



INTERVENTIONS ON THE FRONT LINE OF CHILD WITCH ACCUSATIONS

with **Barrister James Ibor** in Calabar, **Nigeria**

and **Reverend Jean-Paul Aruna** in Goma, **D.R. Congo**

SCWA Coalition

Multi-Agency Forum online May 2021

Our Forum

The SCWA Coalition hold the multi-agency forum twice a year to provide an opportunity to connect for organisations and individuals who are working with the issues of child abuse linked to faith and belief, specifically that of accusations of witchcraft made against children.

Each forum focuses on different aspects of this issue, and invites professionals with relevant expertise to help explore these in some depth. A key emphasis is on improving insights into the complex dynamics behind child witch accusations, and also providing practical positive interventions which can improve the lives of children affected, and help their families and communities become safe places for children.

Our Topic

INTERVENTIONS ON THE FRONT LINE OF CHILD WITCH ACCUSATIONS

Our Speakers

Barrister James Ibor is Director of **Basic Rights Counsel Initiative (BRCI)**, in Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria. He has over ten years' experience of working with children, community leaders, locals NGOs, and government to support and protect children accused of witchcraft, and to uphold and implement child rights legislation. He has also presented at national and international conferences, and is highly engaged with local media.



Reverend Jean-Paul Aruna is Director of **Laissez Vivre Les Enfants (LVLE)** in Goma, D.R. Congo. He is working with church, school, and community leaders, and more recently with the local police and municipal authorities to address child abuse, particularly abuse linked to accusations of witchcraft. He is an experienced and gifted trainer and also presents radio and television programmes on this issue.



Presentations

These are transcripts of the presentations given by our speakers.

NIGERIA

Barrister James Ibor

— working with Basic Rights Counsel Initiative, in Calabar.

My name is James Ibor. I am the Principle Counsel and Co-Founder of Basic Rights Counsel Initiative. Basic Rights Counsel Initiative is committed to protecting the rights of women and children, especially children who are accused of witchcraft.

Children who are accused of witchcraft are very vulnerable. Most victims and survivors of witchcraft accusations are vulnerable because they are born with birth defects, many of them are persons living with disability, many of them are orphans. So they are easily preyed on by religious leaders and traditional practitioners who prey on them for profit.

Most children that are accused of witchcraft are socially disconnected. They drop out of school, for those of them who were in school before the witchcraft accusation. Many of them end up becoming street children like in this situation of school-out boys in Cross River State. They are sexually exploited. Many of them, to enable them to survive in the streets, are introduced into drugs that help them even to endure the harshness of street life.

And we tried to profile some of them, within the limits of our resources, and rehabilitate them. It is very difficult to reintegrate or rehabilitate children stigmatised as witches, because society doesn't want them. There is deep rooted belief that they are witches, so reintegrating them back into society is usually very difficult. Most times we cannot even reintegrate them back to their families.

We recruit foster caregivers, who are very rare. when they discover that the story around a child is witchcraft accusations. Poverty and the state of our health facility are some of the major push factors of the continuous discrimination, stigmatisation, and accusation of children of witchcraft.

Since usually, in a country where there are so many fake drugs, the health facilities are in a terrible state. So when you have sleep paralysis, and when you take malaria drugs and are not getting well, you find the next person who is not looking well, or you think is not looking normal, must be blamed. And most times you consult the spiritual leaders, and they find the most vulnerable person in the family to accuse — people who are defenceless, who cannot argue with them, who do not have strength to stand up to them to say, "No it's not possible." And that [accusation] they do, so they can get money to exorcise the witchcraft.

We have documented well over 300 cases of witchcraft accusation.

Like the case of "Faith" whose street mother died, and the father remarried, and soon after then the father lost his job, and the man's old car started malfunctioning. And in the course of seeking solutions to his economic misfortune, started consulting local pastors to reach a solution to his economic crisis. And one of the pastors accuses his three kids of being

responsible spiritually for his economic woes and problems. He accused them of witchcraft, and proffered solutions, recommending fasting. So these children were locked up in a room which was poorly ventilated, without food or water. They stayed there several days and neighbours became concerned. They alerted us and, of course, we responded. We physically broke into the place and liberated the children. About that treatment, it is sad to say, that the government has not held this family accountable. Only we managed to rehabilitate them and get them back to school.

