



# Witchcraft Accusations: A Protection Concern for UNHCR and the Wider Humanitarian Community?

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## 1. Organisational Background

Stepping Stones Nigeria is a grassroots, child rights NGO that works with partner organizations in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria to protect, save and transform the lives of vulnerable children. A great deal of our work and that of our partners is focused on the issue of child witchcraft accusations and the subsequent abuses of child rights that take place due to them. This paper acts as part of our commitment to sharing our experience of working in this field and promoting a wider understanding of the issue of witchcraft accusations for practitioners, policy makers and organizations working in the fields of humanitarian aid, child protection and human rights.

## 2. Introduction

“Witch-hunting is like an infectious disease and is slowly spreading to newer areas and solutions will have to be found to eradicate this evil practice”<sup>1</sup>

Stepping Stones Nigeria is based in the city of Lancaster, a place that has witnessed some of the most famous witch trials in UK history. Witchcraft accusations in Lancaster led to the trial and hanging of 10 women and one man in what became known as the Lancashire Witch Trials. Today, nearly 400 years later, cases such as Victoria Climbiè, who was tortured and killed due to witchcraft accusation; Boy Adam, whose mutilated torso was discovered floating in the River Thames and Child B, an eight-year-old child brought to the UK from Angola, who was beaten, cut and had chilli rubbed in her eyes after her aunt and two others believed she was a witch, highlight the fact that such beliefs still abound. However as the UK government’s most recent report identifies, witchcraft belief and accusation is “not confined to particular countries, cultures or religions nor is it confined to recent migrants”.<sup>2</sup>

At the international level, Stepping Stones Nigeria, along with numerous other civil society organisations around the world, is witnessing a dramatic rise in witchcraft accusations and subsequent gross violations of human rights that take place due to them. However, to date, this phenomenon has received little in the way of concerted attention from the wider humanitarian community.<sup>3</sup> Stepping Stones Nigeria believes that, left unchallenged and inadequately understood, witchcraft accusations will increasingly become an issue of pressing concern for the UNHCR and other humanitarian organisations working with refugees, asylum seekers and trafficking victims in the years to come. This paper therefore explores whether witchcraft accusations are indeed a protection concern for UNHCR and the wider humanitarian community. Following from this, it attempts to identify what action may be taken by such agencies in order to gain a deeper understanding into this issue and develop guidelines for best practice when working on cases involving witchcraft accusations.

Whilst based on Stepping Stones Nigeria’s experience of working with so-called child ‘witches’ in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria since 2005, the paper also takes a broader look at the belief in witchcraft around the world, identifies key groups that are at risk of witchcraft accusations, outlines where witchcraft accusations may be most likely to occur, analyses the factors that lead to these becoming a protection concern and finally makes a number of recommendations for policy makers and practitioners working on this issue.

<sup>1</sup> Zeenews. National Commissioner for Women asks police to find solutions to witch-hunting in Assam (Nov 18, 2008), available at <http://www.zeenews.com/states/2008-11-18/484620news.html>

<sup>2</sup> Stobart, Eleanor. Child Abuse Linked to Accusations of “Possession” and “Witchcraft” (2006) Department for Education and Skills Report available at <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR750.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR. Witchcraft and Displacement (2008), available at <http://www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR31/74.pdf>

Before progressing with this paper it may be of interest to the reader to note Stepping Stones Nigeria's official stance on the issue of child witchcraft:

*“Stepping Stones Nigeria does not believe that children can be ‘witches’ and is not concerned with proving or disproving the existence or non-existence of child witchcraft. However Stepping Stones Nigeria acknowledges the right of individuals to hold this belief on the condition that this does not lead to the abuse of child rights as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child”.*<sup>4</sup>

### 3. The Belief in Witchcraft: An Overview

Before any understanding of the phenomenon of witchcraft accusations may be gained it is of central importance to acknowledge that witchcraft is a real belief system and one that is very much rooted in the popular mentality of people. Whilst this belief may be especially deeply held in Africa one should note that the belief in witches is manifest throughout the world.<sup>5</sup>

There are a number of commonalities that occur in the various interpretations of the belief system. The general belief is that certain people possess a mystical power which enables them to separate their soul from their physical body whilst asleep at night and enter into the spirit or witchcraft world. In this world it is often believed that the soul takes the form of an animal where it will then cause all manner of unimaginable horrors and destruction. For example, among the Ga of Ghana, the spirits of witches are believed to leave their bodies during sleep at night, glide through the air on the back of an owl or some other creature, often followed by brilliant balls of fire, and cluster in a warlock's meeting where the soul of the chosen victims are ritually eaten, after which these victims die.<sup>6</sup>

