

UNCOVERING OUR HIDDEN SHAME

**Addressing Witchcraft Accusations and
Ritual Attacks in Africa**





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African Child Policy Forum (ACPF)

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AFRICAN CHILD POLICY FORUM (ACPF)

African Child Policy Forum (ACPF) is an independent, not-for-profit, Pan-African institute of policy research and dialogue on the African child. ACPF was established with the conviction that putting children first on the public agenda is fundamental to the realisation of their rights and wellbeing, and to bringing about lasting social and economic progress in Africa.

ACPF's work is rights based, inspired by universal values, informed by global experiences and knowledge, and committed to Internationalism. Its work is guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and other regional and international human rights instruments.

ACPF aims specifically to contribute to improved knowledge on children in Africa; to monitor and report progress; to identify policy options; to provide a platform for dialogue; to collaborate with governments, intergovernmental organisations and civil society in the development and implementation of effective pro-child policies and programmes; and to promote a common voice for children in Africa and elsewhere.



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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACHPR	African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights
ACPF	African Child Policy Forum
ACRWC	African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child
CBO	community-based organization
CEVAC	crimes and extreme violence against children
CPW	Child Protection Worker
CSO	civil society organisation
DCPC	District Child Protection Committees (Malawi)
DSWO	District Social Welfare Offices (Malawi)
FBO	faith-based organization
FGD	focus group discussion
MPS	Malawi Police Service
NGO	non-governmental organization
PWA	person with albinism
STWA	Stop Child Witch Accusations
TWG	Malawi National Technical Working Group (TWG) on Child Protection
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)
UN	United Nations
UNCAT	UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNTOC	United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crimes
WHRIN	Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network



PREFACE

Across the African continent, much has been achieved to improve laws and policies designed to end violence against children. Some progress has also been made in establishing the systems and structures necessary to implement and enforce these policies and laws.

These efforts have not, however, sufficiently addressed one important dimension of violence against children: witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks.

ACPF's 2016 report entitled *Our hidden shame: crimes and extreme violence against children in Africa* exposed these crimes. They happen in secrecy, but they are prevalent to a varying degree all across the continent. The report showed that these forms of violence have an extremely severe, often deadly impact on children. It called for swift action by all concerned, and for further investigation and research into this phenomenon and its effects.

This report builds on the findings of the 2016 report and analyses efforts by states and non-state actors to address violence against children driven by witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks. Responses to these crimes have gathered momentum in recent years, and structures and services to help survivors, victims and persons at risk of crimes and extreme violence are beginning to take shape throughout the continent.

Across Africa, witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks happen within families and communities, but they are deeply shrouded in secrecy, making them one of the most elusive forms of violence against children. No matter how difficult the process, however, child protection and law enforcement agencies must address them. This report seeks to interrogate and clarify child protection practices, norms and standards across Africa in the context of these crimes. It highlights the efforts being made to prevent and respond to witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks, and documents the persistent challenges countries face in their efforts to address these violations.

The report argues that a comprehensive, coordinated effort by state and non-state actors is needed to uncover the nature, magnitude and impact of violence related to witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks. Such an approach will ensure that child protection systems, laws and policies are enhanced to address these forms of violence against children properly.

We are now on the path to greater, more inclusive protection for the most vulnerable children in our societies. The safety of children is at stake here: the new evidence in this report must be used to prevent such violence and to strengthen efforts to address witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks against children across Africa.

Extending my thanks to our partners for their invaluable contribution to the report, I welcome you to it.

Dr Joan Nyanyuki
Executive Director
African Child Policy Forum (ACPF)



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In July 2021, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) adopted a resolution addressing the *Elimination of harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks* (A/HRC/47/L9 of 5th July 2021). The resolution urges Member States to:

...take all measures necessary to ensure the elimination of harmful practices amounting to human rights violations related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks and to ensure accountability and the effective protection of all persons, particularly persons in vulnerable situations.” (para. 2)

This report examines what African countries are doing to address violence against children that is related to witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks. It does so by asking three fundamental questions:

1. What are the principal concerns associated with witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks, and why should they be addressed in child protection systems?
2. What are the existing relevant child protection frameworks, programmes and coordination and accountability systems in Africa, and how might they incorporate concerns related to witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks against children?
3. What lessons can be learnt and applied from recent campaigns to prosecute perpetrators of ritual attacks and murders of persons with albinism, thereby building a broader response to the full range of witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks?

Regarding the first question, this report provides a comprehensive account of the harms to children caused by witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks. In addition to the self-evident issue of the extreme violence of ritual attacks, where children are murdered and/or mutilated for body parts, the report addresses accusations of witchcraft, which have a profoundly damaging effect on children and should be prohibited.

The report goes on to document, as far as is possible in light of the paucity of data, how witchcraft accusations are widespread across the continent (though they vary in extent over time and from place to place). Best estimates suggest that hundreds of thousands of children face accusations each year in Africa and subsequently suffer grievous violations. For instance:

- Six countries – Benin, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, Madagascar and Niger – reported instances of ritual infanticide.
- Eleven countries – Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Ghana, Liberia, Madagascar, Rwanda and Zimbabwe – reported ritual attacks against children with disabilities.
- Five countries – Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali and Tanzania – reported attacks on children with albinism.
- Seven countries – Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Liberia, Nigeria, South Africa and Tanzania – reported instances of violence against children accused of being witches.

Considering the lifelong physical and psychological harms resulting from accusations of witchcraft, they must be considered a serious child rights concern, as well as an enormous public health challenge. Child protection systems must be at the forefront of efforts to combat these violations and crimes.

With regard to the second question, this report finds that with African states having adopted various United Nations (UN) and African Union (AU) child rights instruments, the vast majority have already developed some systems of child protection. Despite limited financial and human resources, dedicated governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community groups, faith-based organisations and individuals are strengthening Africa's commitment to advance child wellbeing. This report examines a range of elements and structures that seek to prevent and address crimes and violence against children related to witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks. These are:

- legal and policy frameworks;
- governance and coordination structures;
- preventative and responsive programmes and services;
- human and financial resources; and
- data, knowledge management and monitoring systems.

In relation to the third question, this report can be seen in the context of the global outrage sparked by assaults on persons with albinism, including children, in the early- to mid-2000s, which culminated in the *African Union Plan of Action on Albinism* (2021-2031). Numerous national policies, plans, and programmes have since followed, showing that responses to witchcraft-related issues can be successfully incorporated into child protection systems.

This report argues that witchcraft accusations against children are more complex than just the extreme violence often exhibited in ritual attacks. While there is general public and societal consensus that murder, maiming and mutilation of innocent children is criminal, this belief is not upheld for those accused of being witches and believed to deploy secret, invisible powers to harm others. The result is a view that these people should be identified and punished, even if they are children. This belief is held in many communities.

This report makes the case that witchcraft accusations are a form of child abuse. In line with international, regional, and national commitments to child rights and child protection, it argues the importance of pressing forward with UNHRC's commitment to addressing witchcraft accusations as well as ritual attacks.

The report concludes by urging African governments, civil society organisations and child rights advocates to take a range of necessary actions. The AU and its organs must establish a continental framework to help governments recognize and address the long-term physical and psychological damage arising from ritual attacks and witchcraft accusations. When integrating witchcraft issues into child protection systems, the aim should be to protect children from harm while maximizing the sense of security in the community. This involves encouraging religious, spiritual and community leaders to devise alternative strategies for shielding their communities from the perceived threats of witchcraft, while protecting child suspects from involvement or accusation, without violating the children's rights.

1. INTRODUCTION

The level of violence against children in Africa is alarming and it continues to rise. Although progress has been made across the continent in protecting children from violence, there is still much to do to end it.

One category of violence against children that is seldom talked about is that of witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks. These forms of violence encompass a range of violations, including accusing children of witchcraft; the ritualized killing of children; mutilation to harvest body parts for magical medicines; infanticide; and mistreating children in the belief they need saving from evil spirits. They happen in secrecy, but they are prevalent to a varying degree all across the continent. ACPF's 2016 report entitled *Our hidden shame: crimes and extreme violence against children in Africa* exposed these crimes and showed that these forms of violence have an extremely severe, often deadly impact on children. It called for swift action by all concerned, and further investigation and research into this phenomenon and its effects.

There are no comprehensive studies of the extent, nature, and causes of witchcraft-related issues involving children in Africa, but the most recent United States Department of State Annual Country Report on Human Rights Practices for African Countries (2020) reveals widespread violations of children's rights relating to witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks.¹ For example:

- Reports of ritual infanticide (as distinct from killings motivated by poverty, shame, or mental illness, for example) were reported in six countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, Madagascar, and Niger.
- Ritual-related attacks against children with disabilities were recorded in eleven countries: Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Ghana, Liberia, Madagascar, Rwanda, and Zimbabwe.
- Attacks on children with albinism were reported in five countries: Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, and Tanzania.
- Accusations of witchcraft, often accompanied by violence against the accused, were reported in seven countries: Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Liberia, Nigeria, South Africa, and Tanzania.

While these reports are by no means comprehensive, they give a good sense of the extent of these issues across the continent.

Witchcraft-related violence against children is a hidden crime. Attacks are usually kept secret within a closed circle of people, mainly because the perpetrators of violence are often people who live and relate closely with the children (such as family members, neighbours and friends). Governments also tend to deny, and at times attempt to suppress reporting of, witchcraft-related violence because it is too alarming, uncomfortable or stigmatising to confront. Government authorities and others in positions of responsibility may also have a vested interest in downplaying the significance and prevalence of these forms of violence.

Some human rights and development organizations² have attempted to expose this violence through limited research efforts. While media attention to the subject has grown, investigative reports tend to be sensationalised,³ and the true nature of the violence and the harm it inflicts remains hidden from public scrutiny.

Children accused of witchcraft face widespread discrimination, stigma and exclusion, and sometimes forced displacement.⁴ They are neglected by those who should care for them, and bullied and victimized by peers, neighbours and community members. This is extremely damaging for children, whose identities are still developing, and can result in severe damage to their mental health.

Many victims of these crimes do not report them to authorities out of fear of further attacks, reprisals and/or further stigmatization, resulting in low levels of investigation and prosecution of cases. This situation creates impunity among perpetrators and injustice for victims, further enabling more violence.