Now “Kimas” case really breaks my heart, a child of six years old, who was forced out of home because of a local pastor branded him as a witch. It was sad because this child stayed on the streets for about two years, depending on passers-by and good people in the community to feed him. He had no roof over his head, he was not in school, and was just struggling, he had a lot of infections. And we were lucky to have come to his aid, because some concerned committee members called on us.

We are currently expanding to more rural communities, and building partnership with local religious organisations. We are also reviewing our advocacy strategy, including these religious leaders in advocacy, in developing advocacy messages that will help to keep children safe.

Note: names of children have been changed to protect identities.

D.R. CONGO

Reverend Jean-Paul Aruna

— working with Laissez Vivre Les Enfants, in Goma.

Good morning to you brothers and sisters. My name is Jean-Paul Aruna Masudi Kayungu. I am the director of Laissez Vivre Les Enfants, which in English is: Let The Children Live. I am born again, I love Jesus Christ, and also I am pastoring the church called Christ's Gospel Church, located in Goma, D.R.C., in the Eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Also I'm married to Sister Edwige Aruna, my wife, and together we have nine children, among them four boys and five girls, praise the Lord!

My purpose in making this short video is to introduce to you our organisation, Laissez Vivre Les Enfants (Let The Children Live), and also to tell you or show you in which level the Lord has accomplished a good thing through us and with us for the purpose of children in this region. As you may know, LVLE exists since April 18th 2015, and we have been involved in many contexts for the purpose of the children, order to see in which way we could create safe environment for children.

In Masisi near Agongo, children are not spared. Masisi near Agongo has been for a long time in the region a theatre of ethnic conflict and also of wars, and a very bad situation caused by rebels in this region. Because of those wars and ethnic conflicts, many families have been displaced, and also have been planted into a very extreme poverty, and many children have been orphaned, because their father or mother could die, or both parents. And because of that, very many of the children are in the streets, and so what they do is they go here or there to beg for food and to steal. Most of them have not many clothes, and they have a very bad look [appearance], and because of that, they are accused as witches.

So this situation of accusing, firstly, children as witches has put the children into a very very deep stress, and has contributed to leading many children into the streets to become street boys. Once first children become street boys, they are very dangerous and often they desire for revenge. And the only way for them to get revenge, is to create a situation of panic: they can steal; they can beat; and also to create a bad insecurity environment. So because of that, as LVLE, we wanted to focus on this reality, on this context, make this phenomenon our principal fight, our principal battle.

Consequences of this bad treatment in the chambers of prayer are very psychological and emotional. Because of what? When those children, after being badly treated by those false prophets, come back into their families. Now, there, because everybody knew that those children were to see the prophet because they were [accused of being] witches, they are very badly treated. Children cried out on them, "Witches, witches, witches." Also they are beaten, and the very bad thing is they are marginalised from others. They don't give them food sometimes; they beat them; they deprive them of some rights in the house; they can't eat with others; they can't sleep with others; they can't stay where other people are, because they are "witches". So this situation plants them in a very deep stress, until they develop many kind of disease emotionally.

That's why, when we find them in the streets to sensibilise them, many of them refuse to come back in their houses.

Those men [who do the abuse] are free, they walk freely. Their churches are healthy [full] – so many people go there. They are not troubled by the government, and yet we have a law which says that accusing a child of witchcraft is punishable by 1 to 3 years of penal servitude. Unfortunately the government remains powerless in the face of this phenomenon. Children are still suffering. Children are still victims of this situation.

We see that, and most of the time when we are in front of the children and trying to talk with them, to sensibilise them to go back home, they refuse categorically, and say, "we can't go back there because we are free here, we eat well here, for sure we suffer here, but we can't go there." Because for us, as LVLE, the safe place we believe for children to live [should be] in the family.

So, in order to stop this phenomenon, with those Synergies, we denounce various of those abuses to which children of these regions and territories are victims. And we praise the Lord, because the police have agreed with us and accepted to go with us in this process. With the Synergies in Masisi and Monigi we have initiated different kinds of sanctions against all those who will be caught in the violence of these areas. And praise the Lord, we have the support of the police and also local authorities in the region. Synergies have had an impact in different ways. Through Synergies LVLE acts very well. LVLE is impacting the region.