Joint research by Stepping Stones Nigeria and our partner NGO, the Child Rights and Rehabilitation Network (CRARN), has highlighted that the belief in child witches in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria cuts across all facets of society, including the literate and illiterate, the wealthy and poor, the law enforcement agents, social welfare workers, law makers and most specifically the leaders of revivalist Pentecostal churches. Such people believe that a mysterious, spiritual spell is given to a child through food and/or drink. The child who eats this spell, is then called out in the night where his/her soul will leave the body to be initiated in a gathering of witches and wizards. The initiated child will then have the spiritual power to cause widespread destruction, such as murdering innocent people and causing diseases like HIV/AIDS, malaria, hepatitis, typhoid and cancer. All accidents, drunkenness, madness, smoking of marijuana, divorce, infertility, and misfortunes are perceived to be the handiwork of these so-called child 'witches'.<sup>7</sup> However, as Daniel Offiong notes, witchcraft beliefs among the Ibibio in Nigeria are of such a nature that it is impossible to establish whether witches exist or not - the matter is supra-empirical.<sup>8</sup>

Belief in witchcraft can be conceptualized as an attempt by people to rationalize the misfortunes occurring in their life; it shapes perceptions and provides an answer to 'why me?' when disaster strikes.<sup>9</sup> Put simply it provides an explanation for what would be otherwise unexplainable. Witchcraft accusations can therefore be seen to follow the patterns of tension and conflict in societies. Indeed the UK Ambassador to the Democratic Republic of Congo, Andy Sparks, when speaking about the child witch crisis in DRC purported that:

<sup>4</sup> Stepping Stones Nigeria. Statement of Guiding Principles and Best Practice for Working with Children Stigmatised as 'Witches' (2009), available at [www.steppingstonesnigeria.org](http://www.steppingstonesnigeria.org)

<sup>5</sup> Muller, Klaus. *Soul of Africa - Magical Rites and Traditions*, Konemann Press, (2000). at 138.

<sup>6</sup> Offiong, Daniel. *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Magic and the Social Order Among the Ibibio of Nigeria*. Fourth Dimension Publishers at 58.

<sup>7</sup> Stepping Stones Nigeria. *Supporting Victims of Witchcraft Abuse and Street Children in Nigeria*, (2007) available at <http://www.humantrafficking.org/publications/593>.

<sup>8</sup> Offiong, Daniel. *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Magic and the Social Order Among the Ibibio of Nigeria*. Fourth Dimension Publishers at 94.

<sup>9</sup> UNHCR Policy Development and Evaluation Service. *Witchcraft Allegations, Refugee Protection and Human Rights: a Review of the Evidence*, (Jan 2009) at 2.

“Accusations of sorcery are a convenient excuse for a particularly cruel way of dealing with poverty, and religion is used as its pretext. Cruelty like this should be punished, regardless of whether it is executed in the name of religion or not. It is not natural for Congolese to behave in this way. It is a recent phenomenon. The consequences of war and the subsequent massive aggravation of poverty are being exploited by a small number of pastors from private, revivalist churches who use vulnerable children as a platform upon which to exploit families that are struggling to feed themselves”.<sup>10</sup>

It is of great importance for practitioners to understand that witchcraft belief itself does not necessarily translate into a protection concern. Rather it is the point where this belief system leads to accusations of witchcraft that the issue becomes particularly problematic, as it is at this juncture that violent abuses of human rights often take place. Indeed Stepping Stones Nigeria believes that the very act of accusing a person of witchcraft constitutes an act of emotional and psychological abuse and, as such, should be considered as a protection concern that may require some form of intervention.

#### 4. Groups at Risk of Witchcraft Accusations

Practitioners and policy makers should be aware that certain groups of people are much more at risk of accusations of witchcraft than others. Indeed Stepping Stones Nigeria’s experience has highlighted the fact that witchcraft allegations are generally targeted against the most vulnerable and defenceless members of society. Whereas witch hunts in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, in the late 1970’s predominantly targeted the elderly, it is now believed that in recent times, children have become the target for initiation by elderly witches as they are more susceptible to their spells and are quicker in action.<sup>11</sup> These findings are supported by an in-depth analysis of available literature, which highlights the fact that women, children and older persons are disproportionately affected by witchcraft accusations, although accusations against adult males are not unknown.

##### 4.1 Risk Groups - Women

Many communities around the world are known to label, target and persecute women as witches. Therefore, given the degree that women are affected by witchcraft accusations, it may be important to consider the gender dimension when planning interventions and developing policies.

In India countless women have been accused of witchcraft and undergone horrific torture, which often leads to death. Indeed according to Ajay Kumar of Jumao Manch, an NGO working to eradicate witch hunts in India, “Witch hunting is a chronic social evil in the state that has claimed 522 lives during 1991 to 2000....these are the government figures. The real status is even worse”.<sup>12</sup> The vast majority of these cases are thought to have involved women from the Dalits, a frequently marginalized group at the bottom of the Hindu caste system. This indicates that those in the most vulnerable positions within society are most likely to be subject to witchcraft accusations.<sup>13</sup>

Similar cases from around the world abound. For example in May 2008, 15 women were killed in a region dubbed Kenya’s ‘sorcery belt’ due to mob attacks on women suspected of witchcraft.<sup>14</sup> In

<sup>10</sup> All Party Parliamentary Group on Street Children. “Child witches”, child soldiers, child poverty and violence: Street children in crisis in the Democratic Republic of Congo, (2006), at 16.