The majority of African states are signatories to the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), and all have ratified the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which recognizes the right of the child to protection from violence. While these instruments do not explicitly address violence related to witchcraft, they seek to protect children from all forms of violence and abuse. Most African states have also adopted national legislation advancing the child protection principles enshrined in these instruments, and have set up institutions devoted to implementation, from national Ministries to local agencies. Across the continent, NGOs and faith based organisations (FBOs) dedicated to children's wellbeing can also be found working to end violence. But despite all this effort crimes and extreme violence against children arising from witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks remain prevalent across Africa. National governments, local civil society organisations (CSOs) and international organizations have not paid sufficient attention to these forms of violence.

One exception to the wide neglect of witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks by child protection systems relates to children with albinism. The past decade has seen a significant increase in research, media attention, advocacy, policy reform and programming regarding the abuse and ill-treatment of persons with albinism, particularly regarding the horrific cases of abduction, murder, and mutilation of children for body parts to use in magical "medicines."⁵

The rights of children with albinism have been greatly advanced by the work of the first UN Independent Expert on the Enjoyment of Human Rights by Persons with Albinism, Ikponwosa Ero. Ms Ero led the development of the AU of the *Regional Action Plan for Africa*, a five-year plan to address attacks and related violations against persons with albinism in sub Saharan Africa. Her work was influential in getting national governments to address the issue – for example in Malawi, where the *National Action Plan on Persons with Albinism* was adopted in 2018. In 2019 the African Union adopted a *Plan of Action on Ending Attacks and Discrimination against People with Albinism 2021-2031*, making it a continent-wide strategy,⁶ and resolved to appoint a Special Envoy on Albinism to oversee the implementation of the Plan.

On 5 July 2021 the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) adopted Resolution A/HRC/RES/47/8 addressing the *Elimination of harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks*.⁷ This resolution urges states to

...take all measures necessary to ensure the elimination of harmful practices amounting to human rights violations related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks and to ensure accountability and the effective protection of all persons, particularly persons in vulnerable situations. (Para. 2)

This report examines witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks against children and the need to strengthen child protection systems in Africa in the context of this resolution. It is based on a systemic analysis of efforts to prevent and address these crimes across the continent, and focuses on key components of national child protection systems: legal and regulatory frameworks; governance and coordination structures; preventative and responsive programmes and services; human and financial resources; and systems for data and knowledge management and monitoring.

Considering the number of children subject to witchcraft accusations and the harm they suffer as a consequence, this issue must be addressed with urgency.

It is also important to remember that children living in poverty, children with disabilities, and children without parental care are more likely to be vulnerable to the harms that arise in communities because of fears of invisible forces and spiritual entities, and/or the actions of unscrupulous individuals seeking advancement by illicit, “magical” means. This heightened risk for those who are already among the most vulnerable in their communities adds even greater urgency to the call for an urgent, coordinated, systemic response to this issue.

2. SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

The study behind this report applied a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate existing legislative and programmatic measures and document gaps and promising initiatives to address crimes and extreme violence against children in Africa, particularly those related to witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks. The study looked for evidence of the capacity of governments and other actors to respond appropriately to these crimes, including but not limited to surveillance systems to track and monitor incidences of such crimes, service provision for victims, and cases where perpetrators have been brought to justice. Data was gathered from primary and secondary sources through document reviews and in-depth qualitative interviews with survivors, experts and stakeholders in five African countries (Benin, DRC, Malawi, Morocco and Tanzania). Given Malawi’s efforts to address accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks, this report is rich with examples from Malawi, compared to other study countries where there was a paucity of evidence.

The report attempts to answer a key question: how can issues of crimes and extreme violence related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks be integrated into strategies to strengthen child protection systems in Africa?

In addressing this question, the report uses the child protection systems strengthening approach as a conceptual framework within which to examine the efforts of child protection systems and assess the challenges faced by the key elements of those systems.

3. WITCHCRAFT ACCUSATIONS AND RITUAL ATTACKS: TERMINOLOGY AND DEFINITION

It is important to clarify from the beginning that this report is not concerned with questions of what “witchcraft” is, or whether it exists. The term “witchcraft” is notoriously difficult to define, and the reality of the phenomenon is a matter of often bitter debate.

This report is also unconcerned with related questions, such as – for example – whether a child can be a witch; whether or how anyone can truly identify a witch; whether witches require or are deserving of punishment; and whether communities, families, or individuals need to protect themselves against witchcraft. While recognizing that questions such as these are pressing issues for some people in some communities, this report is concerned only with the causes and consequences of accusations of witchcraft involving children; and – most importantly – what is being done to address these crimes.

3.1 Witchcraft accusations: what do they entail?

People typically use the term “witchcraft” to describe what they see as a form of interpersonal violence, malicious attacks perpetrated by one person against another or others. So, when a person is accused of using witchcraft, he or she is blamed for causing harm to others. This is akin to accusing a person of committing a crime, sometimes even a heinous crime resulting in misfortune or death. Accusing a perpetrator of such violence is often seen as the beginning of a quest for justice.

Some people also use the term “witchcraft” to refer to anything relating to traditional healing or traditional religious practices, and/or refer to traditional healers as “witch doctors.” However, in line with the UNHRC resolution on witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks, this report endorses the view that traditional or complementary or integrative medicine, as defined by the World Health Organization, is a field distinct from harmful practices related to witchcraft accusations and other rituals attacks violating or abusing human rights.

This report therefore restricts the definition of witchcraft accusations to accusations that harm is being deliberately inflicted, through witchcraft, by malicious human agents.

Witchcraft accusations can result in various forms of abuse, including extreme violence. Notably, however, this report emphasizes that the act of accusation is a form of abuse in and of itself. The consequences of this abuse are particularly harmful to children. The accusation is an act of psychological violence in which the accused child is blamed for the misfortune of others. Often, this misfortune is experienced within the child’s family or close community, and suffered by persons whom the child loves, or on whom they are dependent. By accusing them, the child is denounced as an embodiment of evil. As this report documents, the psychological and physical results can be devastating.

Nature and drivers of witchcraft accusations

An accusation of witchcraft attributes superhuman powers to an ordinary human person, while treating them as enemies of the family and/or the community. To accuse a person of witchcraft is, among other things, to identify them as the perpetrator of a deliberate, malicious act that causes harm. Such harm might consist of illness, death, or other misfortune. The accusation also names them as a person with the power to harm others secretly and invisibly.

The sources of these supposedly superhuman powers are hypothesised in a variety of ways, ranging from innate capacities to secret knowledge to congress with demons and beyond. To accuse a person of witchcraft means denouncing him or her as an immoral person who has renounced membership of their normal human community, and who is thus unworthy of the protection of “human rights.” It also involves labelling them as a source of continuing danger to the community.

At the core of witchcraft accusations lie one or more of a range of several toxic motivations, including fear, revenge, jealousy, resentment and profit.

Fear may emanate from genuine feelings of insecurity and exposure to danger, and is often triggered by the experience of misfortune. The desire for revenge may be caused by a perceived injury, particularly when the outcome is believed to have been an untimely death. Jealousy towards the victim may be a reason for malicious false accusations. Resentment can be a factor when people accuse others, often their dependants, of witchcraft because they resent having to support them. Finally, the profit motive comes into play when spiritual entrepreneurs, such as those pretending to be healers, prophets, or preachers, seek money for identifying and neutralizing witchcraft in communities. This last can be a completely cynical quest for money, or motivated by a genuine concern for community wellbeing, or a mixture of both.

People accused of witchcraft typically live in relatively close social relations with both their accuser and the alleged victim of the witchcraft attack. Accusers are often family members: accusations are most commonly made against elderly grandparents, orphaned children, and co-wives in polygamous households. They can also be neighbours: many communities are home to individuals or families who have a history of being accused and who are automatically suspected when misfortune strikes. They can be friends too, since the motive behind accusations is commonly said to be jealousy. They can also be school- or workmates, in situations where the rewards of success in school or at work are distributed unevenly, arousing jealousy. Generally speaking, witchcraft accusations are not levelled against strangers.

Certain circumstances can exacerbate the fear of witchcraft in communities, leading to increases in accusations. These include rapid economic change that disrupts settled communities, particularly when they lead to increased inequality where the benefits seem unfairly assigned to winners and losers, leaving those who are worse off looking for someone to blame. Epidemics can be an issue, particularly those involving high fatalities, if the unequal burden of disease across communities leaves surviving family and friends wondering who to blame. War and civil disturbances can also be key factors, particularly when they result in displacement of people into refugee camps and peri-urban squatter settlements.

It should be noted that poverty is not in itself a driver of witchcraft accusations. But poverty combined with other, related difficulties is more dangerous – not least when it contributes to a sense of insecurity that makes people feel vulnerable to malicious actions they label as “witchcraft.”

Forms of violence related to witchcraft accusations

This report notes six distinct forms of violence and/or harm that can result from witchcraft accusations.

1. These accusations bring about **severe psychological harm** to children. To call a person a witch is to accuse them of evil practice and grievous harm. Even without physical violence,

such accusations can have a profoundly disturbing effect on people of any age. They are particularly damaging for children, whose identities are still being formed and who can be susceptible to suggestion. Sometimes this leads them to believe the accusation may be true, particularly as it is widely believed that a person can be a witch without being aware of the fact. Accusations are also frequently accompanied by threats of violence and demands for confession, which are often forthcoming despite their falsehood, causing further harm (for more on the psychology of confessions, see the appendix to this report). Accused children can be isolated and neglected by their families and friends. The tendency of caregivers, neighbours, schoolmates, and peers to avoid and neglect children accused of being witches can cause severe negative mental health impacts, particularly among adolescents. Where accusations are made in public, such as in church assemblies or Chiefs' courts (as is frequently the case), the sense of shame inflicted on the accused can be intense. The mere fact of accusation must in itself therefore be considered a form of child abuse involving psychological violence.

2. Witchcraft accusations can also result in **physical violence**, especially when carried out to elicit a "confession." Confessions of witchcraft are

rarely voluntary (for more on the psychology of confessions, see the appendix to this report). As the history of witchcraft trials in many Western countries shows, places where torture was outlawed had fewer cases of witchcraft, because fewer people

What is "witchcraft"?

"Witchcraft," as the term is used across Africa, describes a form of interpersonal violence. It is distinct from but equivalent to physical violence in its effects. Perpetrated in secret by invisible means and evident primarily in manifestations of misfortune (which can take virtually any form), witchcraft is nonetheless said to be every bit as real as any other form of violence. Serious illness and untimely deaths, particularly, provoke speculation about witchcraft. Witchcraft is also said to be an illicit means of accumulating wealth and power at the expense of others, just as physical violence serves similar purposes in robbery and domination.

