a chance to express the reason for their views, while those who thought otherwise were also offered a voice.

The aim of the project was to work with African families in West and North West London to identify traditional practices that violate children's rights and, through discussions, contribute to ideas that can be used as solutions to address these abuses. The key objectives were to:

- Increase awareness and knowledge of children's rights within African communities;

- Involve communities in the fight against human rights abuses suffered by children and young people in the name of culture, enabling children and young people to be safe from abuse and achieve their potential;

- Enable decision makers to deal confidently with tradition-based abuse, by increasing awareness and knowledge about African traditional practices and offering a community-based approach to dealing with sensitive taboo subjects.

## Methodology

### Recruitment of participants

APORENet contacted 72 agencies across West and North West London to introduce the project. These agencies included both voluntary and statutory services, such as the police, schools, local safeguarding boards and primary health care trusts (PCTs). Ten agencies agreed to be part of this project, assisting in recruitment of participants. These included local community organisations, statutory agencies and some African-led faith institutions.

An engagement strategy was used to reach out to communities and recruit a range of participants. This involved targeting community leaders through formal introductions, attending cultural functions such as marriage and baby naming ceremonies, keeping wakes and last funeral rites and visiting places where members of different African

communities congregate, such as churches and social clubs. There were some constraints to participation – for example, some husbands would not allow their wives to attend sessions unless accompanied by male members of their families. However, on average, 60-65% of participants at each focus group were women. Nearly 900 people participated in the project representing 16 African nations. People from a range of faiths were involved in the project, although this data was not captured formally. The focus was not on religious background but on traditional practices within particular geographical areas – many of which are home to people from different religious traditions.

## Focus group approach – building trust over time

The project employed a focus group methodology designed to help participants feel free to interact with each other and express themselves in a safe environment. All groups were facilitated by a moderator to support good interaction and ensure that all participants could have their say. This method was selected for this project because:

- Groups are not complex to organise and individuals can participate irrespective of their literacy levels or age;

- It is relatively easy to vary the balance of group sessions between education/ information sharing and discussion;

- It allows a focus on issues that individual participants relate to and have an opinion about;

- It enables people to interact freely, share ideas and experiences and understand the diversity of views that may exist within people from the same African community or similar backgrounds;

- It creates opportunities to learn about other African communities and cultures, increasing understanding and creating an avenue for human rights respect;

- It is relatively cost effective in providing data in comparison with individual interviews;

- Collecting a wide range of views, using participants' own words, delivers valuable data for policy makers and enables communities to see how far their ideas and recommendations are reflected in action;

- Project staff may be able to follow up particularly interesting or sensitive contributions in individual sessions.

The programme was designed around a series of workshops, designed to build trust and knowledge before moving on to more challenging discussions. Each series began with educational input on the concept of human rights and child rights in particular. Groups then moved on to consider children's rights in African cultures and the different cultural expectations of children and adults. The majority of the workshops focused on in-depth discussion of traditional practices which violate children's rights, why these practices persist and what can be done to eradicate them. Unfortunately concerns about confidentiality meant it was not possible to record the debate for transcription. However, participants were comfortable with the facilitator taking extensive notes, which are the source of the quotes in the report. The facilitator did not seek to influence the discussion in any way, acting as a neutral observer and recording different views and ideas as they were expressed.

It is worth noting that many participants brought a range of other concerns to the project, ranging from immigration problems through to housing, social security and family disputes. It was important to be able to respond to these helpfully, without allowing them to divert the core purpose of the focus group discussions. In order to deal with these questions and in case of specific concerns about risks to individual children, APORENet developed a good understanding of local referral networks and sources of advice and support for individuals participating in the project.

### Direct work with young people

In order to involve young people, APORENet engaged them in art activities. The aim was to give them a voice in a creative and non-confrontational way by facilitating their creation of works of art carrying messages on traditional practices that violate children and young people's rights. This opportunity was appreciated by participants but funding challenges meant that it was not possible to maintain it throughout the programme at levels where its impact can effectively be evaluated.

## Impact of the focus groups

The focus group sessions emphasised and encouraged dialogue as a method of communication, allowing individuals with different views to freely express themselves without interruption. This allowed people from different communities to learn about other cultures and way of life and compare how each culture addresses a given ritual. What emerged from this approach was a greater understanding that African culture is not homogenous. What one group considers as a way of life may be frowned on by the group next door.
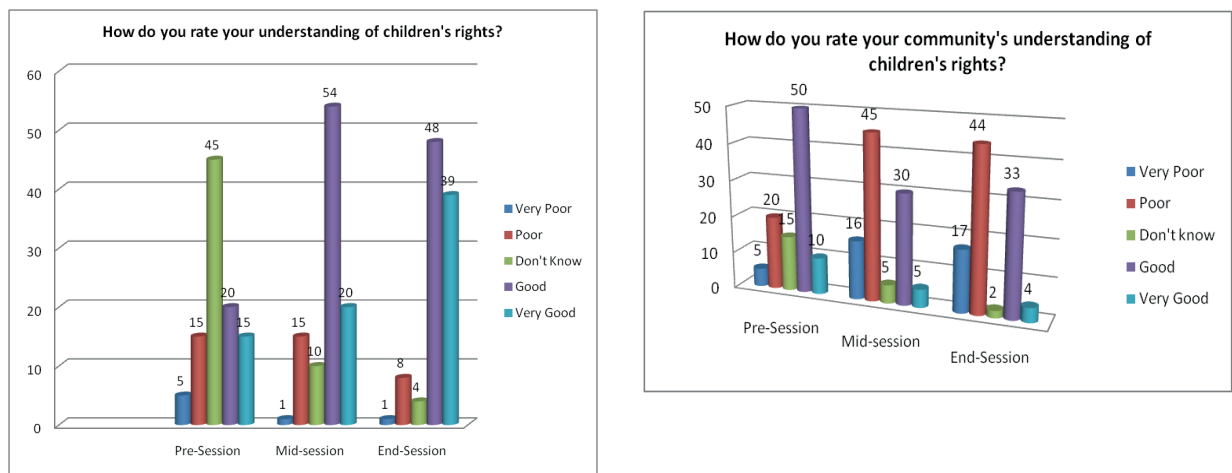


**Figure 1: Understanding of children's rights**

Participants were asked to reflect on how well both they and their community understand human rights. Measures were taken at the start of the sessions, half way through and at the final event (Fig. 1).

Only 35% of participants assessed themselves as having a good or very good understanding of children's rights at the start of the programme, rising to 87% by the end. Interestingly, their perception of community understanding dropped as they became better informed. 60% thought this was good or very good at the start and only 37% by the end. The change in assessment of community understanding as poor or very poor is even more striking, up from 25% at the start to 61% at the end.

**Figure 2: Confidence in discussing children's rights**
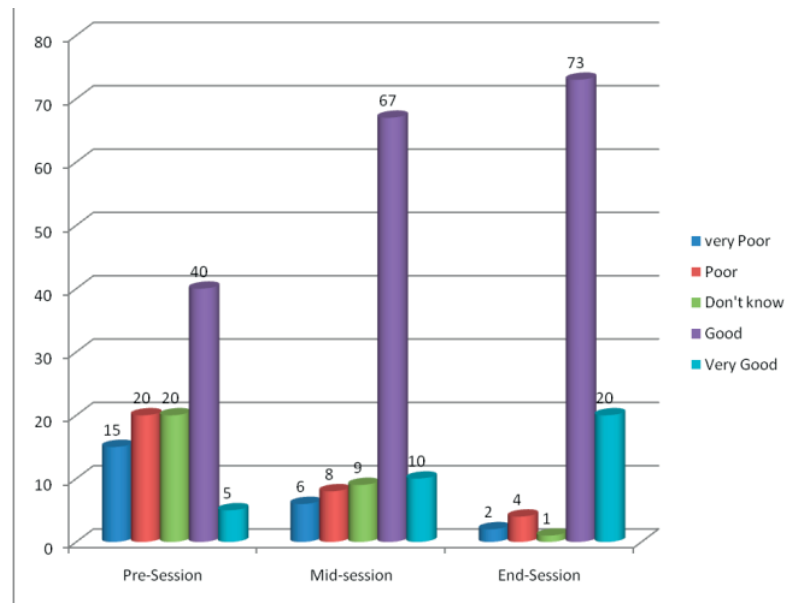


An important element of the theory of change for the project was that increasing people's confidence in discussing children's rights in a theoretical context increases the chance that they will speak up in a real life situation.