<sup>11</sup> Stepping Stones Nigeria. Supporting Victims of Witchcraft Abuse and Street Children in Nigeria, (2007) available at <http://www.humantrafficking.org/publications/593>.

<sup>12</sup> The Telegraph. Pledge to end witch hunting, (Oct 2008) available at [http://www.telegraphindia.com/1081024/jsp/jharkhand/story\\_10013315.jsp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1081024/jsp/jharkhand/story_10013315.jsp)

<sup>13</sup> Advocacy Net. Dalit Women Accused of Witchcraft, Forced to Eat Excrement (Jan 2006) available at <http://www.advocacynet.org/resource/574>.

<sup>14</sup> AFP. Kenya mob burns 15 women to death over witchcraft (May 2008) available at <http://www.religionnewsblog.com/21498/suspected-witchcraft>

<sup>15</sup> The Citizen. Women killed over ghost slave: The real voodoo economics (Oct 2008) available at <http://www.wunderkabinett.co.uk/damndata/index.php?/archives/1584-Women-killed-over-ghost-slave-The-real-voodoo-economics.html>

October 2008 a mob in a Tanzanian village killed two women and burned their bodies after accusing them of using witchcraft to turn a child into a ghost.<sup>15</sup> Ghana has received widespread

press attention for its “witch camps”. Indeed the Ghanaian Commission for Human Rights and Administrative Justice estimates that there are roughly 5,000 women in the witch camps. Forced to flee their homes, women often lose their property or inheritance and, without family support, are left destitute in such camps.<sup>16</sup>

The persecution of suspected witches is also evident in Saudi Arabia, where a woman condemned to death for “witchcraft” is still clinging to hope that King Abdullah will spare her life after Human Rights Watch appealed her sentence. Fawzi Falih faces imminent beheading for sorcery unless the King issues a rare pardon.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4.2 Risk Groups - The Elderly

Perhaps the most well known and documented cases of witchcraft accusations of elderly people have taken place in Tanzania. Witches are commonly identified as older women who are typically bad-tempered, irritable, greedy, eccentric and quarrelsome.<sup>18</sup> Older women who suffer from red eyes, after years of cooking over dung stoves, are often characterised as witches and targeted therein.<sup>19</sup>

Many attacks go unreported, but it is estimated that some 1,000 people in Tanzania lose their lives annually to witchcraft-related violence, the majority of who are women over the age of 50.<sup>20</sup> A study in Magu, a district within Mwanza, found that elderly widows are particularly at risk because “the implicit causes for accusations in this community appear to be strongly linked to conflicts over property ownership where removal of older persons would expedite occupation by other family members”.<sup>21</sup>

Such cases are not isolated to Tanzania. Indeed verifiable instances of the killing of elderly people accused of witchcraft have taken place in numerous other regions of the world. From India to Indonesia, Nepal to Nigeria, abuses of the basic human rights of elderly people due to witchcraft accusations continue unabated.

#### 4.3 Risk Groups - Children

Perhaps the most shocking and recent development in the evolution of the belief in witchcraft is that, at some point in the early to mid-1990’s, witchcraft accusations shifted to the most vulnerable group of them all, children. Numerous cases of children being accused of witchcraft and horrifically abused have been highlighted in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola and, most recently, Nigeria.

Stepping Stones Nigeria’s research has shown that widespread violations of children’s rights are taking place on a daily basis in Akwa Ibom State due to the belief in witchcraft. Suspected child ‘witches’ have been found by Stepping Stones Nigeria to have been abandoned by their parents/guardians, taken to the forest and slaughtered, bathed in acid, burned alive, poisoned to death with a local poison berry, buried alive, drowned or imprisoned and tortured in churches in order to extract a “confession”.<sup>22</sup> Children who have some form of disability or unique character trait such as

<sup>16</sup> Afrol. Tables turned in Ghanaian witch case (Apr. 7, 2001), available at [http://www.afrol.com/News2001/gha002\\_witchhunt.htm](http://www.afrol.com/News2001/gha002_witchhunt.htm)

<sup>17</sup> The Times. King Abdullah urged to spare Saudi ‘witchcraft’ woman’s life (Feb 2008) available at [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle\\_east/article3378460.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article3378460.ece)

<sup>18</sup> Mesaki, S. ‘Witchcraft and Witch Killings in Tanzania: Paradox and Dilemma’, (1993). Unpublished Ph.D thesis, Department of Anthropology, University of Minnesota.