First of all, we have identified through Synergies, all leaders of those chambers of prayer, and right now we are reasoning how to put them in training sessions of "the Heart of the Matter". Another problem: apart from identifying leaders of chambers of prayer because of the Synergies, we have also through the Synergies implanted different cells, like small representations of Synergies in different districts of the region. We have also given out our phone number in many different churches, in order to be in contact with people.

Even if the phenomena and is not yet well eradicated, or completely eradicated, we believe that people are being informed by our presence and by what we are doing there.

And another good thing: at least 156 schools have been trained by LVLE through "the Heart of the Matter". And also over 200 churches have been trained in "the Heart of the Matter" by LVLE actually. This is a very very big impact in the region.

Now I'm going to show you some photos of three different girls who have been accused of being witches, and they were beaten, and have been served bad treatment in their families.

The first is this beautiful girl, called "Sunrain". Sunrain is actually 14 years old, she has lost both parents and two brothers during an armed attack in the village of Kitembe. She was the only daughter of her parents, and just two days after her family died she decided to come down to Saké to find a job, because she could not live by herself after losing her parents. Now the problem is, Sunrain was seriously beaten, and badly treated by her boss's older sister. She reported to me that she was burned on her back by hot water.

Another picture is about this beautiful girl, a gift from the Lord, "Odette". Odette was also a victim of a witchcraft accusation. Odette reported to me that she had a problem of screaming in her sleeping. Every time she was sleeping, she was having this feeling that there was someone coming to her in order to kill her with a knife. Every time this dream was coming to her, and because of that she was crying out in order to find help in the house, in the family. You could even see her left eye is affected, she was beaten seriously, until she ran away. She left the house and now she is living in the street.

Sunrain is there, very deceived by life, and she says she will not come back again to her family. She has accepted to stay forever, all her life, in the streets. She was also a victim of a witchcraft accusation.

Another bad picture, the last I think, it's a very bad story of this beautiful girl. I think you can see her in the picture, her name is "Katarina". Katarina is just eight years old, she is mute from birth, she has never talked, never understood. She was burned in the face because she remained on the bed. You can even see the scar on the front [of her head]. Katarina is an orphan also of her father. She was seriously abused until part of her face came into contact with the fire. The fact was reported by a neighbour of the house, to the nearest church, and it came to us and we've been informed like that. Katarina is now living with the chief of the village.

Note: names of children have been changed to protect identities.

Definition

Synergies: these are a formalised collaborative agreement between the NGO (LVLE), local municipal authorities, the police, and overseers of some of the networks of churches and schools. Over time, Jean-Paul Aruna has developed such agreements, to ensure all agencies are working together towards an outcome of positive child protection and wellbeing.

Questions & Answers

Following the two presentations there was opportunity provided for questions and answers in breakout sessions with each of the speakers separately, and then again together in a final plenary session.

Please observe that these notes are not word-for-word quotes (especially considering translation challenges), nor necessarily in sequence. They are an attempt to catch the salient points that were shared during the discussion times with both speakers. Similar questions have been grouped together. Attendees may have picked up other points or aspects of the responses that have not been noted here.

We have identified the names of our speakers and of the steering group where we have given a response or comment, but have not noted names of other participants who raised a question or made a comment.

Q = question, A = answer, C = comment.

Connections with diaspora communities

Q Child witch accusations (CWA) and related abusive practices occur quite frequently here in the UK and Europe, due to the presence of diaspora communities (and churches) who bring their beliefs with them when they travel. How can we best respond to that connection?

A **Susie Howe:** We need a two-pronged approach. SCWA's partners are working to tackle the issue at source, helping to re-align an entrenched worldview in nations where this originates. However, colleagues in the UK need to engage and work with diaspora churches here. A similar response to begin to change beliefs [as well as practices] is required. SCWA will be looking to work with ThirtyOne-Eight (a UK agency that works to ensure and improve safeguarding in churches and other organisations) to adapt our modular "Heart of the Matter" training course for the UK context. This is used with church leaders and other significant influencers.

Awareness of this issue

Q How is it that people working with an international NGO in the D.R. Congo or in Nigeria may remain unaware of this phenomenon?