There was a significant shift in participants' confidence in discussing children's rights openly and freely (Fig. 2) by the end of the programme of focus groups. 93% of participants assessed their confidence as good or very good, compared to 45% at the start.

# 4. Children's rights in an African context

Participants began by discussing what children's rights are and any differences they saw between how these are expressed in African cultures and other cultures. All agreed that children are gifts from God and it is incumbent upon parents and their broader community to look after them and protect them from bad influences. Not all accepted the idea that children had rights independently of family and community – and certainly all believed that these rights must be understood in the context of cultural values, so that children do not bring shame to the family.

*Children are the responsibility of their parents and the community as a whole.*

The duty to bring children up in line with cultural norms rests primarily with the head of each family. For some, the route to adulthood – and indeed through life – is established and unchanging. Many expect children and young people to show strict obedience to their parents and elders. They would not expect to consult or necessarily even tell a young person about decisions made on their behalf. Others see parents as providing a guiding hand through the choices that young people are faced with as they grow. They discussed talking more openly with their children about important issues in their lives.

*Children should be protected from bad elements of society such as witches, child molesters and bad parents.*

*Children are supposed to obey their parents without question.*

*Parents should guide their children on what they should do for their future.*

*Children do not have rights. Period! I decide what is right for my children.*

There was also a general agreement that Western ways of dealing with children rights brings conflicts in homes. Social Services was mentioned often in the discussions. Participants talked about parents being reported for disciplining their children or children openly challenging their parents' wishes, confident that Social Services will protect them.

*Children should be brought up to respect their society and customs.*

The concept of children's rights is well established in Africa. The Africa Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child has been in force since 1999. It is unequivocal in its emphasis that all action concerning any child should be in his or her best interests. Complexity arises when parents and community members believe that the child's best interest is always served by participating in established rites of passage or spiritual practices, no matter whether these may harm them and violate their rights.

*I talk more to my children about what I plan to do that I think is going to affect their life.*

*The responsibility of bringing up children is pre-determined and children are supposed to pass through their journey via rites of passages.*

*Children have too many rights in this country. This causes confusion in homes and families.*

Attitudes on these practices both within and between African cultures are by no means uniform. Historically and geographically, Africa is a hugely diverse continent. Wars, migration, trade and investment, slavery, religious missions and imperial division of territory, as well as the environment and natural resources, have all left their marks on culture. It is therefore not surprising that participants could not agree on what constitutes African culture and at times clashed when they felt their culture was different from that practised by their neighbours.

*The laws encourage children to talk back to their parents, which is unheard of in Africa.*

But, despite these differences, the project identified seven shared concepts that participants put at the heart of a definition of what they considered to be children's rights in traditional African communities (Fig. 3). Understanding these as a starting point will help any professional seeking to support communities and to protect children and young people.

**Figure 3: Key concepts that define children's rights in traditional African society**

Bringing up children is the responsibility both of their parents and their community as a whole.

Children should be brought up to respect their parents, elders and social traditions.

Children should not be abused by their parents, elders, and or peers physically, mentally or sexually.

Children must be protected from bad elements of society.

Children have pre-determined roles in society. Young people become adults through rites of passage.

Children are a gift from the gods and their fate lies in the hands of the gods.

Community needs override the needs of any individual – whether adult or child.

Participants were asked to consider traditional activities in their communities in the light of what they had learned about children's rights. They also talked more broadly about what constitutes child abuse, how it is dealt with in their community and whether they believe this provides sufficient protection to children.

Broadly, participants focused on three key areas. **Rites of passage** are highly valued as marking critical life transitions in African societies but some were identified as a serious violation of children's rights. **Religious and spiritual practices** were also identified as raising complex questions for communities. And, finally, participants talked about the **challenges of change**. These discussions ranged from dealing with new cultural influences on traditional adult/child relationships in African communities through to the economic, social and political pressures on families and the risk these can create for children. It was also acknowledged that some parents simply fail in their responsibilities to their children or are deliberately neglectful or abusive. These discussions are captured in the following three sections.

# 5.  Rites of passage

The rite of passage signifies a new phase of life, with ceremonies, initiations or rituals performed to mark the transition of individuals or groups from one significant stage of life to another. These ceremonies are not unique to Africa. Every community celebrates the arrival of a child and such ceremonies continue as a person journeys through life. However, many African communities practise rituals meant to test the individual's maturity, bravery, strength and responsibility. Some of these result in painful and unnecessary suffering and, at times, irrecoverable damage to health.

Participants were asked to consider what rites of passage mean to them and their community and to identify where these violate children's rights. Discussion then focused on whether or not these should be preserved in the name of cultural values and what can be done to end or change rites that harm children. A summary of their views and discussion follows.

## Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

FGM comprises all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons. FGM is known to be practised in 28 countries in Africa. In West Africa, FGM is known to be practised in Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, the northern part of Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Benin, Liberia, Burkina Faso, Chad, Cameroon, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo. In East Africa, it is practised in Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Mauritania and Djibouti, and in Egypt and Sudan in North Africa and some parts of the Central African Republic. The practice is highly sensitive for discussion even in a well-facilitated focus group. A lot of rapport was required to engage participants who have an experience of this practice.

Participants were well aware that FGM is illegal in the UK. However it was clear from the discussions that some people still support the practice and would be prepared to take active steps to make sure their daughters or young female relatives are subject to it. A number gave accounts of young women being taken on holiday so that FGM can be carried out.

Some are sceptical about the physical and emotional damage attributed to FGM. Others thought more about the reaction of potential future husbands and the perceived need to control sexual desire in women and girls. Some spoke more broadly about the increase in status that FGM traditionally brings to the girl and her family, which is turn pleases her future husband.

However, members of communities that do not practice FGM spoke out strongly against it.

They saw it as an inexcusable exercise of power by men, who were trying to control women without thinking of their well-being or the double standards they were setting in terms of sexual morality.

Although less outspoken in their views, members of communities affected by FGM – both men and women – were also willing to take a stand against it, whatever the

*If the practice is bad, how come our mothers/ grandmothers underwent it and still gave birth to us?*

*A girl who has undergone female circumcision brings pride to the family at the time of her getting married.*

*Female circumcision stops promiscuity among girls/women.*

*No one will marry your daughter if she has not undergone the ritual.*

*Once again, this goes out to prove that it is a man's world. How else do you explain a ritual that is performed on a person for the sake of pleasing another one without considering the views of the person going through it?*

*It is men's selfishness and chauvinism. They want women to be faithful when they can not do the same.*

dictates of tradition. A number of fathers were clear that they would not permit it for their daughters. The focus groups were attended by many women who had undergone the ritual themselves. Some were ready to refer to their own experience and how determined this made them to protect their daughters. There was concern about the pressure on young girls from older, more traditional family members. A child's grandmother, for example, is a respected and revered member of her extended family. As someone who has gone through FGM herself, it may be easier for her to convince her grand-daughter that this is an important ritual for a young girl. Due to this kind of coercion, young girls end up becoming 'willing lambs led to the slaughter' and learn too late of the consequences.

## Male circumcision

Male circumcision is common in many cultures and religions all over the world and is often practised for medical reasons. It is the context and the way it is carried out that may classify it as abuse. African people have carried out circumcision for centuries and the ritual is practised in all regions of the continent, mostly for religious reasons. The benefits associated with traditional circumcision vary between communities, but all see it as a rite of passage from boyhood to manhood. The candidate has no choice of opting out. If he does, he is ostracised by his immediate and extended family. Traditional male circumcision is carried out when the boy is sexually mature and most likely experiencing a near permanent state of sexual arousal. The knives are not sterilised, there is no local anaesthetic and no post-medical care. This leads to high risks of infection, which may be interpreted as a punishment by the gods on the young man. Victims are not allowed to get medical attention. Any that do are considered to be too weak to be men and ostracised from society. The physical and psychological effects can be profound and remain with men who have undergone the ritual throughout their lives.

Participants generally support the practice of male circumcision. For some, it is explicitly connected with the transition to manhood and preparing a boy to take on adult responsibilities. Others believe it has health benefits, provided it is done safely and hygienically. Some see it as a way of protecting a child from the risk of child sacrifice.