<sup>19</sup> Davies, Katy. Interpreting Local Conceptions of Witchcraft and Anti-Witchcraft Movements: Applicability of a Rights-Based Approach to Accusations of Witchcraft in Tanzania (2006). Unpublished Masters thesis, University of Manchester.

<sup>20</sup> HelpAge International. No Country for Old Women (Dec 2008 available at <http://www.helpage.org/News/Analysis/rfk3>

<sup>21</sup> Heslop, Amanda and Mark Gorman. *Chronic Poverty and Older People in the Developing World*, HelpAge International CPRC Working Paper No. 10 (Jan. 2002), at 20.

<sup>22</sup> Stepping Stones Nigeria. Supporting Victims of Witchcraft Abuse and Street Children in Nigeria, (2007) available at <http://www.humantrafficking.org/publications/593>.

erratic behaviour, bedwetting or epilepsy are especially vulnerable to witchcraft accusations. The vast majority of children accused of witchcraft are orphans of at least one parent and many have been accused of witchcraft when the surviving parent remarries and the incoming spouse does not wish to support the children of the previous partner.

Abuses of children's rights linked to witchcraft are not isolated to Africa. Indeed in 2004 Pakistani police found the body of a child with his throat cut in a town where two men were earlier arrested for murdering four children to use their blood in witchcraft.<sup>23</sup> As these children were not directly accused of witchcraft, this case highlights the fact that it is not only witchcraft accusations that should be understood as a protection concern but rather what the author would call 'associations' with witchcraft.

Such associations are quite distinct from witchcraft accusations as the forms of abuse that follow are often carried out for different reasons and take a different form. Whereas witchcraft accusations generally lead to abuse due to the belief that the victim is possessed by some form of evil spirit and that they may "contaminate" other community members, witchcraft associations may often lead to abuse due to the victim's, known or unknown, relationship with practicing witches and witchdoctors. For example, many children in Nigeria are killed and sacrificed due to their (previously unknown) relationship with witchdoctors who believe that certain body parts can be used in rituals to gain power and money. Many of the elites of society consult such witchdoctors in order to gain political power, cure impotency, cause harm to opponents and/or get large business contracts. The dichotomy between witchcraft accusations and associations is therefore of central importance for practitioners working in this field if any further understanding is to be gained into developing guidelines for best practice and effective protection policies.

#### 4.4 Risk Group - Albinos

A worrying new form of witchcraft accusation has recently arisen in countries such as Burundi and Tanzania, and further afield in the Congo and Kenya, where witchdoctors are leading people to believe that albinos are either dangerously cursed or that their body parts will bring great riches to those who use them properly. Witchdoctors across central Africa are orchestrating this body-harvest. An albino woman was killed in Kenya in May 2008. The head of an albino child was found in the luggage of a man trying to enter the DRC and there are reports of witch doctors selling albino skin. Three people in Nigeria were convicted of ritually killing an albino infant in 2005.<sup>24</sup>

In line with Stepping Stones Nigeria's research findings in Nigeria, which have identified films such as "End of the Wicked" by Liberty Foundation Gospel Ministries as one of the significant contributory factors behind the spread of the belief in child witches, some NGOs are attributing the phenomenon of albino killings to an influx of Nigerian "Nollywood" films.<sup>25</sup> Such films regularly promote superstitious beliefs such as that of witchcraft and highlight the spread the idea that albino body parts may have mystical powers.

### 5. Scenarios Where Witchcraft Accusations are Likely to Occur

This section will analyse witchcraft accusations in relation to the physical location of suspected witches. As was highlighted earlier in this paper, witchcraft accusations can be seen to follow the patterns of tension and conflict in societies. They originate in tense social relations where there

<sup>23</sup> Herald Sun. Pakistan: Child murder linked to witchcraft (July 2004) available at <http://www.religionnewsblog.com/8007/pakistan-child-murder-linked-to-witchcraft>

<sup>24</sup> Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board. Nigeria: Prevalence of ritual murder and human sacrifice and reaction by government authorities (March 2000-July 2005) available at <http://www2.irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/research/rir/?action=record.viewrec&gotorec=45008>

<sup>25</sup> The First Post. African albinos' fear of butchery by witchdoctors (March 2009) available at <http://www.thefirstpost.co.uk/46751,features,african-albinos-live-in-fear-as-witchdoctors-seek-their-body-parts>

exists no effective, socially approved outlet for that tension. These ‘social vacuums’, where extreme poverty, lack of access to basic resources and services and violent abuses of basic human rights abound, provide a fertile breeding ground for witchcraft allegations and act as a way of explaining life’s misfortunes, thus maintaining the social order.

An analysis of the available literature enables us to identify the following social spaces where witchcraft allegations may be most likely to occur.