For most Africans, the potential for malicious action by other persons in the form of witchcraft is an ever-present danger in everyday life, akin to other forms of crime. Vast amounts of time, energy, and money are spent in seeking protection from witchcraft, to undo harms done, and to seek justice. Millions of traditional healers, along with the most dynamic religious movements, are devoted to combatting what they see as the scourge of witchcraft. Legal and political authorities are also confronted with demands for security and justice in the face of witchcraft.

Given the premise of stories of witchcraft, that misfortune is harm deliberately inflicted, remedying such misfortune requires identifying and neutralizing the power of the perpetrator. This sometimes involves open accusation, occasionally resulting in trials of accused witches. Persons so accused have been subjected to physical violence, even killed.

Source: Adam Ashforth, "Witchcraft," in Critical Terms for the Study of Africa, ed. Guarav Desai and Adeline Masquelier, University of Chicago Press, 2018.

confessed⁸. This form of violence can range from cases in which the child is beaten in ways that mirror more common methods of corporal punishment, to extreme cases in which severe violence results in debilitating injury. A study of media reports of witchcraft-related assaults in Ghana between 2014 and 2020 found 33 cases of children being subjected to violence to make them confess.⁹

3. **Corporal punishment** is frequently applied as a punishment to those accused of being witches with a view to “correcting” them and dissuading them from future witchcraft. This violence is inflicted in forms ranging from relatively mild attacks to extreme assaults that cause permanent disability or death.
4. Accusations can also lead to **forcible administration of cleansing “medicines.”** Accused persons, both adults and children, are frequently made to undergo compulsory cleansing involving the ingestion of supposed curative and purifying substances. While the substances administered by healers as treatments can be toxic, and thus physically harmful, the act of forcibly administering any “medicines” to persons unable to consent freely is a form of abuse in itself. While the forcible administration of medicine may not necessarily involve physical violence, and may even be consented to by an adult caregiver, it should be treated as a form of violence.
5. Children accused of being witches are frequently **expelled from family homes and communities** as punishment for presumed witchcraft. Even when there is no physical violence involved, the expulsion of a child from his or her home is an extreme form of abuse. The literature suggests that many children accused of being witches have suffered the death of a parent and were being cared for by a relative before they were expelled. While there may be cases where a witchcraft accusation is deployed in order to rid the caregiver of a burdensome expense, the genuine fear aroused by the belief that a child was responsible for their parent’s death should also not be underestimated.
6. In extreme cases, **witchcraft accusations may result in murder.** The person accused of witchcraft may be executed by people wanting to punish a supposed perpetrator of evil, and/or to protect others from harm by removing a perceived source of evil from the community.

While witchcraft-related killings are the most severe outcome, the mere fact of accusation – regardless of whether or not further violence follows – is an act of abuse with ill effects that are potentially life-long and life-threatening. These forms of violence do not always happen in isolation. They can readily morph one into another. For example, a child accused of witchcraft could be tortured into a confession, at which point physical punishment might be inflicted, potentially followed by expulsion and exile and/or further violence leading to disfigurement, disability, or death.

It is important to note that accusations and the associated violence do not usually occur in formal institutional contexts, such as Chiefs’ or Magistrates’ courts or churches. Rather, they tend to occur in informal family and community contexts, typically following a misfortune such as an untimely illness or a death.

3.2 Ritual attacks: a typology of violence

The term “ritual attack” refers to physical violence inflicted on a victim as part of a ritual carried out in order to interact in some way with invisible forces and beings. The term encompasses a wide variety of violent acts perpetrated to exert influence on invisible forces and entities and secure certain desired ends. These attacks are distinguished from other types of violence

in that they are motivated by the desire to engage with occult or supernatural forces – either to avoid punishment by those forces or beings, or to enlist their assistance.

“Ritual attacks” as defined in the UNHRC resolution involve physical violence deployed in the service of invisible entities (gods, spirits, ancestors, demons, etc.), either as punishment for purported human wrongdoing or in efforts to appease the anger of those entities, avoid their vengeance, and spare humans from misfortune. A prime example of such violence is infanticide reported in the northern districts of Benin, when infants born with disabilities are seen as bearing marks of their ancestors’ displeasure, or as potential witches, and are killed at birth. Ritual attacks can also involve mutilation or murder of victims in pursuit of body parts for use in magical “medicines,” a principal driver behind the recent expansion of violence against persons with albinism.

Even in communities where many, if not most, people consider identifying witches and neutralizing their powers to be legitimate actions, ritual attacks are universally deplored. Even those directly involved in the violence often participate in the knowledge that what they are doing is morally wrong.¹⁰ The people responsible for ritual attacks are everyday human beings seeking magical means to advance ordinary human ambitions of wealth and power. Protecting children from such violence requires active engagement with law enforcement and community-based agencies and organizations to identify and minimize risks and dangers, protect victims and prosecute (and deter) perpetrators. Services for survivors are also crucial.

Types of ritual attacks

Psychological and psychosocial violence: Not all mistreatment of persons with disabilities or persons with albinism involves belief in the supernatural, or is “ritual” in nature; but all such ritual attacks are founded on the discrimination against, and stigmatization and social exclusion of, people with disabilities, or those who are simply different. This mistreatment can take many forms, including but not limited to passive refusal of support from families or communities; failure by the state to provide supportive services; active discrimination and mistreatment; and physical violation.

Who did I eat?”

A 13-year-old girl accused of witchcraft in Benin was admitted to a CAPE [child reception and protection centre] for several years. After raising awareness within her family, it was decided that she should take a few days off with her parents as part of a reintegration process.

Unfortunately, the girl could not spend a whole week at home.

She returned to the reception centre after only four days, earlier than planned. During her stay at home she had been unable to interact with her family. Everyone suspected her of being a witch: their looks, actions, and words were unbearable. Everyone said, directly or indirectly, that she was a witch. Dejected and suffering psychologically, she could only return to the protection centre.

Upon her return, she locked herself in the bedroom all day long, crying and yelling: “they have to tell me the one I ate, they have to! Who did I eat?” She needed to know who had she eaten to deserve being called a witch. It took officials many weeks to help her to regain self-confidence and a healthier mental state. The girl did not return back to her family and continued to live at the protection centre.

Source: Testimony from a girl child survivor of witchcraft accusation from Benin, ACPF country study in Benin, 2021

Infanticide: While the abandonment and/or killing of new-borns out of economic desperation, shame at the evidence of illicit sex, or as a result of untreated mental health issues are all evident phenomena across Africa, the “ritual” murder of new-borns and infants is comparatively rare. Historical records show practices of infanticide as a way of appeasing spirits and protecting communities from spiritual punishment, usually in instances where the mother is suspected of sexual misconduct. In some cultures, twins were historically separated by killing one. More recently there have been credible reports of “ritual” infanticide in regions of Benin¹¹, Ghana¹² and Ethiopia¹³. Credible evidence suggests that these practices are being abandoned, particularly as it becomes increasingly common for births to take place in clinics, and to be officially registered.¹⁴

“Medicine” mutilation and murder (aka *muti* murder or *juju* murder): In the years since 2006, media reports of horrific attacks on persons with albinism, including children, have multiplied across Africa. While there are accounts of this phenomenon in the historical record, it is clear that the current epidemic of assaults is driven by more contemporary factors. The current wave of abductions, assaults, mutilations and murders of children with albinism is thought to have been driven first by desperate artisanal miners and fishermen in Tanzania. Well-intentioned publicity for these crimes then created the perverse myth of a lucrative market for the body parts of persons with albinism. This is false. As the Spokesperson for the Malawi police, James Kadadzera, put it recently:

“...there are a lot of people that we have arrested with bones... They don’t have anywhere to sell the bones. I am saying this is just a mystery; this is just a belief that is unfounded”¹⁵.

There have also been sporadic reports of children without albinism also being killed for body parts, particularly in Uganda.¹⁶

Sexual assault: Girls and young women are sometimes subjected to sexual assaults which should be classified as ritual attacks. Such attacks include the *Trokosi* custom in the Volta region of Ghana, Benin, and Nigeria, where a virgin girl is enslaved to the gods – in practice, to a priest – as recompense for the alleged crime of a relative or ancestor. This practice is illegal and contrary to human rights standards and treaties, but persists nonetheless¹⁷. There is also a persistent myth that intercourse with a virgin girl, particularly a person with albinism¹⁸, can serve as a means of ritual cleansing and can cure diseases including AIDS. It is not clear, however, to what extent this practice is widespread¹⁹. There are further credible reports of girls and young women being raped by combatants in eastern Congo as part of ritual cleansing practices²⁰.

Sacrifice: While animal sacrifice is widespread in contemporary Africa, human sacrifice – in the sense of slaughtering a person as an offering to a deity or other form of invisible being – is rare, although it is found in the historical record. One present-day example of child sacrifice is the killing of “*zouhri*” children of Morocco to appease djinns believed to be guarding hidden treasure,²¹ though the current extent of this practice is unknown. These children are thought to bring fortune and prosperity because they have some distinctive physical characteristics that differentiate them from other children.

The concept of sacrifice should not be confused with medicine murder, which involves mutilating a human body and harvesting body parts to use in medicine.²² The latter practice is a functional one – indeed, victims are typically left fully clothed, with only the areas where parts have been cut off left exposed²³.

4. SCALE AND MAGNITUDE OF WITCHCRAFT ACCUSATIONS AND RITUAL ATTACKS IN AFRICA

There are no comprehensive studies of the extent of witchcraft accusations and/or associated violence in Africa. Most studies are small-scale efforts dependent on media reports, which typically focus on incidents of mob violence that have been reported to the police, and thus vastly underestimate the extent of the problem.

One 2020 study, for example, attempts to estimate the magnitude of the problem of witchcraft abuse against children and older women in Ghana²⁴, presenting “the results of an in-depth analysis of witchcraft-related abuse cases published on the websites of three renowned local Ghanaian media outlets between 2014 and 2020, and a critical discussion of the results.” The study identifies 99 cases between 2014 and 2020, and finds that a majority of children (33 cases) were mistreated to compel confession, and that none were killed during the study period - a very different finding to the older women demographic, 28 of whom were killed. The author concludes as follows:

The data support the view that witchcraft-fuelled abuse is endemic in Ghana, and the worst victims are children and older women of low socio-economic background. It demonstrates that the commonest forms of mistreatment and violence resulting from belief in witchcraft are murder and torture (perpetrated with various weapons/tools), forcible confinement and enslavement, neglect, and child labour. The most dominant motivations for such violations are the suspicion that the persons accused of being witches are responsible for family or community members’ death or illness and the supposed victims’ economic or financial predicament.