A **Jean-Paul Aruna:** Firstly, such malpractice may be hidden away, not done openly, or not talked about in public. Secondly, under the legal system, cases such as deliverance may not be acknowledged.

C As a foreign NGO worker, you may be excluded from any conversation about this topic, as others will assume that it is not part of your worldview.

Early interventions

- Q Have you been able to intervene where a family needs support before any accusation is made? Since it is the family situation which leads to the accusations, surely this would reduce instances of accusations?
- A **James Ibor:** Yes, we have identified some families where children are especially at risk, maybe where a parent dies suddenly, or both parents die in controversial circumstances. Children orphaned then moved to relatives, so more at risk of CWA (as the extended family can't cope with extra children). Also in a family where the wife is not conceiving for whatever reason (there may be several), the step-children are more likely to be blamed. Equally, if a biological child dies, a step-child may become accused. We can give support to these families with counselling, and if needed, some supplementary income assistance, but this is not easily sustainable without government buy-in. We want to do more of this in concert with the government.

Safe houses for refuge

- Q You mentioned that many accused children end up on the streets. Have you used "half-way houses" or "safe houses" as a step to reconciling children with their families, or working with street-connected families?
- A **James Ibor:** BRCI has an emergency shelter opened in 2017 (supported by Unicef) as part of the response. We have also been able to profile all the street children in Calabar. We held "Camp 50" for three weeks, and were able to find out more about the children's situations. We also have a "transit bay" with capacity for six children for up to three months, where we can help them with addictions, inculcate routine etc. prior to reuniting with a family. This structure is inadequate and we need more capacity. We also need to be able to increase the foster network and train more foster parents. These create safe spaces for short stay, as a step to reintegration in society. In a few cases we have reintegrated a child with the biological family, or in some instances with relatives.

Support to parents

- Q What support can be offered to parents and carers during the process of reintegrating the child with the family, particularly considering the emotional harm that has occurred?
- A **James Ibor:** Children's rights law and the Child Rights Act in Nigeria make provision for foster care and adoption, so when we do reintegration into foster care families we help them follow through the processes of documenting for this, and ensure that they are not extorted by social welfare officers. So that is part of the support we give to them. We also provide trainings for them on how to keep children safe, and even provide training on alternative discipline measures. It is very common to have children battered or beaten heavily in the course of witchcraft exorcism, or in the cause of trying to instil discipline, so we have developed some slides which are part of our training module. So we are helping to keep children safe. And for those parents who

are very religious, we tell them that God's hand is not too short to cast away demons, so you can ask adults to go ahead and pray and fast, but don't ask children to fast, and don't beat the child, or deny the child the necessities of life in the process of exorcising witchcraft. You may strongly believe that the child has some spiritual possession, because, perhaps the child is very stubborn. But given the background of many of the street children, of course you don't expect them to conform to your family standards immediately. You need to give them time, discipline is a process, socialisation is a process. So if you want to get them to conform you need to adopt acceptable means of discipline. So the support we give them in summary is training, and monitoring. We have had cause to remove children from where they are placed to another placement. If in the course of monitoring we don't get the desired results, we are always able to go back to court to say, "Look, we want to cancel this fostering or adoption order, because we have found that in spite of the training this family is not capable to care for the child." We have done that in several cases. I say it is tough to get success. We have many cases where we struggle to do this within the limit of our resources. Our greatest motivation is the successes we have recorded.

Family reintegration, fostering and adoption

Q Is it always possible to integrate children back with their families?

A **Jean-Paul Aruna:** No, it is not always possible, and many children don't want to go back to their families particularly where there are step-parents involved. Commonly it is the step-parents who are the abusers. At LVLE we act as mediators between the child and family. It is a lengthy process to reintegrate a child with its family, a lot of work has to be done in educating the parents and change their mindsets. It is a gradual and careful process. Where it is not possible to integrate reintegrated child, we would then look for foster families.

Q Are there circumstances where children have been reintegrated to their original families?

A **James Ibor:** Yes, we've had a few cases, but I think the number is negligible, we have recorded two cases. In those cases we have to do a lot of work and monitor the family more often. We have had cases where we reintegrated the children to the families thinking that everything [in the family situation] was wonderful. Unknown to us, things were just made to seem OK, because they were afraid of being prosecuted. And then the family disappeared, we have not been able to trace them, and we do not know what has happened to the child. Perhaps they have been killed? ...or something else? So in those cases where we reintegrate the child back into the family that has stigmatised the child as a witch, we do a lot of monitoring to ensure that the child is OK, and to be aware of any problems that arise.