### 5.1 Post-conflict Situations

The violence inflicted upon societies by war often leads to a complete breakdown of social networks, family and friendship ties and support services. Destruction of the private infrastructures that previously enabled limited access to health and education, and which supported food security and livelihoods, regularly leads to a mass displacement of people. In the face of this some of the gravest human rights abuses often occur including the systematic use of murder, rape, torture and extortion. In countries experiencing this type of situation, such as Liberia, Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), there has been a massive rise in witchcraft accusations, especially against children. It is estimated that in the capital city of DRC, Kinshasa, there are somewhere between 30,000 and 50,000 street children<sup>26</sup> the majority of whom have been accused of witchcraft. The phenomenon of child witchcraft is therefore a symptom of a more serious problem that involves extreme and boundless violence within a traumatic social space on the verge of disintegration.<sup>27</sup>

In the reconstruction setting of post-conflict Liberia, witchcraft, ritual killings and trials by ordeal are issues at the forefront of the human rights agenda. Deputy UN envoy for Rule of Law, Henrietta Mensa-Bonsu put witchcraft center stage in the fight to improve human rights in Liberia. Speaking at the launch of the “Report on the Human Rights Situation in Liberia, May - October 2007” at the UN Mission headquarters in Monrovia, Mensa-Bonsu focused her speech on “the troubling and continuing problem of witchcraft “.<sup>28</sup>

### 5.2 Environmentally Devastated Landscapes

In the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, decades of oil exploitation by western multinationals, combined with weak government regulation, has led to widespread environmental problems. Numerous oil spills have devastated the streams, rivers and sea that people are dependent upon for food and drinking water. Raffia palms, yam and cassava that are the communities staple crops, have all been poisoned. Without alternatives, the people are forced to drink contaminated water, leading to illness and often death. Such factors combined with food shortages, unemployment and other social ills provide a fertile breeding ground for witchcraft allegations. This has led to many witch hunts taking place in the region, especially in Akwa Ibom state where the majority of Stepping Stones Nigeria’s work is carried out.

One of the region’s most renowned witch hunts took place in 1979 when Edem Edet Akpan, a young man who claimed to have supernatural powers that enabled him to detect witches, embarked upon a witch eradication crusade. Edem and his lieutenants travelled throughout the region identifying witches and vaccinating loyal followers with anti-witchcraft serum to prevent their being bewitched. Once Edem had detected a witch, the accused hands and legs were bound and he was sprinkled with red pepper and black ants and then beaten until he confessed. In the process, hundreds of people were tortured to death and many others were seriously injured and maimed for life. The crusade was extremely popular. At last the Ibibio felt something was being done about their recent bad luck.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Hoskins, Richard. Torment of Africa’s ‘child witches’ , (Feb 2006) at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article726977.ece>

<sup>27</sup> Save the Children. The Invention of Child Witches in the Democratic Republic of Congo, (2006) at 6.

<sup>28</sup> AllAfrica. Liberia: UN Puts Witchcraft Center Stage, (April 2008) available at <http://allafrica.com/stories/200804030795.html>

<sup>29</sup> Offiong, Daniel. Witchcraft, Sorcery, Magic and the Social Order Among the Ibibio of Nigeria. Fourth Dimension Publishers at 137.

Since the late 1990's a new witch hunt has taken place in this region. The massive boom in Pentecostal churches preaching the gospel of child witchcraft, demonic possessions, deliverance and exorcisms has led to a huge rise in accusations of witchcraft against children. A significant number of Pentecostal pastors are helping to create a terrible new campaign of violence against young Nigerians. Children and babies branded as evil are being abused, abandoned and even murdered while the preachers make money from the fear of parents and communities.

### 5.3 Regions in the Grip of Public Health Crises

There is undoubtedly a significant correlation between witchcraft accusations and public health crises. Indeed numerous witch hunts have been triggered by health crises in the past: during a tetanus epidemic in Benin and following dysentery and malaria deaths in Papua New Guinea, and Tanzania.<sup>30</sup>

There have also been numerous instances of HIV/AIDS being linked to witchcraft. Stepping Stones Nigeria has certainly found this to be true in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria where a HIV/AIDS prevalence rate of 5.6% is found.<sup>31</sup> Indeed as the epidemic of HIV/AIDS continues to sweep through many parts of the world, numerous other cases of witchcraft allegations have arisen in response to this crisis. Papua New Guinea's dramatic resurgence in sorcery and witchcraft is being fuelled by a spiralling AIDS crisis and the collapse of health services, sapping villagers' faith in Western medicine. Barely educated villagers living in remote mountain valleys are blaming the increasing number of AIDS deaths not on promiscuity or a lack of condom use but on malign spirits.<sup>32</sup>

In South Africa the epidemic of HIV/AIDS has also led to an epidemic of witchcraft allegations and in the Caprivi region of Namibia, an upsurge of witchcraft accusations can be seen as a direct reaction to increasing AIDS-related illness and deaths, and to changes in socio-economic attitudes and expectations.<sup>33</sup> Such accusations of witchcraft therefore provide a socially acceptable explanation for illness.