Another study²⁵ on children accused of witchcraft in the Democratic Republic of the Congo asserts that the streets of Kinshasa are home to “thousands” of children accused of witchcraft. This study relies on two reports, one by Human Rights Watch (HRW)²⁶ and another²⁷ looking at a Save the Children project working with street children in Kinshasa. Based on interviews with NGOs and officials, the study concludes that policies to protect these children are inadequate. A further study that explores the lived experiences of street children in Kinshasa reports that half the children in one particular refuge had been expelled from their homes following accusations of witchcraft²⁸. It is thus not unreasonable to assume that the number of children so accused is in the thousands.

Perhaps the most rigorous study of the extent of witchcraft accusations against children was done in the southern region of Malawi in 2013²⁹. This study estimates that several hundred children are subjected to violence and abandonment following witchcraft accusations each year in Malawi, and that there could possibly be several thousand children abused physically as the result of such accusations. Malawi is a small country and this estimate does not even account for the many children who have been accused but not subjected to physical violence.

5. VULNERABILITY TO WITCHCRAFT ACCUSATIONS AND RITUAL ATTACKS

Most people who are accused of witchcraft or who are victims of ritual attacks are among the most vulnerable in their societies – i.e. the elderly, women and/or children, and the marginalised. But in contemporary Africa, as in other places where witchcraft accusations have flourished throughout human history, women, and particularly older women, typically make up a disproportionately large number of the accused. This leads many observers to treat witchcraft accusations as a form of gender-based violence, though this is not wholly accurate³⁰.

Older women, who tend to use physical violence infrequently, are commonly thought more likely to use witchcraft³¹; while young men, in contrast, are thought to incline more towards using physical rather than occult violence. When communities punish accused witches, therefore, the pattern is generally one of young men beating older women. In attempting to understand this phenomenon it is important for outsiders to realize that the people who see themselves as dispensing justice perceive the targets of their violence, who might seem vulnerable and marginal to outsiders, as immensely powerful and dangerous.

As discussed earlier, widespread witchcraft accusations against children are a relatively recent phenomenon. While there are some historical accounts of witchcraft powers being transmitted down the generations from mothers to daughters and from fathers to sons³², the ethnographic literature on contemporary child witch accusations does not show significant gender disparity in accusations. Historically, boys and girls seem equally susceptible to being accused of witchcraft. In instances where children accuse their elders of teaching them witchcraft – as is the case in Malawi, for instance – documented cases include boys and girls in similar numbers.³³

The general supposition about children and witchcraft seems to be that children are vulnerable to indoctrination by malevolent adults, or to the influence of evil spirits, resulting in their becoming “witches” by virtue of their youth, regardless of gender. But, given the particular abuses to which girl children are vulnerable as a result of their gender, policymakers and service providers should be cognizant of the ways that witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks can complicate other forms of gender-based abuse. For example, there are reports of young women threatened with supernatural sanctions by sex traffickers³⁴, or girls targeted for rape as part of “cleansing” rituals by men believing themselves compromised by spiritual forces.³⁵ This report shows that certain children are particularly vulnerable to witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks. These include children with disabilities (including those with hunched backs, learning difficulties, mental health problems and/or physical impairments); children with albinism; children living in poverty; orphans and children without parental care; and children who are deemed to be the bearers of fortune or misfortune due to their physical characteristics. Children with disabilities and children with albinism in particular may be accused of witchcraft based on the circumstances of their birth or their congenital deformities, or the way they look or talk. Ritual attacks against children with albinism are also driven by myths, and the false belief that their body parts can be sold for money.

6. EFFORTS TO ADDRESS CRIMES AND EXTREME VIOLENCE IN AFRICA

This report's examination of efforts to address crime and violence related to witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks against children was guided by the wider framework for strengthening child protection systems in general. Child protection systems are defined as

...a set of laws, policies, regulations and services, capacities, monitoring, and oversight needed across all social sectors – especially social welfare, education, health, security, and justice – to prevent and respond to protection-related risks.³⁶

The following elements are the central components of national child protection systems in most countries.³⁷

- 1. Legal and policy frameworks:** these are defined as “the laws, policies, services delivery protocols and standards, and roles and responsibilities (mandates) of different actors involved in the protection of children.”³⁸ The principal international instruments guiding these frameworks are the ACRWC and the CRC. Analysis of a country's legal and regulatory framework should also take into account national and customary law as well as informal legal institutions such as Chiefs' courts and neighbourhood security organizations.
- 2. Governance and coordination structures:** these are the agencies, institutions, and organizations that make the child protection system work. They include government ministries and agencies, civil society organisations, NGOs and community and faith-based organizations focused on various aspects of child protection. Analysis of these structures must also consider multisectoral collaboration and coordination of the actors connected to and engaged in the child protection system.
- 3. Programmes and services (preventative and responsive):** these are the specialized programmes, services and initiatives designed to prevent neglect, abuse and exploitation, and to provide rehabilitation, remedies and redress that help survivors overcome trauma.
- 4. Human and financial resources:** these are the resources needed for the recruitment, training, and financing of staff and the provision of services.
- 5. Data and knowledge management and monitoring:** this refers to systems for gathering and assessing evidence relating to the functioning of the system, and for monitoring and improving the effectiveness and relevance of programmes and services.

Most African countries have the basic elements of a child protection system in place, and these should also serve to protect children from the violence and trauma of witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks. In recent decades, driven by a global commitment to protecting children's rights, most African countries have also demonstrated positive developments in public opinion regarding child protection. But in almost every country, child protection systems face significant challenges. This report analyses the status of child protection systems across the continent, and the efforts of state and non-state actors to address these particular crimes within those systems.

6.1 Legal and policy framework

The legal and policy framework in Africa is shaped by a series of international and regional instruments and corresponding national laws, policies, and programmes. These are founded on two main instruments: the widely ratified United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and its Optional Protocols, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC). The Joint general recommendation No. 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women/general comment No. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2019) on harmful practices³⁹ also provides authoritative guidance on legislative, policy and other appropriate measures that must be taken by States parties to ensure full compliance with their obligations under the Conventions to eliminate harmful practices. The adoption of Agenda 2063, Agenda 2040, and the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and Goals (SDGs) further reinforce efforts to implement these binding legal instruments. The ratification and domestication of these instruments by African countries is evidence of progress in the use of legal frameworks to prevent and address violence against children on the continent.

Most African countries are States Parties to international instruments that advance the protection of children. These include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR); the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD); the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC); the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, supplementing the UNTOC (aka the Palermo Protocol); the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR); the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (aka the Maputo Protocol); the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Africa; and the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (UNCAT). Table 1 shows the status of ratification of these key instruments by country across Africa.

Table 1: Status of ratification of international and regional legal instruments by African countries

Green = ratified Red = not ratified							
Country	UNCRC	ACRWC	ACHPR	UNTOC	Palermo Protocol	UNCRPD	UNCAT
Algeria							
Angola							
Benin							
Botswana							
Burkina Faso							
Burundi							
Cameroon							
Cabo Verde							
Central African Republic							
Chad							
Comoros							

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Green = ratified Red = not ratified							
Country	UNCRC	ACRWC	ACHPR	UNTOC	Palermo Protocol	UNCRPD	UNCAT
Congo (Brazzaville)							
Cote d'Ivoire							
Democratic Republic of Congo							
Djibouti							
Egypt							
Equatorial Guinea							
Eritrea							
Eswatini							
Ethiopia							
Gabon							
The Gambia							
Ghana							
Guinea							
Guinea-Bissau							
Kenya							
Lesotho							
Libya							
Liberia							
Madagascar							
Malawi							
Mali							
Mauritania							
Mauritius							
Morocco							
Mozambique							
Namibia							
Niger							
Nigeria							
Rwanda							
Sao Tome and Principe							
Senegal							
Seychelles							
Sierra Leone							
Somalia							
South Africa							
South Sudan							
Sudan							
Togo							
Tunisia							
Uganda							
United Republic of Tanzania							
Zambia							
Zimbabwe							

While these international and regional instruments do not explicitly reference witchcraft issues, they do contain provisions protecting children from physical violence such as torture, corporal punishment, forcible administration of cleansing medicines, maltreatment, and murder (see Table 2). Similarly, the UNTOC and the Palermo Protocol address the transnational aspects of ritual attacks and the murder and trafficking of children, evident in countries including Malawi and Morocco. The abuse and violence occasioned by witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks are contrary to the letter and spirit of all these conventions. Failure to protect children's dignity and physical integrity is a violation in its own right. Agencies, organizations, and individuals advocating for greater attention to witchcraft-related violence as a child protection concern can thus reference these instruments as frameworks for action or accountability.