Working with authorities

Q In their presentations, both speakers mentioned working with authorities. How do you get to a point where you can include authorities, police, NGO, and churches all working together?

- A **Jean-Paul Aruna:** LVLE's approach is to identify the right people to get involved, building relationships with people from government and police who have the authority and capacity to influence others. This does not happen instantly, may require revisiting them several times. So you need to know your constituency well, and then bring together the right people for interactive participatory training, so they can be leaders on this issue in the community.

Legal cases and challenges

- Q What success has there been in bringing cases of abuse to court? Have there been any successful convictions of people who have been accusing children of witchcraft?
- A **Jean-Paul Aruna:** Yes, indeed. Through developing the "Synergies" process to get the police and authorities onside to challenge these practices and bring these cases to court, we have had some successful convictions against perpetrators implicated in maltreating children. One example is the case of one of the girls you saw in the presentation, and the people who were abusing her are now in prison. Parents may hand children over to the prayer rooms, so they are complicit but not the ones who directly cause the abuse. Nonetheless, we have had some success (whether cases against family members, church leaders, prayer room leaders, or others causing the abuse), and these cases are beginning to be heard.
- Q What is the potential for the role of parent advocacy? It is clear from the presentations that there has been good success around reintegrating some accused children into a few families. How are you using the experiences of families who have undergone reconciliation to amplify the voice for others who have are facing similar situations?
- A **James Ibor:** [Of the two biological family re-unions we have achieved] one set of parents will be a good advocate, but not the other. Even with those cases where we see some success, we are careful, as often they are not willing to talk about it. [It may be that other influences around them prevent them from openly continuing the abuse, not because they are convinced that the child is not a witch.] maybe accepting the child back because of their social status. It will be easier to use other foster care families that are successfully caring for these children [as advocates], to increase the number of families or of parents or relatives that are taking care of these children. Often there are lingering beliefs that are deep-rooted, so maybe we have to do more. Even if the child is back in the house, the family still goes to religious activities (not harming the child but still praying for a deliverance), so the child may be back in the house, but there is still this psychological pressure... and the child may still be indirectly referenced as a child who has not had deliverance, or who may still have some religious possession. The family may still be struggling with other pressures around, and so they can quietly or silently point fingers. And so there may still be suspicion or beliefs that are problematic. We don't see these parents verbally defending their children. The child may want to be with the parents, despite the discomfort of accusations, and stigma in school. so they stay, but are insecure. We must continue to monitor these cases closely.

Impacts and interventions

- Q What is the long-term impact on children being accused of witchcraft as they grow up into adulthood?
- A **James Ibor:** They are socially disconnected, not able to integrate, have not received and education, and generally become abusers themselves. There are second generation street children who have been born on the streets.
- Q What sort of interventions would you like to see happening?
- A **James Ibor:** Mobilising churches to look at the truth in the gospel the scriptures, the bible, to train pastors to stop the spreading of falsehoods. And that more people who commit these crimes are jailed. Sometimes lawyers seem to misinterpret what is in the actual laws, or magistrates convict children rather than the abusers – they use the accusations of witchcraft against the children.
- Q What particular changes would bring an end to child witch accusations?
- A **Jean-Paul Aruna:** A change of mindset, there is no reference in the bible to children being witches. These mindsets have to be changed to end the accusations. It is the mindsets of the churches, schools, and authorities. The “Heart of the Matter” training, along with other training, challenges people and changes people’s attitudes.
- A **Carolyn Gent:** Training works, There are two main resources available, “Heart of the Matter”, and “Touch Talk” which helps children to protect and take care of themselves. There are also child protection policies (and toolkits) available for organisations to use, which help create safe environments for children.