## 6. Impacts of Witchcraft Accusations

An analysis of the available literature clearly demonstrates the fact that witchcraft accusations often lead to violent abuses of human rights around the world. Such accusations may lead to harassment, ostracisation from communities, violence and, in countless cases, death. As UNICEF Angola have highlighted, witchcraft allegations as a phenomenon are one of the most serious in terms of human rights violations.<sup>34</sup> Such abuses of rights lead to forced and voluntary displacement of people and impact upon refugee movements, internal and external human trafficking and asylum claims. As a concern for the UNHCR and the wider humanitarian community, the plight of refugees, trafficking victims and asylum seekers and the impact that witchcraft allegations have on the protection of such people's is of central importance. The paper will now explore the relationship between witchcraft accusations and the protection concerns of some of the key stakeholder groups that UNHCR and the wider humanitarian community work with: refugees, asylum seekers and trafficking victims.

<sup>30</sup> UNHCR Policy Development and Evaluation Service. *Witchcraft Allegations, Refugee Protection and Human Rights: a Review of the Evidence*, (Jan 2009) at 20.

<sup>31</sup> The Niger Delta Foundation (2008) available at [http://www.nigerdeltafoundation.org/fight\\_HIV.html](http://www.nigerdeltafoundation.org/fight_HIV.html).

<sup>32</sup> *The New Zealand Herald. Renaissance of the Dark Arts: Witchcraft in Papua New Guinea (Feb 2007)* [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=2&objectid=10423203&pnum=0](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/news/article.cfm?c_id=2&objectid=10423203&pnum=0)

<sup>33</sup> Thomas, Felicity. *Anthropology & Medicine*, Volume 14, Issue 3 (December 2007) at 279.

<sup>34</sup> Angola Press. *Unicef Publishes Study On Impact of Witchcraft's Accusation Against Children (Dec 2008)* available at <http://allafrica.com/stories/200812110970.html>



## 6.1 Refugees

Witchcraft accusations have a significant impact upon the numbers of internally displaced persons in a various countries around the world. Such individuals or people groups are forced to leave their homes due to violence that is threatened against them because of the belief that they are witches. Stepping Stones Nigeria has identified numerous cases of people, mainly women and children, being forced to leave their communities due to witchcraft allegations. Such instances of forced exile are relatively common in the Niger Delta region although, as with other cases of internally displaced people, it is very difficult to quantify exact numbers.

Accusations of witchcraft also abound globally in the wider refugee and returnee context. Research by UNHCR Policy Development and Evaluation Service has revealed numerous instances of witchcraft accusations within refugee camps and amongst refugee populations. These have taken place in Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Tanzania, DRC and Sierra Leone.<sup>35</sup> Witchcraft accusations are also reported to plague refugee camps in southern Chad where they have led to widespread cases of assault and arson.<sup>36</sup> Research with refugee and returnee children in Southern Africa has also highlighted reports of murder and mutilation linked to witchcraft in the area.<sup>37</sup> It is likely that these cases relate more closely to witchcraft associations than to direct accusations, as body parts were taken from some of the victims.

In the context of working with refugees, witchcraft accusations and the subsequent protection concerns can therefore be seen to occur internally, which may result in displacement within the victims country or exile across international borders ,externally in refugee camps, and upon returning home, or when relocated to another country for settlement. As such they can arise at any point in the cycle of displacement.

## 6.2 Asylum Seekers

Witchcraft accusations are increasingly being used as a basis for asylum claims throughout the developed world. Forced to flee from their homes due to violent persecution, numerous people are increasingly seeking asylum based on their experiences of witchcraft.

The recent asylum case of the footballer Alhassan Bangura, who was trafficked to the UK served to highlight the role of witchcraft belief in asylum claims. Although not accused of being a witch, Bangura's case stated that his late father had been the head of Soko, a secret society with witchcraft associations. As the eldest son, Bangura was expected to take over the leadership and when he reached 15, the society approached his mother to demand his involvement. "The Soko society was a cult in which its members dismembered parts of their bodies and inflicted pain as part of their extreme rituals," said Bangura in his deposition to the tribunal. "I was totally against this cult's activities and ideologies." When he told the elders he did not want to take part they threatened to kill him and he fled.<sup>38</sup>

In response to increasing claims from Ghanaian asylum seekers to the UK, the UK Government's Home Office has developed its operational guidance notes highlighting that some applicants may make an asylum and/or human rights claim based on ill-treatment amounting to persecution due to them having been attacked by witches or the subject of a witches' curse or hex.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> UNHCR Policy Development and Evaluation Service. *Witchcraft Allegations, Refugee Protection and Human Rights: a Review of the Evidence*, (Jan 2009) at 23.