Table 2: Aspects of international and regional instruments relevant to witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks

Instruments	Provisions related to witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks
UDHR	<p>Article 1 states that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.</p> <p>Article 3 states that everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security.</p>
UNCRC	<p>Article 35 obligates States Party to take all appropriate national, bilateral, and multilateral measures to prevent the abduction, sale of, and/or trafficking in children for any purpose or in any form.</p> <p>Article 6 recognises that all children and young people have the right to survival and development.</p> <p>Article 19 requires States Party to take measures to protect children from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment and/or maltreatment or exploitation.</p> <p>Article 24 (3) mandates States Party to take all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children.</p> <p>Article 36 obligates States Party to protect children against all other forms of exploitation prejudicial to any aspect of the child's welfare.</p> <p>Article 37 requires that no child shall be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.</p>
UN CRPD	<p>Article 7(1) obligates States Party to take all necessary measures to ensure that children with disabilities fully enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with other children.</p> <p>Article 4 (1a) obliges States Party to consider the protection and promotion of the human rights of persons with disabilities in all policies and programmes.</p> <p>Article 10 mandates States Party to ensure that every human being has the right to life, and to take all necessary measures to ensure the effective enjoyment of that right by persons with disabilities, on an equal basis with others.</p>
UNTOC	<p>Article 1 of the UNTOC defines its purpose as to promote cooperation to prevent and combat transnational organized crime more effectively.</p>

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Instruments	Provisions related to witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks
Palermo Protocol	<p>Article 9 (1a) obliges States Party to establish comprehensive policies, programmes, and other measures to prevent and combat trafficking in persons.</p> <p>Article 9(1b) obliges States Party to protect victims of trafficking in persons, especially women and children, from revictimization.</p> <p>Article 11 (1) further obliges States Party to strengthen border controls as necessary to prevent and detect trafficking in persons.</p>
ACHPR	<p>Article 18 (3 & 4) obligates States Party to ensure the protection of the rights of the child as stipulated in international declarations and conventions, and to ensure that people with disabilities have the right to special measures of protection in keeping with their physical or moral needs.</p>
ACRWC	<p>Article 16 (1) obliges States Party to ensure the protection of the child from all forms of torture and inhuman or degrading treatment, and especially physical or mental injury or abuse.</p> <p>Article 21 requires that State Party shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate harmful social and cultural practices affecting the welfare, dignity, normal growth and development of the child.</p> <p>Article 29 (a) obligates States Party to take appropriate measures to prevent the abduction, sale of, or trafficking in children for any purpose or any form, by any person including parents or legal guardians of the child.</p>

Most African countries have domesticated these international instruments with a variety of laws contextualising them to local realities. Many countries also have laws related to witchcraft, such as Witchcraft Acts and anti-discrimination statutes, and issue specific related policies and programmes (see Table 3, which summarizes some of these in an indicative selection of countries). For example, Malawi, South Africa, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania have laws on witchcraft and ritual attacks, while Benin, DRC and Morocco have generic laws that protect against ritual attacks and violence, but not against accusations and related violence.

Table 3: National laws, policies, and structures relating to witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks in example countries

Country	Laws on the practice of Witchcraft	Laws on persons with disabilities (including albinism)	Laws on violence against children (witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks)	Laws on trafficking and transnational organised crime	Existence of (multi-stakeholder) coordinating structure(s)
Benin		Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2017)	- Constitution (2011) - Children's Code (2015) - Penal Code (2018)		National Commission for the Implementation of the Rights of the Child (CNDE)
Democratic Republic of Congo	Child Protection Code (Article 160)		- Constitution - Child Protection Code - Penal Code		- Ministry of Gender, Women, and Children - National Council of Children
Malawi	Witchcraft Act (1911)	- Persons with Disabilities Act (2019) - National Action Plan (NAP) on Persons with Albinism (2018-2022)	- Constitution - Penal Code (Amended 2016) - Anatomy Act (Amended 2016) - Child Care, Protection and Justice Act	Trafficking in Persons Act	National Technical Working Group (TWG) on Child Protection - National Technical Committee on Persons with Albinism
Morocco	Penal Code (Article 609)	Integrated Policy to Promote the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2016-2026)	- Constitution - Penal Code - Integrated Child Protection Policy (2021-2025)	Anti-trafficking law (Law 27-14 (2016))	
Nigeria	- Criminal Code (Section 216) - Penal Code (Section 210)	Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act, 2018	Criminal Code	Trafficking in Persons Law Enforcement and Administration Act (2013)	
South Africa	Witchcraft Suppression Act 3 of 1957	- Constitution - Policy on Disability	- Constitution	Prevention and Combating of Trafficking in Persons Act, 2013 (Act No. 7 of 2013)	

Country	Laws on the practice of Witchcraft	Laws on persons with disabilities (including albinism)	Laws on violence against children (witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks)	Laws on trafficking and transnational organised crime	Existence of (multi-stakeholder) coordinating structure(s)
Uganda	Witchcraft Act (1957)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Persons with Disabilities Act (Act 3 2020) - Prevention and Prohibition of Human Sacrifice Bill (2021) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Constitution - Children Act 2016 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act (2009) 	
United Republic of Tanzania	Witchcraft Act (2002)	Persons with Disabilities Act (2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Constitution - Child Act (2009) - Penal Code - National Plan of Action to End Violence Against Women and Children (NPA-VAWC 2017/18 – 2021/22) 	Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act (2008)	Ministry of Health, Community Development, Gender, Elderly, and Children

For example, under the Witchcraft Act (1911) of Malawi it is an offence to accuse any person of being a witch or practicing witchcraft; to claim to be a wizard or a witch, or to have or exercise the power of witchcraft; to conduct trials by ordeal; or to administer charms to commit any unlawful act. Children accused of witchcraft are in principle protected because Section 4 of the act makes it an offence to accuse any person of being a witch or practicing witchcraft; but in practice, the Act offers limited protection. The majority of people do not know it exists, fewer agree with its pronouncements, and some police officers and magistrates misinterpret and/or wrongly apply it to suit their own witchcraft beliefs and to prosecute and convict persons accused of being witches.

Most importantly, the Act does not protect vulnerable children who report “being taught witchcraft,” an emerging phenomenon in Malawi and one that children have frequently reported; but their claims are often dismissed as the allegations, imaginations, or dreams of children. Furthermore, by reporting being taught witchcraft, children inadvertently admit to two crimes: being witches themselves, and accusing another person of being a witch. Both acts are criminalized under Section 6 of the Witchcraft Act.

By and large, the Act is seen as a contentious piece of legislation in Malawi. Those who do not believe in witchcraft see it as a fair piece of legislation to protect those falsely accused of witchcraft; but those who consider witchcraft a real threat see the Act as foreign, a piece of law that fails to address the realities of community life. At a 2020 National Consultative Workshop on the Review of the Witchcraft Act, one judge pointed out that the Act does not adequately protect those accused or those who claim to be witches or wizards.⁴⁰ The government of Malawi therefore has more work to do to improve access to justice for children accused of witchcraft, and/or those who report being taught witchcraft.

In the wake of a dangerous escalation of ritual murders of persons with albinism (from one in 2013 to 60 in 2016⁴¹), the government re-enacted the Penal Code (2016) and the Anatomy Act (2016) to take into account the rise in ritual attacks and strengthen penalties to provide a stronger deterrent. In December 2016, the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs launched a technical handbook on legislative changes to guide investigators, prosecutors, and magistrates in how to handle offences against persons with albinism. The handbook seeks to strengthen the legal response to these crimes by bringing together all applicable charges that can be filed against suspected perpetrators.

In 2018, the Malawi government also developed the National Action Plan (NAP) on Persons with Albinism (2018-2022). The NAP has seven priority areas:

1. Civic education, awareness-raising and training
2. Justice and support for victims
3. Safety and security of persons with albinism
4. Human rights monitoring, reporting, and research
5. Mainstreaming and empowerment of persons with albinism
6. Access to affordable and quality health care services
7. Equitable access to high quality education.

Within the framework of the NAP, various programmes and initiatives have been implemented that have helped prevent ritual attacks against persons with albinism. The NAP priority area on safety and security included a strategy for “ensuring and enhancing the security of persons with albinism at household and individual levels” and had an implementation budget of MK30 million (US\$40,000). The annual number of ritual attacks against persons with albinism had declined to four at the time of the study survey in November 2021. There are various possible reasons for the decline from 2016 onwards, but high-level advocacy and activism, accompanied by concrete actions from government, certainly contributed.

In Tanzania, while the legal framework has some provisions addressing witchcraft, the laws in question tend to deal with discrete aspects of these crimes without addressing them holistically. The Witchcraft Act of 2002, for instance, stipulates that witchcraft is illegal, but provides no comprehensive definition. Section 2 defines witchcraft as including

...sorcery, enchantment, bewitching, the use of instruments of witchcraft, and the purported exercise of any occult power and the purported possession of any occult knowledge.

This definition addresses terms and practices related to the occult and the existence of power rather than the effects of such acts, making it difficult to determine what offences relate to the practice of witchcraft. The law also fails to refer specifically to children, or to protect them from *accusations* of witchcraft.

In Morocco, 2015 saw the introduction of the Integrated Public Child Protection Policy (2015-2025), a national framework to protect children from all forms of violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation. The policy aims to establish an integrated system focusing on five strategic areas:

1. Strengthening the legal framework for child protection and enhancing its effectiveness
2. Establishing standards for services and practices
3. Establishing strong community-based mechanisms for child protection

4. Promoting social norms that protect children's rights
5. Developing effective, standardized information systems for regular monitoring and evaluation.

This policy attempts to place the child and his or her rights and best interests at the centre of government action by creating an integrated system that guarantees effective, sustainable protection for children in need. Like most child protection policies and programmes, the Moroccan policy is not focused on witchcraft issues; rather, it concerns itself primarily with issues of child labour and trafficking and other forms of abuse. But, for example, advocating for the “promotion of social norms” that protect the child rights could be enhanced with specific reference attention to witchcraft issues. It is important to note that through this policy the state has set itself the task of conducting studies to improve understanding of social behaviours, practices and perceptions affecting child protection, and to shed light on the forms, causes and trends of child abuse, exploitation, and neglect. These studies could also explore issues related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks against children.

While none of the existing witchcraft laws examined in this report address children specifically, Witchcraft Acts can, with little or no revision, be deployed to prohibit and prevent accusations against children. But major challenges remain in their implementation. A 2012 study by the Association of Secular Humanists in Malawi found that witchcraft laws are rarely used to prosecute accusations, and are virtually unknown in most of the jurisdictions in which they apply, even by relevant political and legal authorities.⁴²

A study of witchcraft laws by HelpAge International⁴³ identified several reasons for this failure. In

Child sacrifice in Uganda

In the past decade, the sacrifice of children in Uganda has been cited by the media, police and government of Uganda as a major child protection concern. National legislation was ill-equipped to deal with the crime: while incidents of child sacrifice were reported to police and investigated, there were very few prosecutions.

Human sacrifice cases are very particular crimes, but have historically been prosecuted as murder under the Penal Code Act, or under Human Trafficking legislation, neither of which is sufficient to deal adequately with the crime. Sadly, this has resulted in perpetrators committing crimes with relative impunity and the practice has continued nearly unchecked.

To address this, Uganda's parliament passed the Prevention and Prohibition of Human Sacrifice Bill 2020, which was officially signed into law on 14 July 2021. The new law proposes the most severe sentence under the law for any person convicted of committing human sacrifice or financing the practice. It also criminalises the possession of human body parts and their use in medicine for sale or personal use. A person convicted of the offence faces life imprisonment. In addition, any person found to have spread belief in human sacrifice for financial gain, or to have encouraged others to use a human body in any ritual, will also receive a life sentence.