Participants were aware that circumcision services are readily available through medical services in the UK. Some still believed strongly that their sons should go through the traditional practice. This is done on grounds of family pride and loyalty to their customs. Others argue that circumcision is a health issue and should be dealt with as such. It was also pointed out that other ancient cultures have found new ways to carry out these rituals, taking advantage of modern medical techniques and approaches.

*It is an old ritual that dates back from biblical days. Jewish people continue to practise it but under anesthetic conditions.*

## Bride price

Bride price is a practice where money and other material things are exchanged between the groom's and the bride's families for the bride. This practice is prevalent in almost all African countries. It is the level or the amount of money and material goods that differ. Traditionally, a prospective husband is expected to give a certain amount of

*Nobody will respect your daughter if no bride price is paid.*

*Bride price is like putting a monetary/material value on your daughter. The husband's family will pay according to the value they place on her.*

*The more the in laws pay the more it reflects about what the girl is worth to them.*

*I would not sell my daughter for pieces of silver but I would accept a gift. It is wrong to refuse a gift.*

*We donate everything to the new family. In so doing, we fulfil the customary requirement but at the same time provide the new family with a start up. It's a win-win situation.*

*Have I stolen him? He needs to declare his intentions before the elders and respond to their concerns before he can take me for his wife.*

money and goods to his future wife's family before a marriage is agreed. This practice is very much alive among African communities resident in the United Kingdom.

Bride price was not generally seen as a bad practice. For many, it is a traditional expression of friendship and a symbol of binding two families through marriage. Some see it as an indication of the respect and value placed on their daughters by their husband's family and of gratitude to her family for 'a job well done' in bringing her up. There were, however, some concerns that bride price ties a young woman to a man as if she were his property. And many spoke disapprovingly of parents and guardians who take no account of a girl's wishes and offer her for marriage to those with potential to give the highest bride price. Some spoke of different ways of thinking about bride price, with the traditional payment being passed on to the newly married couple. Done with the knowledge and full consent of the groom's family, this maintains tradition but in a way that supports them in beginning their new life together.

Participants were keen to point out that bride price or dowry should not be equated to forced marriage. Many observed that the expectation that a gift will be presented to the bride's family should not be mistaken for an unwanted obligation or a burden to the groom or his family. For some, its purpose is not directly financial but, more importantly, a test of the prospective husband's standing and the seriousness of his intent.

*The biggest question that is always at the back of every father's mind is "does this man have the capacity to look after my daughter well?" One way of showing this is his ability to offer a reasonable bride price for her.*

The symbolism of bride price is also important within African communities because it signals acceptance and approval of the marriage by families of the bride and groom, their communities and the elders. This is demonstrated by the bride's parents allowing their daughter to get married at a 'giving away' ceremony where they present the new couple with gifts to start their new life. The couple can then marry with the blessings of their community. The majority of younger participants were as supportive of their elders of bride price, provided it is done with good intentions and not for greed. They wanted to marry with the blessings and support of both their families and the wider community. Fulfilling traditional expectations is an important part of this journey.

*In some communities elaborate questions are asked about the suitability and means of the groom and the history, character and suitability of his family. It is only after these important questions have been positively responded to that the community (members of the bride's family) will accept to take the bride price.*

## Forced marriages

*No one should be forced into marriage.*

*You cannot force your daughter whom you love to go into marriage with someone she doesn't like.*

In many African cultures, marriage is the ultimate rite of passage, where a girl or boy passes out of childhood. Forced marriage takes different forms with different communities using different methods which ultimately lead to one thing – a person being compelled to marry a person against his or her wishes. Participants described extreme practice in some parts of Ethiopia, Rwanda and Uganda where some marriages are based on abduction. Members of the man's family waylay a girl and take her to his house where she is forced to become his wife. This is done without the consent of the girl or her family. More common are arranged marriages where

two families agree between them and their children are forced by parental and social pressure into marriage, whether they support the arrangement or not.

Traditionally parents and family elders have had a role as match-makers, arranging marriages for their sons and daughters. During discussions, participants drew a clear distinction between arranged marriages and forced marriage – although there were differences in view about how much say a parent should have in a choice of husband or wife for their child. Everyone took the view that there was nothing wrong with recommending a spouse to a son, daughter or close family member. Most, however, disapproved of forced marriage. They saw it as wrong in principle, because the feelings of the young people were not considered. And many felt it was a poor foundation for a good marriage. Participants reported that the practice was still prevalent in communities within Africa, and, despite legal restrictions, continued in the UK. They gave many examples of the impact, particularly on young girls. Tempted by bride price, parents may be willing to marry off their daughters to older rich men, locking them into a loveless marriage where they may be at risk of spouse abuse and domestic violence. At its most extreme, families simply sell girls into marriage. Because most of these marriages take place when a girl is young – sometimes before the age of 16 – they are commonly associated with denial of education.

Some participants questioned the practice of marrying young people for the social status of their parents and their community. However some argued that there was a difference between forced marriages and marriages arranged to meet a need of the family or community. Others pointed out that Africans are far from being the only ones to encourage or push their children into financially or socially advantageous marriages.

## Body branding and ritual maiming

Body branding and ritual maiming are rites of passage practised in some African communities. The traditional reasons for carrying them out vary from culture to culture. The most common forms are scars inflicted on young girls or boys to make them more attractive to the opposite sex. In some communities body branding is done as a test of bravery. A young person is put through excruciating pain inflicted by a hot surface or sharp instrument. Their success in withstanding the pain qualifies them as fully fledged adults in the community. Branding and ritual maiming may also be done on spiritual grounds, with young people being branded or losing body parts as an offering to the gods or to ward off evil spirits. Young people have no choice in the matter. They are forced through the process or face ostracism.

Participants varied in their views about branding, depending on their tradition. Some challenged the idea that scars make a person more attractive, while others saw protecting children from evil spirits as an overriding priority. It was again pointed out that body branding is not a peculiarly African approach to adornment – and resented the sense that African communities were being singled out for criticism.

# 6. Religious and spiritual practices

*When we arrived in the UK it was only the pastor who welcomed us and prayed with us.*

*Pastors are anointed by God and have powers to cast demons away.*

*I know that my aunt was bewitching me and that's why I couldn't give birth.*

Religion plays a very important role in African society and is connected to every aspect of life. Religious rituals are performed to link the individual with their community, as well as with ancestors and the spirit world whose guidance is needed as one embarks on life's journey. It was clearly evident from discussion in the focus groups that belief in a higher power, the 'unknown', was very strong among participants and that religion and spiritual belief played a dominant role in their lives.

As a result religious leaders have a huge influence on communities and on the way traditional practices are interpreted and carried out. For many, they are a lifeline in an unfamiliar new environment. They have the power to heal and the authority to drive out demons. Unlike medical services, they understand the power that ancestors or hostile family members wield over current events and can perform rituals to remove any negative influence.

At the same time, children are at risk in a number of ways from some elements of traditional religious and spiritual practice. This is particularly true if they are vulnerable because of anxiety, depression or other mental health problems, are sick or have physical or learning disabilities. They may be subject to violent and traumatic ritual or starved to expel demons. They may be rejected by the community because they are thought to carry a curse or be denied medical care for easily treatable conditions. This was a particularly challenging area of discussion for those participants who believe that practices, which are clearly emotionally or physically abusive from a child right's perspective, are essential for the protection and welfare of children affected by evil spirits.

## Unscrupulous faith leaders

*The pastor told members of his church in the UK that he could help barren women conceive. Yet it was discovered that he had another church in Kenya where he was collecting children by promising their families they would have a better future. He was actually selling them to barren couples in the UK.*

While 'genuine pastors' were spoken of with great respect and appreciation, some were very concerned about the rise in unscrupulous African faith institutions in the UK. They argued that these are led by dogmatic, money hungry people, exploiting the fears and insecurities of their communities for personal gain. There was discussion about the increasing influence of new age churches that combine African rituals with Christianity – in particular, the exorcism rituals that pastors perform on children who they claim are possessed by evil spirits. It was pointed out that most of these churches in the UK have branches in Africa. UK residents are often encouraged to donate money, clothes and other goods to support their 'brothers and sisters' back home. However, many believed that these donations end up in the pockets of the pastors who build themselves mansions in Africa and live luxurious lifestyles.