<sup>36</sup> UNHCR. *Witchcraft Allegations plague camps in southern Chad*, (Oct 25, 2008) available at <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/news/opendoc.htm?tbl=NEWS&id=472094884>

<sup>37</sup> UNHCR. *Through the eyes of a child: refugee children speak about violence. A report on participatory assessments carried out with refugee and returnee children in Southern Africa, 2005-2007* ( Jan 2008) available at <http://www.unhcr.org/doclist/protect/43994c3d2.html>

<sup>38</sup> The Guardian. *Deportation battle for footballer who fled death threats from secret society*, (Nov 2007) available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2007/nov/26/immigration.immigrationandpublicservices1>

<sup>39</sup> UK Government Home Office. *Operational Guidance notes: Ghana* (Jan 2009) available at <http://www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/sitecontent/documents/policyandlaw/countryspecificasylumpolicyogngs/ghana.pdf?view=Binary>

Both of these cases once again illustrate the need to look beyond witchcraft accusations as a protection concern. Significantly, they have shown that in addition to asylum being sought due to direct accusations of witchcraft they also occur because of the victim's associations with witchcraft, either through family ties or attacks and persecution by witches.

The Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB) has conducted a number of brief country condition analyses related to witchcraft, indicating that it has been the subject of various asylum claims. In early 2005, Canadian Immigration authorities granted a Nigerian accused of witchcraft a temporary stay of removal pending a judicial review of the individual's application. The man's lawyer, Kingsley Jesuorobo, argued that the client has recently been accused of witchcraft to the detriment of his relatives. At least two U.S. asylum cases in 2008 dealt with occult claims. Katherine Luongo, Assistant Professor in North-eastern University's History Department, provided expert testimony in two affidavits in which Kenyans were applying for asylum because of the threat of witchcraft accusations.<sup>40</sup> In addition to this, there is also disturbing evidence that the number of child abuse cases involving witchcraft accusations and young asylum seekers is on the rise.<sup>41</sup>

### 6.3 Trafficking

Trafficked persons are often in great need of protection. Witchcraft accusations contribute to the need for this protection by displacing victims from the safety of their communities and making them more vulnerable to traffickers. Many victims are afraid to return home for fear of retribution from their traffickers, are deeply traumatized by their experience and in need of medical and psychological support. Effective prosecution of traffickers relies, for now, on the cooperation of those trafficked, but providing evidence can often place the victim at risk of reprisals.

Stepping Stones Nigeria's research in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria has shown how witchcraft accusations push children towards traffickers in this region. On the streets these children are particularly vulnerable to child traffickers, ritualists (there have been recorded cases of children being used for body parts in Juju) and rapists. In Oron Local Government area, where the belief in child "witches" is especially deeply held, there are frequent "disappearances" of abandoned street children. Many of these children are shipped to the Gabon and Equatorial Guinea to work on plantations.<sup>42</sup>

Women accused of witchcraft, have only very limited options of sustaining themselves. Many end up prostituting in order to survive. Others fall victim to human traffickers preying on them with promises of a better life in Europe or North America. Some children are trafficked for the purpose of forced labour, either domestically or across Africa. Many try to escape their dire situation, and, in hopes of reaching Europe, undertake a long and possibly life-threatening journey through the Sahara desert.<sup>43</sup> However it remains difficult to quantify the number of victims of trafficking and more research is required in order to identify trafficking routes, networks and source and transit countries before this practice can be reduced or eradicated.

<sup>40</sup> UNHCR Policy Development and Evaluation Service. *Witchcraft Allegations, Refugee Protection and Human Rights: a Review of the Evidence*, (Jan 2009) at 38.

<sup>41</sup> UNHCR. *Witchcraft and Displacement* (2008), available at <http://www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR31/74.pdf>

<sup>42</sup> Stepping Stones Nigeria. *Supporting Victims of Witchcraft Abuse and Street Children in Nigeria*, (2007) available at <http://www.humantrafficking.org/publications/593>.

<sup>43</sup> Stobbart, Eleanor. *Produced on behalf of ECPAT, Child Witches, Abandonment and Trafficking* (Nov 2008), available at <http://www.ecpat.org.uk/downloads/Ritual%20Abuse%20DP.pdf>

<sup>44</sup> UNHCR. *Witchcraft and Displacement* (2008), available at <http://www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR31/74.pdf>

## 7. Conclusion

When one considers the dearth of in-depth materials on the issue of witchcraft accusations available to practitioners and policy-makers in the humanitarian field and compares this with the dramatic rise in cases of witchcraft related abuse that is taking place around the world, it would seem fair to state that there is a pressing need for greater understanding of this emerging issue to be developed by larger organisations working in the field of human rights, humanitarian aid and refugees. More in-depth understanding would help clarify the different forms of witchcraft related abuse that take place such as those related to 'accusations' and 'associations', as outlined in this paper. This would then enable more meaningful interventions to be made in the lives of the most vulnerable.