Changing beliefs and practices

- Q What have been the challenges in changing perspectives in the churches from being part of the problem to being part of the solution?
- A **Jean-Paul Aruna:** We consider that a child emerges from different environments. A child grows up in the environ of the family who brings the child to the school or to the church. In principle, these should be two safe environments in which to raise children. But the problem is one of thinking and mentality. And this problem of beliefs extends beyond the family, because churches are made up of families (and their young people) from the community, who carry the same beliefs. Also I distinguish between the formal regulated churches and the so-called “prayer rooms” often established against the authority of the church, led by people who are not accountable, are not church pastors, and whose motivation may be to gain money or reputation. And these are where the most abusive practices happen (forcing children to fast, and other severe maltreatment). But even in the churches, people don’t really understand that a child cannot be a witch. So we have developed training to help churches truly understand the rightful place of the child within the church and the community.
- C **Carolyn Gent:** So, what has to happen is a lengthy process to engage leaders (in the schools as well as churches and prayer rooms) to start to change the mindset that

children can be witches or capable of the harm of which they are being accused. So that is the biggest challenge, as it takes time through training to change this thinking, so that people can be responsible to stop the harms which they are causing. And until this thinking is changed, the switch (from problem to solution) doesn't really happen.

- C LVLE has extensively used the modular "Heart of the Matter / Cœur du Sujet" participative training resource with many leaders of churches and schools in Goma, Monigi, and Massisi.
- Q Who are the churches ready to listen to? How can you become accepted as an authoritative source for this training not to be seen as an "external organisation" which will not be received so well? Particularly for an NGO, how do you engage well, not just with the traditional churches, but also the indigenous churches, and prayer room spaces?
- A **Jean-Paul Aruna:** In our case, with LVLE, it is important to identify the key leaders in the district authority who have power over the institutions (churches, schools), and to work closely with them first. If we want to do training in a particular district (where CWA is an issue) we begin by reaching out to meet with the chief of the district authority. We make time to have a clear and fairly frank dialogue with them about who we are and what is the objective of the training. If the district chief doesn't understand this, he will not give us permission to visit the churches and schools in that area. Once we have this level of approval, then through the district authority we can proceed with approaching local leaders, and will be accepted. You will fail if you try to engage directly without gaining the approval of those in overall authority, and you will create a barrier or block for what you want to achieve. I think a lot of organisations have not been accepted because they have gone directly to the churches or schools, and not got the permission of the authorities over them.
- A **Carolyn Gent:** Approach is always through the hierarchy of those who have the influence over the churches or the schools. Preliminary dialogue must be with these people first before attempting to engage churches or schools directly. Once the approval and stamp of authority of the overarching influencer is given, then it is possible to move forward and approach the churches or the schools with the backing of these overseers.
- Q How long has this process taken, so far?
- A **Jean-Paul Aruna:** We have been working [in selected districts] with this approach for three years, and are now at the stage where we are working with leaders of churches who are directly implicated [in abusive practices], and with leaders of prayer rooms, too.

Multiple risk factors for children

- Q Do some of these children come from homes where they suffered abuse before the witchcraft accusations?

A **James Ibor:** Yes, they do. One such example is of a father who was sexually abusing his daughter, and in order to cover up the crime they accused their daughter of being a witch. Then the pastor turned against the child saying that there was a spiritual dimension to what was happening. It is common for the churches to cover up any abuse.

Q What experience do our speakers have of accusations made against children with mental and physical disabilities? Are they more at risk? And what interventions are successful?

A **James Ibor:** Yes we have had so many of these cases. There is a child in our transit bay facility for about 2 years now. She lost her father before she was born and her mother soon after, and so was staying with grandparents. She was accused by the grandmother, who felt she was not growing up properly. The girl was struggling to learn to talk and to walk. Then the grandmother falls sick, and so accuses the child of being evil, who is then evicted, forced out of the home at the tender age of between 3 and 4 years old. So, when we rescued this child she was terribly brutalised, needed to be hospitalised for about 6 months, and then when she recovered she still lost her speech. And we are struggling to get her to school now, because nobody is willing to foster her. No child should have to grow up in the environment from which we rescued her, but the trauma has affected her mentally, and complicated her case. We just are trying now to get her into a special schools which is very expensive. We had other cases too. Another case of a child with autism, and this child is doing well now with a foster family. We also had the case of “Annabelle”, who had polio when she was born, and had other deformities. Then we had an interesting case of “David” who actually confessed to witchcraft, because of his smartness, because that was the only way to stop the pain inflicted on him. We have had a number with physical and mental disabilities, but those with mental difficulties it is easy for them to “confess” to witchcraft. Some confess because of what they imagine. And you know, we have just one mental health facility in Nigeria, in Cross River state, which is very expensive, and some medical practitioners there, in spite of their medical training, can be very superstitious, so (I’ve learnt from observing their sessions) some find it difficult to separate their professional training from the way they have been socialised into this same worldview. So sometimes I may have to threaten to report them to the medical council. They should keep within the limits of what they are applying their medical skills, as they are professionally trained to do. For example, some may suggest that in addition to the drugs, the child needs deliverance. Or that if you are reacting badly to drugs they say, “don’t you think that prayer works better?” The medical practitioners sometimes suggest or agree with these beliefs in a way that I feel is not appropriate. So yes, children with disabilities are the most challenged when it comes to issues of witchcraft branding and accusations. And they are most challenged because sometimes they “admit” to it, even when there is not empirical reason to do so.