*It's all fake. Pastors are the richest people – they drive Hummers and their wives wear gold and live in mansions. They take advantage of vulnerable people and sexually exploit them while exhorting money for the prayers they offer.*

Others told stories of communities in Africa being exploited and misled by pastors into giving up their children and of pastors putting children at risk from those who believe they can become rich through child sacrifice. The connections between communities in Africa and the UK are very strong. Abusive practices in either the UK or African countries cause great concern to those worried about unscrupulous religious leaders. Some wanted to see greater regulation of faith institutions to protect vulnerable people.

## Exorcism

*Even Jesus cast out demons from people. How can you claim that demons do not exist?*

*My niece had failed to be cured of her illness in all medical facilities until the Pastor prayed for her and she got healed.*

*Every Sunday the Pastor calls upon parents to bring the children who are possessed by the devil and he prays for them.*

*The Pastor has the vision to pinpoint evil spirit in a young person and the power to cleanse them.*

*My pastor will cast the demons away and send them back to the one who had sent them in the first place.*

*Children who are possessed by evil spirits cannot be treated in normal hospital. They need the pastor to exorcise the demons.*

*There are cases where modern medicine cannot heal a person. Only prayers by pastors can heal them.*

Exorcism is a ritual performed to rid a person or a place of evil spirits or demons. It is by no means a practice confined to African communities – the Church of England's Deliverance Ministry, for example, can provide exorcism rituals as part of the Church's Ministry of Healing. As in the Church of England, in African communities, these rituals were usually performed by specialists. These were respected members of the community, believed to have powers to cast out demons, whose task was to help the victims of witchcraft who had fallen prey to evil minds.

In modern times, the practice has taken on a new angle that mixes the old traditions with new brands of Christianity. Pastors may, usually for payment, offer their services to help families to exorcise the evil spirits from children. Exorcism is prevalent in many religious traditions and most African countries, especially Congo and the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, Southern Africa and several West African countries.

Participants agreed that there is a widespread belief in ghosts, witchcraft and evil spirits in many African cultures. Illness, disability, anti-social behaviour and a range of other challenges affecting individuals and communities are often attributed to witchcraft or demons. Parents concerned about a child's sickness or behaviour may see this as the result of a curse or possession. As a spiritual problem, spiritual intervention is critical to finding a solution. This leads to a strong reliance on pastors and the power of prayer to banish evil spirits and make people well again.

*The pastor prayed for my son and helped us to get rid of the evil spirit that had possessed him for a long time.*

Everyone agreed that genuine pastors had powers and responsibilities to help in these cases. There were differences in view about how far these rituals should go and how the role of the pastor should be seen alongside other sources of help, such as the medical profession. Some believed that it is only through spiritual intervention and traditional rituals that a child can be cured. Where prayer alone is not effective, this may lead to other practices that put children at risk of abuse or denial of care.

Some talked about the practice of starving a child in order to starve out evil spirits. None said they had done so themselves – although it was acknowledged that denying food to an errant child is a normal practice in many households in order to bring them back into line. Whether or not they approved of the approach, participants made a clear distinction between parents who starve and mistreat their children out of neglect and those who believe they are doing it to save them from an evil spirit.

*They are starving the devil in the child, not the child themselves.*

*I take my children to hospital when they are ill and later take them to the church to be prayed for so that the medicine can work.*

There was also considerable discussion about the relationship between traditional rituals and conventional medical care. Some simply saw modern medicine as ineffective against illnesses that they attributed to evil spirits or witchcraft. Others had found more accommodation with the medical system, making use both of the skills and experience of doctors and the power of prayer to support and assist healing. It was clear that, for everyone, the spiritual dimension of care and healing was paramount.

*It is God who heals. Prayers supplement proper diagnosis and treatment by qualified doctors*

## Witchcraft branding

*Parents may have done an evil thing and that's why they got a lame child.*

*The evil spirit made the child lame.*

*The family has been cursed and needs to exorcise the demons in order to have children who are not lame.*

*I will still look after my child whatever condition he or she is in. Every child is a gift from God.*

Witchcraft branding is a practice where people are labelled as witches, mainly because they are identified as looking or behaving 'differently' from others. People who are vulnerable because of age, mental health issues, epilepsy, physical or learning disabilities, are often targeted as victims of this practice – as are children.

AFRUCA (Africans Unite Against Children Abuse), a pioneering community organisation involved in protection of African children in London, argues that the branding of children as witches is a new phenomenon in African societies and contrary to traditional African values of caring for the most vulnerable members of their community. AFRUCA attributes the new phenomenon to, among others, increasing levels of poverty and the breakdown of family and extended family structures. In African societies, these arrangements had for centuries bound individuals to community values, making each person 'his brother's keeper'. This created institutions where the weak and the most vulnerable were protected and had a place within family structures and within the wider community. Branding of children as witches exists in several African countries, including the Democratic Republic of Congo, Congo, Angola and several others in West Africa.

Many participants did see having a disabled child, for example, as a punishment on the family for wrong doing or the result of hostile forces or evil spirits. They talked about the negative effects that attitudes to witchcraft and sprit possession can have on attitudes to disabled children and young people, sometimes leading to serious neglect and exclusion. Physical or learning disabilities or unusual birthmarks are considered in many communities to be the sign of a curse on the family or possession by an evil spirit. Disabled children may be unwanted and unloved. Some suffer neglect, leading to premature death. There was discussion of extreme cases where disabled children are victims of ritual killings. Albinism, for example, is considered a curse in some communities. Many young people with this condition are branded witches and subjected to neglect. Participants talked of reports from Tanzania that some were being killed so that their body parts could be used for witchcraft.

Some challenged the view of disabled children as cursed or possessed, arguing that every child should be valued. However participants agreed that, even where their family takes good care of a disabled child, they are more likely to be denied an education or other opportunities available to children with similar conditions born in other cultures.

# Child sacrifice

*My neighbour's daughter disappeared on her way from school and her body was later found decapitated.*

*The wrath of the gods needs to be pleased by sacrifice.*

*Those who sacrifice children are devil worshippers.*

*It is the new age cults and religions that are fuelling child sacrifice.*

Participants discussed the most extreme examples of child abuse, where children are murdered as sacrifices to the gods. Although there were no indications that these practices are prevalent in the UK, they felt very real to participants. They were very aware of media reports and stories coming from Africa and within communities in the UK. Many said they knew of or had been told about people who had participated or who knew a victim. Most rituals involve removing parts of a child's body to bring 'blessings' to the people who take possession of them. Although some rituals have religious roots, designed to appease angry gods, many are for personal gain. People may believe the sacrifice of a child brings wealth or promotion at work, treats illnesses or assists in conception.

Participants were shocked and distressed by the reports they had heard of ritual sacrifice – and very concerned about any developing practices likely to increase the risk to vulnerable children. Participants brought in articles from African newspapers with gruesome images of young people reported to have been victims of these abuses perpetuated by those seeking wealth. Some, especially those from East/Central and Southern Africa, were concerned that the reported increase in cases of child sacrifice in their home countries could spill over into the UK. There was equal concern that Africans in the diaspora may themselves be fuelling abusive practices. In particular, participants questioned whether Africans in the UK might be involved in child sacrifice taking place in Africa, since they are known to be among the most affluent members of their communities.

# 7. Challenges of change

Participants talked about the external pressures on families and communities and the risks these pose to community stability and to children. They discussed some of the challenges of child rearing within the very different cultural expectations in the UK, changing social and family structures and in the face of 'a smaller world' created by the use of communications technology.

Some saw all these as factors in abuse of children taking place behind closed doors within their communities. As in all cultures, children may be at risk from parents, family members or others with a duty of care towards them. Participants were unanimous in their condemnation of neglectful parents or those who physically, mentally or sexually abuse their children. But there were some differences in view about the boundaries between reasonable discipline and abusive behaviour.

*There is lack of control within some parents and they cannot control their temper.*

*Many perpetrators are alcoholics.*

*I would not call it corporal punishment but children must be aware there is a price to pay when they offend. Otherwise the home would be turned into a bedlam.*

*I don't beat my children even when they annoy me. I sit with them and explain to them the consequences of their actions. They later apologies for their actions and we move on.*

*There is a misguided philosophy that young people will respond and comply immediately with corporal punishment.*

*I am the ruler of my house and no social services should interfere in how I run my house.*

*Corporal punishment has existed from time immemorial and no legislation can stop it.*

## Discipline and control

Corporal punishment has for generations been common in many African cultures. The philosophy of 'spare the rod, spoil the child' is expressed in different ways in many communities. Participants agreed that this approach to discipline can go too far, with children subject to serious physical pain such as beatings, kicks, shaking, caning, cutting and burning. Parents who resort to these measures were not simply seen as over-zealous in their punishments. Participants felt that this kind of abuse of children was a clear sign of adults being out of control, unable to manage their own lives or under the influence of drink. It is clear that many children who are victims of this form of abuse are too afraid to report the abuse to the authorities and therefore nothing is done to the perpetrators.