Source: *Children on the Edge* (accessed at: <https://www.childrenontheedge.org>); and *Uganda criminalises human sacrifices with death sentence* (12 May 2021; accessed at: <https://www.medicalbrief.co.za>)

some countries, the common belief in witchcraft across all sections of society, including law enforcement officials and members of the judiciary, means that legislation to protect those accused of witchcraft is seen as offering unfair protection to alleged witches. This results in an unwillingness to investigate and prosecute those who commit acts of violence against people accused of witchcraft, or in reluctance of members of the public to come forward as witnesses.

Fear of reprisals, either from the community for protecting an alleged witch or from the alleged witch themselves, also prevents the use and enforcement of the law. Weak judicial systems have the same effect. Some justice systems are underdeveloped, poorly resourced, and cannot cope with the number of cases before them. Lack of legal training for those within the legal system can lead to a failure to apply the law effectively and consistently.

In addition, when people accused of witchcraft are poor and vulnerable, they cannot access the legal system, and many have no faith in the system as a way of resolving their problems. In some countries, corruption in the legal system can prevent enforcement of the law, especially where there may be the prospect of financial gain for accusing or persecuting someone for being a witch. In some countries, where witchcraft related legislation was introduced under colonisation, it is still associated with colonial administrations and there is a reluctance to enforce inherited legislation at odds with popular belief.⁴⁴

Many of the witchcraft laws across Africa have been amended in recent years, with even more under study for revision, mostly with a view to allowing courts to distinguish between true and false accusations⁴⁵. Even in their revised form, however, these often provide inadequate regulation of witchcraft accusations. For example, the revised Witchcraft Act of Tanzania (2002) criminalises witchcraft accusations only when they have not been made to the proper authorities.

Another issue is the fact that regardless of the legal and regulatory frameworks at national level, witchcraft cases are regularly adjudicated in customary and informal legal forums as well as formal courts. It is important that stakeholders involved in child protection systems pay careful attention to how “traditional” leaders and other local authorities deal with witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks, and how these trends positively or negatively affect formal systems and structures.

In conclusion, it is clear that legislation alone is ineffective in preventing people, including children, from being accused of what for most Africans is a heinous crime. These accusations often have dire consequences. The challenge is to devise ways to strengthen child protection systems to incorporate consideration of the harm caused by witchcraft accusations, without fuelling communities’ tendencies to perceive witchcraft as an existential threat.

As has been shown by successful campaigns against ritual attacks on persons with albinism, carefully targeted legislative reform is essential in establishing a framework for child protection. Witchcraft laws should therefore be revised specifically to outlaw accusations against children, and penalties for the crime should be enhanced. Given that persuading people that witchcraft does not exist is unlikely to prevent accusations, the challenge is to insist that *children*, whatever the accusers’ fears, should not be accused of evil. Rather, they should be protected from evil, and from the risk of any harm being inflicted on them.

6.2 Governance and coordination structures

Child protection systems involve multiple governmental departments, agencies, and institutions. Coordinating these entities and functions across national, regional and local levels is a critical function of any such system. Throughout Africa, the provision of child protection services is constrained by a general lack of human and financial resources, and few countries have services specifically designed to aid child survivors of witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks. Most African countries have, however, ratified the ACRWR and passed legislation enacting its provisions into national law. These countries have begun to institutionalize services that could, with appropriate financial and human capacity building, serve as a foundation from which to address witchcraft issues while strengthening child protection systems.

The case of Malawi illustrates both commendable effort and the potential challenges of such systems strengthening. In Malawi, a National Technical Working Group (TWG) on Child Protection is the national technical and coordination platform for child protection. The TWG is composed of representatives from the Ministries of Gender, Health, Education, Justice, Home Affairs, and Labour; the National Registration Bureau; the judiciary; the National Child Justice Forum; the Malawi Police Service; the Malawi Human Rights Commission; and a range of local and international NGOs. The TWG reports to the Gender Youth and Sports Sector Working Group. On policy, the TWG is supposed to report to the National Steering Committee on Children, a political body comprising Principal Secretaries from the Ministries of Gender, Education, Health, Home Affairs, and Justice. But while the system seems comprehensive on paper, in practice the National Steering Committee on Children rarely meets, due to insufficient clarity of roles and responsibilities and other operational challenges resulting from a scarcity of human and financial resources⁴⁶.

At the district level, child protection in Malawi is coordinated by District Child Protection Committees (DCPC) which report to District Executive Committees⁴⁷. A DCPC comprises at minimum the District Social Welfare Offices (DSWO), District Community Development Offices, District Health Offices, the police, the judiciary, and NGOs and community based organisations (CBOs) active in child protection. At the community level there are Child Protection Committees comprising stakeholders such as Child Protection Workers (CPWs), CBO representatives and others. The CPWs provide frontline child protection services through community structures such as community victim support units and Children's Corners, link the DSWOs with the community, and refer cases of abuse up to the DSWO where necessary⁴⁸. But despite the existence of this system (Figure 1), a 2016 public inquiry found that community policing structures were weak and poorly resourced⁴⁹, and some were "dead."⁵⁰ For example, the CPWs are expected to cover large geographical areas, but generally lack a means of transportation with which to do so. `

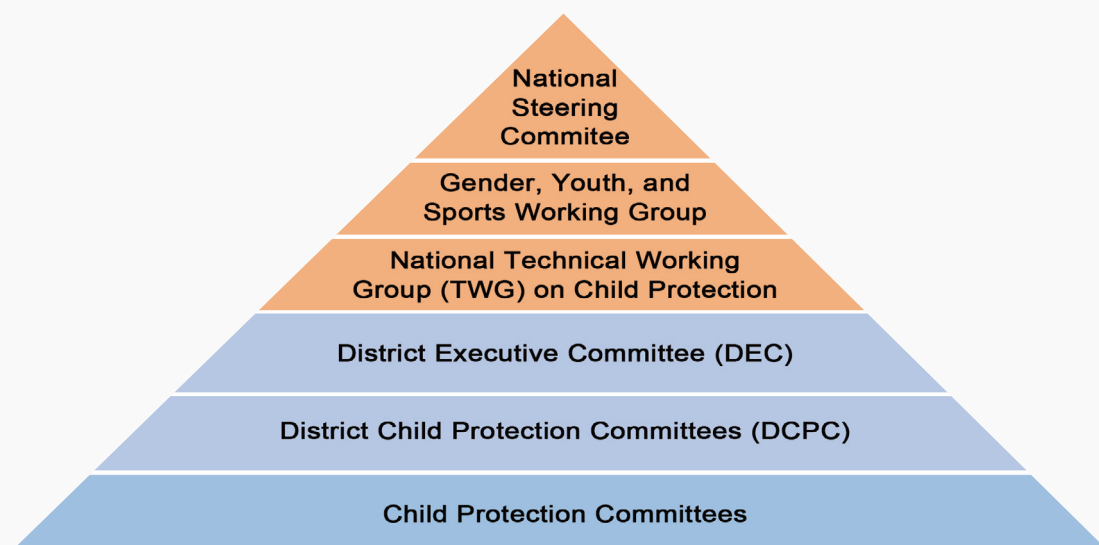


Figure 1: Multisectoral coordination structures and mechanisms in Malawi

Overall, therefore, Malawi has the institutions and multistakeholder coordination structures for child protection at national, district, and community levels. But the functionality of these structures varies, largely due to inadequate resources. At district and community levels functionality varies depending on the availability of funding from international donors; and while the National TWG on Child Protection has leveraged social media and other virtual platforms to reinforce this work, the same is not true at the decentralized levels.⁵¹ Furthermore, most technical and coordination child protection structures in Malawi do not provide for child participation in their processes. Children are consulted on an *ad hoc* basis, an approach that undermines the effectiveness of child participation.

Within the justice system, coordination between the judiciary and other agencies is generally ineffective in child protection cases. There are also operational issues that constrain collaboration between investigation and prosecution services, leading to delays in processing and concluding criminal cases or the inability to secure convictions in cases, including those related to ritual murders of persons with albinism.⁵² To facilitate collaboration between agencies and the courts and thereby improve service delivery, Malawi established Court User Committees; but these are generally dysfunctional and are not optimally used. They tend to be dependent on donor financing, they rarely meet, and they lack the means to enforce resolutions.⁵³

The government of Benin has implemented similar grassroots structures. It has established Social Promotion Centres in every community across the country under the auspices of the Ministry of the Family (Ministère de la Famille, des Affaires Sociales, de la Solidarité Nationale, des Handicapés et des Personnes de Troisième Age). These centres are charged with coordinating, among other things, health and psychological services for “ill-treated” children, which at times includes children accused of witchcraft.⁵⁴

Integrating issues of witchcraft-related crimes and extreme violence into child protection systems does not require the development of new parallel structures. Many African countries already have laws, policies and strategies that are broadly adequate to address violence against children, and many have gone further and established appropriate structures for implementation, enforcement and coordination. By increasing awareness of witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks, and by clarifying the roles and responsibilities of existing entities in addressing these concerns, child protection systems can be strengthened and made responsive to these issues.

6.3 Programmes, services, and other initiatives

While there are hundreds of NGOs operating in Africa that are dedicated to advancing the rights, wellbeing and protection of children,⁵⁵ most of the larger ones have not traditionally focused on witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks. But in response to increasing numbers of ritual attacks on children with albinism, NGOs have recently taken the lead in protecting children from witchcraft-related violence and performing related advocacy – though to date this has focussed mainly on persons with albinism rather than witchcraft accusations.

The experience of campaigns addressing ritual attacks against persons with albinism suggests that issues of witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks could also be successfully integrated into child protection systems by reforming legislation, enhancing policies and criminal justice systems, raising awareness, and targeted service provision. But the ethical and political implications of efforts to address witchcraft accusations against children are more complex than those pertaining to ritual attacks. To date, state-sponsored policies to protect children from such accusations remain limited.

There are a few exceptions. In Tanzania, the Witchcraft Act (2002) punishes those who practice witchcraft as well as those who accuse others of such practice. Zimbabwe passed a law in 2006 that criminalises “groundless” accusations of witchcraft and all related practices that pose harm to others.

Despite the general lack of policies paying specific attention to witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks against children, NGOs and governments across Africa continue working to establish both preventative and responsive programmes and services.

6.3.1 Preventative programmes and services

Awareness raising and sensitisation campaigns

There have been various efforts to raise awareness of the need to protect people – and children in particular – from witchcraft accusations and attacks. But these awareness-raising activities have tended to be piecemeal, insufficient, and conducted as add-ons to existing services rather than integrated or mainstreamed into broader child rights initiatives.