From an analysis of the evidence it is apparent that such practices are significantly increasing in scope and frequency and are leading to widespread violations of human rights around the world, especially amongst women, the elderly and children. They can therefore be seen to undermine the primary UNHCR objective of creating 'a favourable environment for protection'.<sup>44</sup> The fact that such abuse is likely to occur in scenarios, such as post conflict situations and public health crises, where UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations regularly operate, makes the need for developing and sharing further understanding on this issue even more pressing.

Higher levels of education and increasing scientific knowledge have not destroyed the belief in witchcraft. Globalisation has resulted in the disintegration of traditional societies and one repercussion arising from this has been insecurity. As populations continue to grow and resources become increasingly scarce, witchcraft accusations around the world are likely to rise. International organizations working for the protection of refugees, asylum seekers and trafficking victims need to be aware that the phenomenon of witchcraft related abuse poses a significant threat to a large number of vulnerable and defenceless individuals. Such insight will enable more effective interventions to be planned and implemented when working in the field and subsequently allow field staff to respond to outbreaks of violence and provide protection as and when required.

If the lives of numerous other indefensible individuals around the world are to be protected from this violence then UNHCR and the wider humanitarian community undoubtedly have a responsibility to commit resources and expertise towards developing effective guidelines for working on this most challenging of issues. It is therefore the sincere hope of Stepping Stones Nigeria that this paper may stimulate debate and lead to the acknowledgement and recognition amongst larger organizations, including the UNHCR, of the fact that witchcraft accusations are indeed a protection concern. Urgent action will then need to follow if such agencies are to protect and save the lives of the most vulnerable.

In order to encourage further action to be initiated on this issue, Stepping Stones Nigeria would like to make the following recommendations.

## 8. Recommendations

### **Call for Global Conference on Witchcraft Related Abuse**

UNHCR, in partnership with other international organizations, should seriously consider the need for such a conference to take place in 2009. This would bring together government officials, academics, NGOs, faith groups, humanitarian aid agencies and the international media to discuss experiences of working on this issue and debate what can be done to prevent the further spread of witchcraft related abuse.

One of the main challenges of working on the issue of witchcraft is the lack of formal networks in existence for practitioners and policy makers working in this field. Whilst some effort has been made recently by UNHCR in setting up the witchcraft, displacement and human rights network blog, this clearly needs a great deal more work if it is to be seen as an effective forum for the numerous

agencies working in this area.

A global conference would strengthen the informal networks that already exist and allow for practitioners and policy makers to share ideas and experiences. This would allow for more effective and cohesive interventions to be planned and implemented in order to protect vulnerable people from witchcraft associated violence.

### **Production of Education Materials**

Education and awareness-raising will be of central importance in preventing the spread of witchcraft related abuse and protecting the lives of vulnerable people around the world. UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations should consider working together to develop a wide range of educational resources to raise awareness of witchcraft related abuse and train practitioners in how to protect victims of witchcraft related violence. Stepping Stones Nigeria would suggest that particular attention needs to be paid to developing a toolkit of materials that help to:

- Clarify the different forms of witchcraft belief that may be held around the world.
- Demystify common health problems, such as epilepsy, malaria and HIV/AIDS, that are associated with witchcraft.
- Educate practitioners about the rights of people accused of witchcraft and how best to uphold them.
- Identify strategies to prevent the spread of witchcraft related violence

Awareness-raising activities should focus on the production and dissemination of standardised television, radio and billboard advertisements as well as books and leaflets. Stepping Stones Nigeria has also found that the production and performance of drama plays on the issue of witchcraft can act as an extremely effective awareness raising tool at a community level. The development of country specific drama scripts, to be performed by community members, may also need to be considered by the larger multinational agencies in order to mitigate the risks associated with witchcraft accusations.

### **The Role of Legislation**

Enactment and implementation of legislation by governments and humanitarian agencies to combat witchcraft-related violence should be considered as a viable tool to protect the lives of people accused of and associated with witchcraft. Such legislation should consider outlawing the act of accusing a person of witchcraft and prosecute individuals who are found to have abused the rights of suspected witches.

In response to Stepping Stones Nigeria's advocacy work and the film - Saving Africa's Witch Children - which highlighted the widespread abuses of child rights that take place in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria due to witchcraft accusation, the state government has taken the unprecedented step of outlawing the stigmatization of children as witches and has also enacted the Child Rights Act. This has led to the arrests of a number of pastors and parents in the region. However initial research from our sister NGO, Stepping Stones Nigeria Child Empowerment Foundation (SSNCEF) has highlighted the fact that this legislation may in fact be driving the belief underground and leading to parents killing their children rather than abandoning them on the streets and face arrest and prosecution. As such, any action taken by governments or humanitarian agencies in an attempt to legislate a solution to witchcraft-related abuse should consider the potential consequences of forcing action underground.



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