*Some parents cannot manage the family work pressures and take it out on the children.*

Although against such extreme punishments, many participants argued that some level of physical correction is an essential tool for teaching children right from wrong. Some believed that only a neglectful parent fails to punish their child or that parents can only exercise sufficient control of their children by at least retaining the right to punish them physically. Others, however, were using different parenting techniques and found them effective.

*A child needs to be shown that he or she is in the wrong through some small beatings – so that they know that what they did is wrong and don't repeat it.*

There was a strong reaction from some of the participants to the idea that the state should dictate to parents about methods of bringing up children. As discussed earlier, the raising of children is clearly seen as the responsiblity of parents and their community. Outside interference is not welcomed – and people's instinct is to close ranks, even if they disapprove of the behaviour of a family or community member towards a child. There was also some scepticism about attempts by the State to outlaw corporal punishment and doubts that this approach could ever be effective in controlling and ending it.

*Some women shelter their husbands and hide the fact that they are abusing their own daughters because bringing it out will shame the family.*

*Some girls lure their fathers because of unhealthy competition with their mothers for the attention of the man in the home. Men with no self control fall in the trap.*

*There is lack of orientation for new arrivals. Many arrive as refugees, running away from conflict, and are located in places where they don't know anybody. They find social services procedure difficult to understand and "become lost."*

*Professionals such as teachers, doctors and social workers have no knowledge about different African cultures. They often don't know why the newly arrived have become refugees and the traumas they have gone through.*

*Because people have so much trust in them, they tell them all their problems and seek their advice. The church leaders end up misleading and misdiagnosing the problem leading to abuse.*

Participants also discussed how the tradition of closing ranks may harm children suffering or at risk of sexual abuse. This kind of abuse may be difficult even for other community members to discover, because it takes different forms and most often happens within homes, often perpetuated by close family members. In closed African families, such abuse may be hidden and never talked about, especially when the perpetrator is the head of the family or an elderly member of the community who is highly regarded. The victim often suffers in silence, accepting the abuse as the way things should be. Concerns about bringing shame to the family or being ostracised by the community for involving outside authorities may discourage others from taking action to help them. Just as in other cultures, some participants were ready to lay some of the blame for child abuse at the feet of the child victim. But the vast majority strongly condemned sexual abuse against children and those who carry it out.

## Changes in environment and circumstances

Participants talked about how different the concept of children's rights in Britain feels to new arrivals – and how little support they get in understanding the values and principles that define children's rights in their adopted country. Many are already disoriented and traumatised by their experiences. Ways of doing things are very different and it is easy to become confused. Key first points of contact with 'the system', such as teachers, doctors and social workers, may not be familiar with the culture these new arrivals have come from or the challenges they have overcome to arrive in the UK. Participants pointed out how difficult this can make it to begin to establish trusting relationships with professionals, who are well equipped to introduce new arrivals to the way things work in the UK and give them confidence to engage.

When this does not happen, new arrivals often end up relying on community leaders, traditional healers and spiritual leaders to guide them in understanding everything about their new home. Many do this with great care and skill. But participants talked about unscrupulous leaders, who prey on the vulnerabilities of their people for material gain, prescribing abusive practices for social and medical problems that could easily be addressed by professionals.

*Some community leaders, especially church leaders take advantage of new arrivals because of their vulnerabilities and extort material things from them.*

More generally participants questioned the lack of training given to professionals dealing with young people in detecting tradition-based abuse. There was extensive discussion of media reports of high profile cases of abuse. What they had read and heard made many participants concerned that professionals are so afraid of being accused of racism that some fail to take action to protect children, even when they believe they are seriously at risk.

Many gave examples of the different ways that children respond to a change in their environment. Some don't understand why their parents have taken them away from their homes and friends. They miss the people they left behind and may get depressed. Some are bullied in the playground because of their accent or 'being different' and end up becoming withdrawn or 'difficult'. Parents notice the changes and the symptoms but may not be able to understand what is causing them or how to help. They naturally turn to the pastor for advice, who may diagnose the child as possessed or being a witch. The process of exorcism then starts. If a teacher, doctor or other professional

can identify the need to offer support to the child or their family earlier in this process, participants believe this will significantly reduce the child's vulnerability to abuse.

*I lived in a refugee camp for five years before I was allowed to come to the UK. I didn't know what to do and my children couldn't understand their surroundings. We simply followed what we were told.*

## Family breakdown

First generation immigrants into the UK face a lot of pressures – economically, socially and psychologically. For example, participants talked about significant changes in the role and authority of women, who were seen as being more able to get jobs than many of their husbands. As the main breadwinner, women are more likely to challenge their husbands. This is seen as affecting children's attitudes to traditional male authority.

*They despise their husbands in front of their children and children stop respecting their fathers because they regard them as failures.*

For some, this was creating positive changes in traditional views of the relative value of sons and daughters and of the roles they should play. They observed that many African communities are patriarchal, leading families to have a desire for a son. Where this desire is not satisfied there is a tendency to discriminate against female offspring and deny them love they should otherwise receive.

*Some families do not want their daughters to go to school because girls are being prepared to be wives and mothers and there is no need to educate them.*

In families with both daughters and sons, boys may be given preferential treatment. For example, girls may be given lower priority for education or taken out of school at the earliest opportunity. Although some stated that boys should be raised to take responsibility for their future wives and children and girls should learn obedience, they generally made it clear that this did not indicate a preference for boys over girls. Some made it clear that they believed strongly in equal treatment and in encouraging their daughters and girls more generally to achieve their full potential.

However, they also reported that pressures on families and traditional roles meant that marriage breakdowns are increasingly common. These are often bitter and contested, causing rifts between whole families within the community. Children may be either abandoned by one parent – usually their father – or forcibly removed, denying them the right to see their other parent. Participants saw this instability around children's lives as a major source of risk. Many were worried about children growing up without the guidance of their fathers. Some talked about this as a cultural as well as a personal issue, with children seen as losing out on the 'African connection', affecting their performance in schools and socially within the community.

*Some of these breakdowns are acrimonious bitter family feuds and the children pay the price.*

*Some children are abducted and taken away from the UK to foreign lands to live with extended family and never to see the parent they left behind again.*

There was considerable anxiety about the power of the State to intervene in child-rearing. For many, the threat of losing their children felt very real and outside their control. Social services were often described as colluding with children in disobedient

*Children learn homosexuality in care homes.*

and dangerous behaviour, making the task of rearing children even more challenging. Removal into care was seen by many as a point of no return, with children subject to a range of new dangers and becoming increasingly out of control and alienated from their communities.

*Children become worse when they are taken into care where they get abused by their carers or the custodians of the homes.*

## Use of technology

*There is continued risk of corruption of children's minds from the Internet – from gangs, drug use, sexual predators and pornography.*

There was considerable discussion about the impact technology is having on the issue of children's rights. Participants agreed that better access to information helped children to understand their rights and to know what to do if they were being abused or harmed in any way. They also understood the educational value offered by use of technology and were keen for their children to benefit.

*Some children are possessed by the devil – this is why they spend so much time online and fall behind in their academic endeavours and do not listen to authority.*

At the same time, most parents were not as Internet savvy as their children. They were very anxious about the risks and dangers of social networking and digital communication and felt at a disadvantage in managing them. In a bid to protect their children, a number were taking very restrictive action, denying their children basic rights to freedom of choice, expression and association. Some used corporal punishment to control their children's Internet behaviour – and there were reports of extreme cases where parents had turned to exorcism.

*You cannot correct a wrong by doing wrong. Mutual respect and discussions within a family can help set up Internet guidelines within the home.*

*Parents need to be educated about the Internet and learn that it is a tool that can be used to protect and develop their children.*

Overall, however, participants agreed that parents needed education so that they could gain the knowledge and confidence to guide their children about the dangers of technology and support them in harnessing this tool. Many stressed the importance of having candid conversations with children and helping them to protect themselves. Digital communication is so widespread that children cannot effectively be protected by discipline and control within the home.