In Tanzania, communities are educated on the impact of harmful practices, customs, and cultures that lead to accusations and extreme violence against children. This task is the shared remit of the Ministry of Health, Community Development, Gender, Elderly and Children and organisations such as the Children Dignity Forum and the Legal and Human Rights Centre.

In Benin, an NGO called Franciscans Benin works to popularise understanding of the Benin Children’s Code, particularly in relation to ritual infanticide.

In Malawi, programmes and services targeting accusations and attacks have focused mostly on sensitizing communities about the Witchcraft Act (1911). The line ministry for children, along with the police and a number of NGOs including but not limited to Plan Malawi, World Vision and Humanist Malawi (previously the Association for Secular Humanism), have carried

out sensitization campaigns to educate communities against accusations of witchcraft and discourage them from taking the law into their own hands. In 2012, Humanist Malawi implemented a three-year project to eradicate witchcraft-based violence in 11 of Malawi's 28 districts. This followed a successful campaign by George Thindwa, General Secretary of Humanist Malawi, to pressure the President to release around 100 people convicted of being witches, or who were awaiting trial for witchcraft, from prisons around the country.⁵⁶ The project sought to raise awareness of the existence and provisions of the Witchcraft Act (1911) and thereby reduce witchcraft-related accusations and violence affecting the elderly, women and children, and promote human rights. It also sought to improve the capacity of service providers and stakeholders, particularly among traditional leaders and in the criminal justice system, and provided capacity-building support to police and victim support units. The project supported litigation in cases involving witchcraft accusations or violence⁵⁷ and, in partnership with stakeholders, undertook mass media campaigns to raise awareness of the Witchcraft Act. These campaigns reached 80,374 people in the second year of the project.⁵⁸

Perhaps the most visible international NGO addressing witchcraft issues has been the Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network (WHRIN). It was founded in England by Gary Foxcroft, who previously established Stepping Stones Nigeria, after he witnessed the distressing mistreatment of a child accused of being a witch. WHRIN has been instrumental in bringing issues of witchcraft-related violence to the attention of human rights agencies and activists worldwide. WHRIN promotes awareness and understanding of human rights violations that are committed around the world due to the belief in witchcraft.⁵⁹ Supported by the UN Independent Expert on the Enjoyment of Human Rights by Persons with Albinism, and after a long campaign, WHRIN advocacy and research were of crucial relevance in achieving the United Nations Human Rights Council's recognition of the high prevalence of human rights abuses driven by occult-related assaults on persons with albinism.⁶⁰

Several NGOs have also carried out campaigns to challenge negative beliefs associated with albinism. For example, the Association for Persons with Albinism in Malawi organized the country's first-ever beauty pageant for persons with albinism in Lilongwe in September 2019.⁶¹ The Mwimba Texas Foundation in DRC works to stop attacks against persons with albinism by raising awareness in schools and workplaces, on public transport and within communities.

The success of campaigns to eliminate ritual attacks on persons with albinism shows that substantial progress can be made when driven by advocacy and supported by strategic allies, including local and international organizations and donors. With the recent adoption of the UNHRC resolution on witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks, this progress could be further enhanced to provide specific protection to the many hundreds of thousands of children at risk of being targeted with witchcraft accusations each year in Africa.

Protective programmes for children with albinism

Several programmes have been initiated across Africa to protect children, especially children with albinism, from attacks. The Malawi police, for example, reported implementing night curfews in some areas (such as in Mchunguza village in Machinga⁶²), conducting special patrols in hotspot areas, and distributing over 5,000 personal security alarms connected to nearby police station radio communication systems to alert the police in case of attacks.⁶³ To prevent attacks against students with albinism, the government also enrolled 2,506 students with albinism (1,208 boys and 1,298 girls) in boarding school together with other learners, and tightened security in these schools.⁶⁴

A recent study from Malawi reported that some teachers had arranged a “buddy system” through which children with albinism had peers assigned to help them in class and “protect” them during breaktime. Other teachers had arranged for children with albinism to be accompanied to and from school, and encouraged the local community to be vigilant and to report any “strange and suspicious activities” to the police.⁶⁵

The government of Tanzania has established temporary holding centres to protect children with albinism from attacks. Despite the government’s good intentions, however, the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child has highlighted findings⁶⁶ that show these Centres are no longer temporary, and that they do not serve the best interests of the children. In reality they are more like detention centres than safe houses, characterised by poor infrastructure and resources. These include shortages of learning and teaching materials, poor living conditions that constitute a danger to health, and poor nutrition.⁶⁷

6.3.2 Response programmes and services

This category of intervention includes specialized programmes and services designed to address the aftermath of accusations and attacks, protect victims’ rights, and help survivors overcome trauma.

Mobile legal aid clinics

Mobile legal aid is an initiative designed to enable legal service providers to bring their services directly to potential clients in remote and underserved communities. In one of the few documented initiatives of this type in Malawi, the Walter Leitner International Human Rights Clinic (Leitner) and the Center for Human Rights Education Advice and Assistance provided mobile legal clinics for children accused of witchcraft, or who had been reported as having been taught witchcraft. These services also included counselling, provision of alternative explanations with which to counter the accusations, and referrals to the police.

Psychosocial support for victims

This report finds only limited evidence of comprehensive psychosocial support programmes for child survivors following incidents of crimes and extreme violence. Such support is essential in order to address children’s emotional, social, mental and spiritual needs – all crucial elements of development.

The construction of safe housing and provision of affordable health services for people with albinism by Malawi’s National Technical Committee on People with Albinism⁶⁸ is one example of such victim support. Recognising the need for safe housing for people with albinism, since 2019 the government has allocated funding and built houses. It has also attempted to provide essential skincare supplies, though this initiative has faced supply chain and distribution challenges.

Despite these efforts, two child survivors of albinism-related attacks interviewed in Machinga Ntcheu in 2021 expressed dissatisfaction with the post-attack support they received⁶⁹ and underscored the continued need for safe housing for both children and adults with albinism.⁷⁰

Child helpline services

“Child helplines” are toll-free telephone outreach services for children, and form critical parts of national child protection systems. Most African countries provide helpline services to children and their families. Depending on their purpose these helplines receive constant reports on issues including but not limited to abuse and violence, provision of basic needs, matters related to school and education, and sexual health. Tanzania’s National Child Helpline (telephone number 116) receives thousands of calls related to violence against children. The helpline is operated by a child protection NGO called C-SEMA, working under contract with the government. According to C-SEMA latest data showed the helpline served 3,597 contacts every day, offering “professional services in the areas of child protection, gender based violence, nutrition, mental health, justice, early childhood development, and sexual [and] reproductive health.”⁷¹ While the helpline services do not specify witchcraft-related violence, given its holistic approach to child protection, this could easily be integrated into the service.

Interventions by faith-based organisations and community groups

There is documented evidence of community groups and faith-based organisations working on violence against children accused of witchcraft across Africa. The Stop Child Witch Accusations (SCWA) organization is a coalition of mostly England-based Christian groups that has worked extensively with Christian church leaders in several African countries. Their operating principle is that while some church leaders may be involved in fostering accusations and attacks, the church is also key to preventing and stopping them. As they put it,

“SCWA is a coalition of individuals and agencies responding to the reality of children experiencing serious harm or the threat of harm due to accusations of witchcraft or belief in malevolent spiritual influence.”⁷²

A 2017 report for SCWA authored by Seren Boyd⁷³ outlines the lessons and best practices derived from SCWA’s experience working to reduce the harm of witchcraft accusations. It argues that:

“...the issue must be approached from a faith perspective, as well as from a human rights one. The church, often the first port of call for families who believe their child is a witch, must be engaged. There is an urgent need for a concerted, preventative approach that identifies and addresses root causes.”

This report is an important contribution to the literature on protecting children in Africa from witchcraft accusation, because it provides compelling arguments for a spiritual response to an issue which is fundamentally one of spiritual insecurity.

Malawi has also attempted to use faith-based and/or local customary systems to resolve witchcraft related accusations and ritual attacks. This work takes different forms, including provision of advice and mediation by village headmen, prayers for deliverance by religious leaders and administration of traditional medicines by traditional healers.⁷⁴ However it is important to note that the traditional medicine has on occasion been reported to be poisonous, even to the extent of causing the death of the accused.⁷⁵

6.4 Human and financial resources

Financial challenges are a common issue facing every aspect of child protection systems across Africa. Human resources and capacity are frequently adversely affected by the simple lack of funds. Many promising programmes are hindered by a reliance on donor funding, which often follows priorities determined primarily by the interests of the donors, most of whom are unfamiliar with witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks. Many worthy projects are launched only to stall later for lack of continued funding, since most donors insist on limited timeframes for their support.

Human resources

The social service workforces of many African countries are inadequate in number and therefore fail to meet the needs of the communities they serve. This trend includes the child protection workforce and becomes even more problematic around issues of witchcraft-related crimes and violence. Those capacity building programmes for child protection workers that do exist are often donor financed, project-based, and confined to specific areas. They are frequently tailored more to the needs of the donor or project than to local or national priorities, and hence are not sustainable. For example, the National Plan of Action for Vulnerable Children in Malawi (2015-2019) reported that while Malawi had 800 child protection workers, only 37.5% (300 people) were on the government payroll, while the rest were volunteers. It also revealed that only a limited number of police investigators and prosecutors had received orientation on laws applicable to ritual murders against persons with albinism (including the amended Penal Code (2016) and Anatomy Act (2016)).

The number of police officers in the Malawi Police Service (MPS) is seriously inadequate, with a police to population ratio of about 1 to 1226 (against a standard ratio of 1 to 455). This makes the Police unable to provide adequate preventative policing, such as patrols, which are critical for the prevention of ritual attacks against people with albinism.

Despite these constraints, however, the police report having taken measures to strengthen the capacity of 375 Community Policing Forums, 6,717 Child Protection Platforms and 32,717 Child Protection Committees. This was done by providing training and security equipment such as bicycles, torches, whistles, and reflector jackets, under the banner of a project aimed at “enhancing the security for people with albinism including children with albinism”.⁷⁶

Malawi has also made some progress in providing human resources for ministries, departments, and agencies working on child protection.