Q What about intellectually gifted children, who may challenge parental authority and decisions? In African societies, often adults don’t take a challenge from a child as a normal occurrence, and so these children may be more at risk. In Kenya, we have seen

shifting pattern [of emphasis] from the child's appearance or habits towards their talents. Do you have any comment to make on gifted children and accusations?

A **James Ibor:** Yes, we have seen this. We had one exceptionally bright boy who developed [an interest in] electronic engineering skills while growing up, and this was the major reason why he was branded a witch. Imagine the father buying a very expensive electronic device, and maybe the child wants to know how it is put together and how it works, and in the course of trying to discover this he spoils it or damages it. He asks a lot of questions, he doesn't get answers, he tries to experiment, and gets into trouble. In the parents' view it is only witches and wizards that can be like that. So it was very convenient for a pastor to brand him a witch. We rescued him in 2011 from the streets (in fact, when we celebrated the first international day for street children in Calabar). We identified his talents, and took interest in him and started the process of rehabilitating him. As I speak, he is now a 2nd year engineering student in university, and we are proud of him. We are aware of other children who are targeted because of their intelligence, and many of them are frustrated [with less demanding activities]. In other cases where a child is outstanding, some adults get intimidated, including when children ask awkward questions or point out difficulties in scripture. A pastor might take this as a challenge, and so instead of researching and responding to the questions, the child is banished by the pastor (or even accused of being demonised), which may result in the child being evicted from the church and the home.

Q We are discussing witchcraft accusation as a single issue, but often victims experience more than one harmful practice. For example, FGM survivors also experience forced marriage. What other harmful practices do children experience in addition to witchcraft accusations?

A **James Ibor:** Yes, there can be multiple issues for some of these children, because the accusations put them in a more vulnerable situation. We have seen instances where this can lead to a child being subject to sexual abuse, and some accused children may also be subject to trafficking.

Coronavirus pandemic

Q Has there been any impact on children due to the coronavirus pandemic?

A **James Ibor:** Yes some impact. Some people think of covid-19 as a western creation, and so we are told to "mind the white people". There was a very powerful pastor who has been making "prophecies" about covid-19, and there have also been global conspiracy theories going around. Children who have been accused and forced out of home have suffered more. It has been difficult to reach out to these children during the period of lockdowns. And most people who have been supporting these children (visiting them and providing them with food) have stopped supporting them during the pandemic due to reduction in income. As a result, some children have died. Lockdowns have been another hellish experience for children on the street, making it more difficult to reintegrate these children.

Q Are you seeing any link between the pandemic and witchcraft accusations? Have you seen an increase in CWA due to the coronavirus pandemic?

A **James Ibor:** We've not actually done an objective research survey [in Calabar]. Many families have disintegrated during the pandemic, but I don't want to speculate on the impact [on accusations]. It would be good to do a survey.

A **Jean-Paul Aruna:** Yes [in Goma region], indeed. Because covid-19 is badly misunderstood. So people assume it must be due to witchcraft, and children are being more frequently accused. And children themselves are very ignorant about how covid-19 is spreading and the cause, also they don't know what to do to protect themselves from the pandemic. Children on the streets don't have access to water for washing and such, or may not have recourse to means of protection and so are particularly vulnerable.

Other Questions

Questions raised during the forum, but not answered by our partners.

Q Many cases are unreported among diaspora communities. How can we improve reporting of CWA here in the UK context?

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Thank you.