# 8. The political and economic context

There was considerable discussion in the focus groups about the broader pressures that poverty and the immigration system put on families, again increasing risk to children.

## Poverty and injustice

Participants talked at length about the risks to children caused by the poverty found in many African countries. Many told stories of children and young people sold off for money to extended families in the UK or smuggled into the country as adopted children or members of a family to whom they have no biological ties.

Although people agreed that some of the parents who sold their children did not care what happened to them, they believed most did it for the good of the child and the family overall. They were convinced that the child would have a good education and, in time, be able to make a good living, allowing them to provide support to the family remaining at home. The reality of their situation is often very different. Once here, some of these children are denied their fundamental rights like education and food. Participants talked about how they are used as home helps and are not paid a penny for their services by their ostensible benefactors. Victims of this form of abuse often suffer other severe physical abuse like beatings, rape, periods of starvation and, in extreme cases, murder.

## Immigration policy

Many participants believed that UK immigration policies, especially issues surrounding family reunion, contribute greatly to human rights abuses against children. Cases can take so long to be dealt with that, in desperation, families resort to human traffickers to bring their children to the UK. Some of the children who come through this channel end up being victims of child abuse.

The government was also blamed for denying some children their right to a parent by the way immigration laws are enforced. When one of the parents is deported out of the country, a child is left with only one parent. In many cases, this parent does not have enough money to ensure that the child can visit their deported parent. Restrictions on travel also prolong family separation and cause great distress for people who have lost contact with their children or other family members. There was also concern for children kept in detention centres with adults while their parents were awaiting determination of their immigration status or asylum claim.

*I got separated from my children during the war and some disappeared. I have not been allowed to travel for the last ten years and find where they are. I get depressed when I think about them.*

# 9. Community solutions

Throughout the workshops, participants were keen to engage with the challenge of finding solutions that respect and support traditional cultures, while protecting children from harm. Their ideas fell largely into three main categories – improved education for communities, accessible support structures, and support for professionals in identifying abuse and responding to it appropriately.

## Education

The overwhelming majority of participants identified education as the most effective way of reaching communities and engaging them in ending abuses of children's rights. They were keen to see and support action on a number of fronts.

### Educate parents of African origin about children's rights

Educating and creating awareness among parents is a cornerstone in the fight against tradition-based abuse. Participants pointed to their own experience of participating in this programme as evidence that some community members are not fully aware of the responsibilities they have as parents to uphold and defend children's rights. There can be clashes between traditional norms and what the children's rights concept demands of parents and the community as a whole. This leaves parents caught between conflicting views of what is in the best interest of their child. African communities need the opportunity to understand and discuss these challenges in a non-judgmental environment, so that they can develop solutions that respect the rights of children, without abandoning important elements of tradition.

### Educate children about children's rights

Participants agreed that a children's rights awareness programme aimed at children would help in early detection and prevention of tradition-based abuse. Many remained cautious about how their rights are described to children and the dangers that focusing on rights will undermine the traditional glue that holds African families and communities together. However, some saw such programmes as a chance to talk to children about both rights and responsibilities. And most were clear that children do need to understand what abuse is and that they do not have to suffer in silence. They need to know where and when to seek and get help if they suspect abuse is taking place. Some saw the value of creating platforms where children and young people can freely express themselves about their rights. Others wanted to see more opportunities for families to discuss these issues together.

### Educate communities about traditional practices

Most of the participants strongly support the bond between Africa and her offspring abroad, with almost all of them highlighting the benefits of taking their children home to Africa whenever they can afford to do so in order for the children to learn the language and other cultural values. However participants felt that parents should be aware of the dangers they put their children through when they encourage and

*Parents who believe that their children are possessed by spirits are not trying to harm them. They argue that it is their duty as parents to ensure that children are exorcised of the spirits.*

*Community members should be aware that they are duty-bound to act in the interests of children and that children have a right of say in any decisions that affect their lives.*

*(Now that I know about child rights) I react differently when I see my friends smack their children.*

*Children should not be allowed too much rights because they misuse it – they also have responsibilities to the family and community.*

*It is important that children know about abuse so that they are able to report it.*

*Art is the best way children can express themselves in a non-confrontational way.*

*Dialogue in the family is important.*

at times force their children to undergo traditional rituals that have not moved with modern times. Participants suggested that educating communities about the history and purpose behind traditional practices – and about the harm that they can do – would encourage more people to challenge and change them. All traditional practices that abuse children that were explored in this project have long term negative effects on the victims. These effects can be physical, psychological, and medical and sometimes threaten their lives. Participants agreed that members of the community all need to understand these negative consequences in order to make informed decisions.

Some rituals – such as FGM and traditional male circumcision – pose so much danger to the victims that some wanted to see concerted action to end them. They proposed that this should be based on a combination of education, effective enforcement of the law, support for children at risk, and positive leadership within communities.

A number of people engaged by the project were ready to take on stronger roles in their communities in promoting a child rights approach. The project did not set out to find these potential agents of change. But certain individuals emerged from the focus groups, showing a strong grasp of the issues raised and a willingness to take action. Unfortunately funding limitations made it impossible to develop these roles fully during the project. However, a number of individuals acted as group leaders and participated in many focus groups to build their knowledge and experience. By the end of the programme, 82 people had been identified who are willing to advocate for children's rights in their communities. APORENet hopes to continue to work with and develop this group, helping to build momentum for sustainable, community-based solutions to stamp out tradition-based children's rights abuse.

## Support communities with child upbringing

Participants suggested that some parents bring up their children under a regime of abuse because they do not know any better. There will always be bad parents who cannot control their temper or deliberately hurt and intimidate their children – but they believed that many would accept new approaches to bringing up children if they were confident that this would educate and protect their children as effectively as traditional methods.

# Support structures

Participants believed that communities can do a great deal to support children's rights and protect them from abuse. But they in turn need good co-operation with the authorities and financial support for community-based services. These can inform and advise community members and act as a bridge into the services they need. There was a strong sense that 'prevention is better than cure'. Early action to inform arrivals about their new culture and connect them with a range of relevant agencies can avoid many difficulties down the line.

## Community-based support structures

Participants were keen to see community-based support services, which were not directly associated with religious institutions, and able to provide accurate and well-informed support to families and individuals on social issues. Many new arrivals find

dealing with the system in the UK very challenging. A relatively small investment by government would make sure that they learn about relevant community organisations very early on. These services can give them practical advice and also build their confidence and capability in dealing with medical staff, teachers, social workers and other professionals.

*Newly [sic] arrivals should be sign-posted to community organisations that are specific to their cultures so that they are guided about what to do.*

More broadly, economic, medical, psychological and family pressures leave many families and individuals lonely and isolated. This in turn makes them easy prey for people who seek to exploit them within their community. Participants believed that these alternative community structures, supporting families and individuals on social issues, would help break the hold that such unscrupulous leaders often have over vulnerable individuals.

## Stronger community cohesion programmes

Participants felt strongly that new arrivals should be given support by the authorities and encouraged to integrate into their adopted culture and learn about the values of the society they live in.

As well as dealing with practical priorities, like education and housing, they saw great advantage in enabling people from different cultures to meet and get to know each other. Many believed that tackling isolation in this way would also prevent such families being vulnerable to unscrupulous spiritual and community leaders and protect children from the conspiracy of silence that can surround incidences of abuse.

*Understanding communities and encouraging cultures to live side by side would help break the taboo inspired silence that leaves tradition-based abuse undetected for long even among neighbours.*

## Getting help

Despite concerns about the consequences of speaking out against members of their own families or communities, some participants were clear that they would be prepared to report suspected abuse. They wanted easy access to a confidential service, which would understand something about their culture and respond in a sensitive way. It was also seen as essential that children knew where to go for help and that they would be listened to. Most were reluctant to go directly to 'the authorities' but no-one was aware of any other services outside their own community that could help them. Participants wanted to see this kind of support service set up – or much better publicity within communities for existing services, with confidence building work to help adults and children feel safe using them.

*Some people fear to report to police because their migration issues are still pending. They die quietly.*

There was considerable discussion about whether participants would approach the police with concerns about suspected abuse or to report known incidents. Very few would be willing to do so, either on their own behalf or for others. Perceived police attitudes to immigration were uppermost in people's minds. Some had fears about unresolved immigration issues being uncovered. But even those with an established right to be in the UK felt questions about their immigration status would be a higher

priority for the police than concerns about abuse. Some simply saw the police as hostile or indifferent to African communities. There was a general view that more police action was needed to demonstrate to communities that the service was for them. Some wanted to see more recruitment of community police officers from African communities to increase confidence and improve understanding of their cultures.

## Support for professionals

### Access to training and expertise

Participants saw teachers, doctors, nurses, social workers and others directly involved with children as well-positioned to see early warning signs of abuse and make sure that children get help. Their concerns were that different belief systems or lack of education about African cultures often prevented professionals from identifying potential problems or responding to them well.

Participants would like professionals working with African communities to get support and training in understanding tradition-based abuse and to have access to 'expert centres' or trained community advisers for further advice. This would help them, for example, to pick up children at risk of exorcism rituals because of behaviour change associated with difficulties coping with a new environment. Or they might look more closely at whether a young girl who is showing anxiety about a forthcoming holiday is, in fact, being taken abroad for FGM. Participants believed that a combination of training and access to expert advice would give professionals confidence and help to eliminate inaction based on fear of being seen as racist when dealing with suspected cases of abuse.

*Professionals working in communities should learn about the cultural values of the people they serve in order for them to effectively respond.*

### Preventative action

Participants argued that more needs to be done to inform community members about the laws surrounding child rights and child abuse and of the consequences of breaking them. Although they understood that the abuses identified in this programme can be addressed by current legislation, some wanted to see tougher laws or stronger penalties. This came out particularly strongly around FGM, although other practices, such as traditional male circumcision, were also identified by some as worthy of more severe punishment. Others were concerned that further legislation might drive tradition-based abuse underground, making it even harder to monitor and control.

Participants also called on local authorities and professionals in contact with young people to monitor and identify those who are likely to fall victims of such practices during holidays and warn parents of the dangers of conducting traditional rituals that are not only illegal in the UK but also endanger children's health.

*The local authority should issue an official circular to every parent at the end of term warning them about the health implications and the likely penalty of breaking the law through such practices.*

On the role of faith institutions in fuelling the abuse of children, participants called on government to regulate the new age churches in the UK through carrying out

*Church leaders should undergo CRB checks before they are allowed to minister.*

*They are causing problems in Africa too – governments must work together to protect vulnerable people.*

*Credible organisations exist in Africa that could help in the fight against cultural practices that violate children's rights but they are financially constrained.*

disclosure and barring service checks on pastors and registering them. They also urged engaging with African governments to find out about their branches in Africa and their activities. This could be done through police intelligence or other state organs and other agencies involved in child protection so that information is shared and approaches are harmonised. Participants also were keen to see development support for community groups involved in safeguarding work with children in Africa. They believed that not only would this protect vulnerable people in Africa. Finding ways of assisting these groups could also cut the number of children suffering tradition-based abuse in the UK.

# 10. Overall conclusions

In the light of these extensive discussions with community members, APORENet identified the following key areas of learning, which we hope will be of value to professionals and others working with traditional African communities and their children.

## Roots of abuse

It is critical to understand that many violations of children's rights within African communities are not deliberately committed. Neither are they the result of neglectful or uncaring parenting. While recognising that some people are deliberately abusive or neglectful, parents involved in the focus group meetings expressed good intentions for their children. Any violations they commit come from their understanding of their parental and/or traditional obligations. For example, most parents who use corporal punishment believe that they are doing it for the good of their children, moulding them into becoming better adults. Yet none would make this argument to justify any form of sexual abuse, which was unanimously condemned as wrong.

In working with families, professionals need to be aware that abusive behaviour is often the result of lack of knowledge, marginalisation and a sincere desire to protect their children from harm. Clearly the priority must be to protect children. But understanding that an abusive parent may genuinely be concerned for the welfare of their child provides a starting point for changing behaviour which may not otherwise be available.

### Lack of knowledge

The project highlighted the vicious cycle of abuse that children of African descent can face. This starts with lack of knowledge that leads to misinformation which in turn leads to inaction or responses that perpetuate abuse. To break the cycle there is need for a radical shift in local authority and government approaches, designed to encourage otherwise marginalised communities into the mainstream. Participants identified education and work to create links between communities as an essential starting point, reducing isolation and exposing people to new ideas and different ways of doing things. Parents need new tools to fulfil what they see as their responsibilities to their children and their communities – and they need support in understanding, implementing and sharing them. Although there are examples of good practice in training and community engagement in both the voluntary and statutory sector, these need scaling up to be more systematic and widespread. No participant in the programme knew that such opportunities might be available to them.

It is also clear that many new immigrants have different interpretations and understanding of psychological and behavioural disorders that may affect children. Without good access to alternative diagnoses and treatments, they inevitably fall back on traditional interpretations of disorders. Many cases of spirit possession, witch branding and corporal punishment abuse can be traced to this phenomenon. This may lead to distressed and disoriented children undergoing stressful and dangerous

exorcism rituals or being beaten and denied food to starve out the devil within them. In many cases, medical treatments or therapies routinely available in the UK could quickly cure the child, supported by their community and family through their prayers.

## Marginalisation

Risks to children are increased by the marginalisation in the UK of both new arrivals and of African communities more generally. When new arrivals stay on the fringes of society, parents and children are not educated about children's rights and are therefore oblivious to the law and social expectations. The fact that some traditional practices break the law goes unnoticed by the victims, perpetrators of the abuse and the authorities. Many community members would welcome education about child protection and parental responsibilities as part of official Home Office engagement with new arrivals or as part of the 'citizenship test' for those applying for naturalisation as a British citizen or for indefinite leave to remain. Community engagement in developing official information and tests would help to ensure that they genuinely help recent immigrants to understand cultural expectations and the practical realities of living in the UK.

Many families of African origin – whether newly arrived or well-established – are isolated and marginalised. Many feel that there is a lack of interest in what they do or concern for their well-being and needs. Their only sources of help and advice are community and faith leaders, which leaves them susceptible to exploitation when these leaders are either ill-informed about how the system works in the UK or abusive in their dealings with people, physically, emotionally or financially. There are strong arguments both for positive official engagement with faith institutions to assist them in their support role and for greater regulation to protect vulnerable people, especially children, from exploitation. Building alternative community support networks and integration programmes makes it more difficult for abuse to go unchallenged, significantly reducing risks to children.

## Sincere desires to protect children

Many parents in African communities – as elsewhere – struggle to protect their children from negative influences. Parents in the focus groups were seriously concerned about, for example, the gang culture surrounding them, their children being drawn into drug use and the hidden dangers of the Internet. Many believed that corporal punishment, isolation or denial of food are the only effective ways to control children and protect them from antisocial groups like gangs. Brought up this way themselves, they need to be introduced to different methods of child rearing and to be convinced that they will still be fulfilling their responsibilities as good parents if they adopt less violent and controlling approaches.

It is also important to understand how deep the belief in spirit possession runs in African communities and how important is a parent's responsibility to protect their children from evil spirits. Possession is seen as a common phenomenon. It can only be dealt with by experienced faith leaders, who have powers to rid children of evil spirits. Similarly, maintaining continuity of tradition and culture is a key parental role. Some parents feel that, if they do not force their children to go through the same traditional rituals as they did, they are denying them their heritage and cultural rights. In both cases, respected members of the community, such as elders and pastors, play a critical role. Ending abuse of children through traditional rituals and practices means engaging these key leaders and opinion formers in finding community-driven solutions which respect culture while safeguarding young people.

## Failure to address abuse

The APORENet programme encouraged communities to explore and 'own' the challenge of protecting children and respecting their rights. But individuals and communities need support if they are to come forward to report abuse or risk of abuse to the authorities. Lack of knowledge of what abuse is, fear of ostracism and lack of confidence in the system means many turn a blind eye to abusive behaviour or close ranks with the perpetrator if concerns are raised.

Educating communities about child rights, the nature of abuse and the law has already been discussed as key to increasing understanding and encouraging people to identify and report abuse. Better publicity is needed for existing services where suspicions of abuse can be reported – and new ones should be developed, where they do not exist. Community members need to be assured that such services will be both confidential and culturally sensitive. Anonymous reporting mechanisms are most likely to lead to early reporting.

Where a family or community member does not stand up on their behalf, children are very reliant on professionals to identify signs that they are at risk of or being abused. Teachers, medical staff or social workers need training and support to recognise these symptoms, particularly where they are associated with traditional rites of passage or exorcism rituals, which they may not be familiar with.

It is equally important that professionals do not, through ignorance of African cultures, misdiagnose innocent activities as child abuse. So, for example, in most African families respect for elders is taken for granted. Children listen and obey instructions as laid down by the head of the family. Western society allows children to negotiate around instructions. In the process they may argue with their parents or answer back. A professional witnessing a situation where a child always accepts orders without question can interpret this as a sign of bullying or even underlying abuse. Yet culturally, African children are brought up to respect their elders' instructions as being given in their own interests. Such mistakes create mistrust and confrontations between parents and professionals, which have a wider impact in communities. When successfully challenged by parents, there is a danger that the authorities lose confidence in dealing with such cases and are too cautious when strong action is required.

The APORENet programme suggests that there are many within African communities who are willing to act as agents of change, advocating for children's rights and helping communities find new ways to express tradition and culture. Around 10% of participants (82 people) were identified as having the potential to take on this role. This is an enormously valuable resource, which needs to be further developed.

## Co-operative international action

As one participant expressed it, 'you can get an African out of Africa but you can't get Africa out of an African'. All the practices discussed in this report have their roots in Africa. And the bonds between communities mean that a sustainable and permanent end to traditional practices which harm children relies on action both in African and the UK. As well as supporting, educating and engaging communities in the UK, it is therefore important to 'take the fight to the frontline' by tackling child abuse in Africa. HumaneAfrica's work, for example, uses a similar participatory model to that used by

APORENet but with communities in Africa. They too have found that a community education approach has led to open and creative discussion within communities. Where community members are actively involved in developing solutions, sustainable change is much more likely to be achieved.

Government and funding agencies in the UK can assist this effort by funding African-based agencies working on the ground in a participatory way to tackle child abuses at root. Since education has been identified as the key ingredient in the fight against abusive traditional practices, efforts should be put into encouraging Diaspora and other groups in the UK to engage on this issue with their communities and partners in Africa, sharing learning and building co-operative effort to find alternative ways of celebrating culture without causing harm to children.

# 11. Recommendations for action

The findings of this report suggest a number of ways in which decision makers, professionals and funders can support the development of community-based solutions to the challenge of tradition-based abuse in African communities and help protect children at risk. In summary, community members attending the focus groups identified the following key areas for action:

- Rights based community education;

- Better integration and support networks;

- Effective reporting mechanisms;

- Training for professionals;

- Targeted regulation and effective use of the law;

- Engaging leaders and opinion formers.

## Rights based community education

Community education is the key to safeguarding children. Many parents find themselves caught between conflicting views of what is in the best interest of their child. Rights based education exposes people to new information, ideas and ways of doing things and creates opportunities for openness and discussion. It is this combination that will enable communities to come up with community-driven solutions that respect both their cultural heritage and children's rights. Targeted educational resources for communities will help underpin this work. There is scope to build on existing examples of good practice in both the public and voluntary sector. Specific recommendations were for training and resources on:

- Child rights, the law and cultural expectation in the UK, for both adults and children;

- The history and cultural purpose of traditional practices and any dangers they pose to mental or physical health;

- Alternative interventions available to support vulnerable children, such as mental health or medical services;

- Alternative approaches to child rearing, which do not involve corporal punishment;

- Guidance on safe use of the Internet.

## Better integration and support networks

New arrivals and others living in marginalised communities need a more robust support network if they are to be successfully integrated into the UK. Without this, people remain isolated, relying on traditional structures such as religious institutions. Although an important resource for many, not all faith-based organisations are best placed to help new arrivals to engage with a new society. The right kind of early intervention provides a supportive introduction to social expectations, enables families and their children to link into mainstream services and builds their confidence. Specific recommendations were:

- Developing community-based support services, trained in children's rights and experienced in guiding people through a complex new environment, connecting them to the services they need.

- Promoting programmes to enhance cultural and social interaction, helping communities to feel valued, breaking down isolation between neighbours and opening new sources of support.

## Effective reporting mechanisms

When children are at risk, communities need services that are accessible, well-informed and ready to act. Despite concerns about the consequences, some community members are ready to speak out when they see or suspect abuse. They need to know what to do and where to get help – and to be confident that services will be confidential and culturally sensitive. It is clear that the option to report anonymously is likely to significantly increase the numbers prepared to come forward. Specific recommendations were:

- Better publicity within communities about how to contact 'the authorities', what action they will take and how the caller will be treated;

- Information about other services willing to help those who do not want to speak directly to social services or the police;

- Information for children and young people in schools, referring specifically to tradition-based abuse and advising them on who to talk to – within the school or outside;

- Specific services for anonymous reporting of tradition-based abuse, run by people with direct experience of African cultures, creating confidence that concerns will be understood and dealt with appropriately.

## Training and support for professionals

Teachers, doctors, nurses, social workers and others directly involved with children are on the front-line for identifying early warning signs of abuse and making sure that they get help. This is a challenging role where different belief systems or lack of education about African cultures may prevent professionals from identifying potential problems or responding to them well. Specific recommendations were:

- Developing 'expert or knowledge centres' or teams of trained community advisers to provide training to professionals working with African communities

in understanding tradition based abuse, the ages or circumstances where children may be most at risk and possible symptoms.

- Providing access to follow up advice, enabling professionals to test out concerns and build their confidence and expertise in dealing effectively with suspected cases of abuse of abuse within potentially unfamiliar cultural contexts.

## Targeted guidance, regulation and effective use of the law

There are arguments for backing up an educational and enabling approach with selected use of more formal communication channels to remind community members – and parents and carers in particular – of the law in relation to the safeguarding of children and of the potential consequences of breaking it. Specific recommendations were:

- Using routine communications from schools or medical practices to reinforce messages about children's rights;

- Publicising successful prosecutions related to tradition-based abuse;

- Considering extending current registration and regulation arrangements – for example, requiring faith institutions to demonstrate effective child protection practices or including people convicted of FGM on the sex offender register.

## Engaging leaders and opinion formers

Professionals concerned with safeguarding need to work with communities to find solutions rather than simply police them. Individuals and community groups are well positioned – and ready – to raise awareness about the dangers of the harmful practices, mobilise community members to address them and work together with communities in Africa to embed change. To do this, they need to support of government agencies. Specific recommendations were:

- Engaging and supporting faith leaders ready and willing to take a lead on child rights, as well as taking strong action against unscrupulous pastors who endanger or abuse children. Churches, mosques and other religious institutions have great influence within communities and positive leadership has the potential to reach and influence many.

- Engaging with established leaders and others ready to put themselves forward as agents of change, both as a source of expert advice to safeguarding authorities and to challenge the instinct within communities to close ranks against what might be seen as outside interference.

- Supporting international work enabling communities in Africa to challenge traditional practices that harm children. The links between communities are very strong and permanent solutions will only be found by action on both fronts.

# Further reading

National Action Plan to Tackle Abuse Linked to Faith or Belief. The National Working Group on Child Abuse linked to Faith or belief.
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/175437/Action_Plan_-_Abuse_linked_to_Faith_or_Belief.pdf

Female Genital Mutilation in Britain, J. A Black and G. D Debelle, Children's Service Unit, South Birmingham Health Service Authority

FORWARD – Safeguarding Rights and Dignity – A statistical Study to estimate the Prevalence of Female Genital Mutilation in England and Wales - http://www.forwarduk.org.uk/

Violating Children's Rights – Harmful Practices Based on Tradition, Culture, Religion or Superstitions. A Report from The International NGO Council on Violence Against children - http://www.crin.org/docs/inco_report_15oct.pdf

Child Sacrifice and the Mutilation of Children in Uganda - HUMANEAFRICA
http://www.humaneafrica.org/

Trafficking Body Parts in Mozambique and South Africa – HUMANEAFRICA
http://www.humaneafrica.org/

AFRUCA – Tackling Child Abuse linked to Faith or Belief
http://www.afruca.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/ECJ-3-4-Faith-based-abuse.pdf

AFRUCA - Promoting the Rights and Welfare of African Children
http://www.afruca.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/SACUS05_What-is-witchcraft-abuse.pdf

Trust for London – Safeguarding Children's rights: exploring issues of witchcraft and spirit possession in London's African communities
http://www.trustforlondon.org.uk/policy-change/strategic-work-item/safeguarding-childrens-rights/