Despite this, however, resource constraints continue to hamper not only the work of non-state child protection actors, but also that of the majority of ministries and departments, including the lead Ministry dealing with children’s issues, the judiciary, and the MPS. The judiciary and the police are not only understaffed, but also staffed, to the extent that they are, with inadequately qualified personnel.⁷⁷ This situation contributes to backlogs of cases and the ultimate failure of the criminal justice system to deliver justice to survivors and victims of violence in general, and survivors of witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks in particular.

The MPS Action Plan on Protection of Persons with Albinism (2021-2023) acknowledges the systemic challenges faced by the MPS in investigating and prosecuting cases related to ritual attacks against persons with albinism:

The MPS has not done enough to systematically collect adequate information that could lead to swift arrests for perpetrators and completion of cases before courts essentially due to lack of both technical skills and equipment to conduct thorough investigations. Failure to arrest perpetrators in time and the delay to complete investigations/prosecution of cases undermines our mandate to safeguard the protection of the rights of PWAs and this often leads to frustration on the part of relatives of the victims and creates opportunities for community members to take the law into their own hands and commit mob violence.⁷⁸

Financial resources

Allocation of adequate financial resources is a crucial step in translating national policies, laws, and programmes into action that results in improved child protection outcomes. Sadly, there is no evidence of specific budget allocations for initiatives on witchcraft-related violence anywhere across the continent. The only proxy evidence available at national level is that of allocations for child protection. By and large, national budgets show child protection to be one of the least prioritized government functions across Africa.

In Morocco it is possible to find evidence of budget allocations to sectors that benefit children (e.g. education, health, social protection, youth and sports). This shows a decent overall increase from 75.5 billion dirhams in 2014 to 93.3 billion dirhams in 2019 (22.3% of the general budget).⁷⁹ Table 4 shows allocations between 2016 and 2019 for the key social sectors.

Table 4: Morocco social sector budgets 2016 – 2019 (billion Dirham)

Departments	2016	2017	2018	2019
Ministry of Youth and Sports	1.95 Bn	2.61 Bn	3.12 Bn	4.11 Bn
Ministry of National Education	55.65 Bn	54.78 Bn	59.29 Bn	62.03 Bn
Ministry of Health	14.28 Bn	14.11 Bn	14.79 Bn	16.33 Bn
Ministry of Solidarity, Social Development, Equality and Family	0.69 Bn	0.64 Bn	0.85 Bn	0.85 Bn

Source: Module on child rights sensitive public finance, *Situation Analysis for Children in Morocco (SitAn)*, 2019/Ministry of Economy and Finance

It is important to note, however, that Morocco is one of the few countries in Africa which has adopted child-sensitive budgeting and integrated child rights into ministerial and departmental budgets. By doing so, Morocco complies with the provisions of the UN CRC, particularly Article 4 and General Comment No. 19 on the need to create specific mechanisms to ensure the traceability of funds allocated for child rights in public budgets.

In Malawi, budget allocations for child protection have decreased in recent years. During the 2018/19 financial year, the total government budget allocation for child protection across various ministries was 27.7 billion MKW (Malawi Kwacha), representing 1.9% of the total

approved national budget for the financial year. This is lower than the child protection allocation for 2017/18, which was 3% of the approved national budget. Adjusted for inflation, budget allocations for child protection decreased at an annual average rate of 4% between 2012/13 and 2017/18.⁸⁰

The result of this failure to provide national budgets is – as touched on earlier – a situation in which many African countries' child protection programmes are funded by international donors. In the case of Malawi, for example, during the 2017/18 fiscal year a single donor, Plan International Malawi, provided a greater child protection budget (i.e. a little over 1 billion MKW) than the national government (which allocated 820 million MKW). This overreliance on donor funding – funding that is often time-limited and project-based – is unsustainable. When project funding ceases, it is common for donors to expect, at least outwardly, that local agencies will continue the work and community members will contribute their services voluntarily. But funding from local sources is rarely available, and local people tend to be uninterested in working without pay, so the services collapse.

6.5 Data, knowledge management, and monitoring

Despite the pressure on governments and donors to demonstrate successful implementation of policies, projects and programmes, monitoring and evaluation are perennial problems.⁸¹ Implementers are rarely held accountable for the all-too-frequently dismal results of investments intended to improve the circumstances of people in desperate need.⁸²

There are, however, some glimmers of hope in relation to witchcraft-related issues.

Africa now has a comprehensive plan, *The African Union Plan of Action on Albinism (2021-2031)*, that engages Member States of the African Union, relevant ministries and other organisations addressing issues of concern around persons with albinism (including violent ritual attacks on children). The big questions moving forward concern implementation. The Action on Albinism NGO (formerly the “African Albinism Network”) has developed a website devoted to monitoring the AU Plan of Action and mobilising resources to support it. This website presents updated, accessible online information on regional and national progress.⁸³ Publication of this report comes too soon to assess the impact of the Plan of Action, but Action on Albinism is committed to monitoring its progress and publicizing the results.

Several countries in Africa have national Child Protection Information Management Systems that document and monitor child protection issues, including violence, abuse, exploitation, and child neglect. Data collected in communities is consolidated at district level and analysed at national level to produce periodic reports. The challenge here is that these systems collect and analyse very little data on crimes and violence perpetrated against children. National level surveys on violence against children appear to cover sexual, physical, and psychological forms of violence against children, but not violence related to witchcraft.

In several countries it is primarily the role of the police to collect and store data related to witchcraft accusations and attacks; but this data tends to be of limited value in terms of providing evidence for programming, because it is not systematically disaggregated by age or gender. This makes it difficult to assess which children are most affected by witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks. In Malawi, the MPS performs spatial analyses of ritual attacks

against people with albinism to determine hotspots that require special police patrols, and to monitor progress in prosecuting suspects; but there is no evidence that these have been used to inform national or sub-national programmatic responses to witchcraft accusations and/or ritual attacks. Even when it is available the data has limited value for programming.

Some CSOs also gather data on reports of witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks, but their systems are not comprehensive and governments may not pay adequate heed to the information they provide. In 2020, the Legal and Human Rights Centre in Tanzania documented thirteen incidents of witchcraft-related killings reported across the Geita, Rukwa, Katavi, Tanga, Mbeya, Njombe, and Kigoma Regions. The data was criticised for being incomprehensive, and hence was “not fully trusted” by the government.⁸⁴

Many aspects of crimes and extreme violence are cloaked in secrecy. Reports of infanticide of children with disabilities in Benin, for example, make it apparent that midwives who take ritual action to kill new-born children with disabilities do not even inform the birth mothers.⁸⁵ Similarly, communities involved in witch-cleansing fear drawing the authorities’ attention if their activities contravene the law, so they move in secret.

Police services are almost always struggling to keep track of basic data relating to the perpetration of regular crimes, let alone those with occult implications. Witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks typically only come to the attention of police when they result in breaches of the Penal Code or incidents of public violence, such as when children accused of being witches are killed or the police are forced to intervene to prevent vigilante violence. No police service in Africa tabulates crimes related to witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks. Even in South Africa, where the South African Police Service operated an Occult Crimes Unit in the 1990s, crime statistics did not capture elements pertaining to witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks.⁸⁶ And, while a number of NGOs and multilaterals – notably WHRIN, Under the Same Sun and the UN Human Rights Council Independent Expert on Albinism – have striven to estimate the prevalence and extent of crimes and extreme violence related to witchcraft, the necessary information is limited. Obtaining evidence and managing related data is thus a complex task.

7. SPOTLIGHT ON ALBINISM: LESSONS TO ADDRESS WITCHCRAFT ACCUSATIONS AND RITUAL ATTACKS

In the mid-2000s an outbreak of attacks on persons with albinism spread across Africa. It seems to have begun in Tanzania, and it hit particularly hard in East Africa. Following this period, authorities across the continent amended laws, enhanced law enforcement, established protective systems, and worked to raise awareness of albinism and mitigate stigma and discrimination. While attacks on persons with albinism have not stopped, they have diminished significantly from their peak. Figure 2 illustrates this trend for Malawi.

Figure 2: Trend of recorded cases of attacks on persons with albinism in Malawi, 2013-2021



Source: Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability, and Social Welfare (2021): *Mid-term report on implementation of national action on persons with albinism in Malawi*

The core question is: what lessons does this episode offer for integrating witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks more broadly into child protection systems?

At first, the response to the outbreaks of ritual attacks on persons with albinism – in terms of protecting people from attacks, offering care to victims and performing advocacy – was driven by NGOs, foremost of which was the Canada-based organisation Under the Same Sun.⁸⁷ In addition persons with albinism have also been a notably active and organized group. As a result of the publicity and political pressure they exerted in response to the attacks, police and law enforcement officials paid increased attention to such attacks, leading to substantial declines in incidence. In several countries, including Malawi and Tanzania, laws were amended to address these crimes more effectively.

As the issue continued to gather momentum, in 2015 the United Nations Human Rights Council decided to appoint an Independent Expert to promote “the enjoyment of human rights by persons with albinism.”⁸⁸ This decision followed work by the UN Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions (2009 report A/HRC/11/2); by the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence against Children, including the 2012 study *Protecting children from harmful practices in plural legal systems, with a special emphasis on Africa*⁸⁹ and by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (in particular Joint General Comment No. 18 on Harmful Practices, which was issued in 2014 together with

Recommendation No. 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and revised in 2019). The eventual appointment of Ms Ikponwosa Ero as the first Independent Expert on the Enjoyment of Human Rights by Persons with Albinism was transformative for the pan-African campaign against attacks on persons with albinism.

With the assistance of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and various NGOs, Ms Ero led the development of the *Regional Action Plan for Africa*, a five-year plan to address attacks and related violations against persons with albinism in sub Saharan Africa. Her work was influential in stimulating corresponding action from national governments – in one such example, in 2018 the government of Malawi adopted a National Action Plan on Persons with Albinism. Together these activities culminated in the African Union's 2019 adoption of the Plan of Action on Ending Attacks and Discrimination against People with Albinism 2021-2031, making it officially a continent-wide strategy.⁹⁰ The AU also resolved to appoint a Special Envoy on Albinism to oversee the implementation of the Plan of Action.

Legislative and law enforcement responses to ritual attacks against persons with albinism

As a result of this crisis, and spurred by the actions of the UN Independent Expert and the various albinism advocacy groups, some national governments have worked energetically to enhance their national frameworks of legal protection for persons with albinism. These efforts provide the basis of a roadmap for expanding national child protection systems to incorporate the full range of witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks.

Consider the case of Malawi. The Laws of Malawi were not originally drafted to address crimes against albinism involving murder, mutilation, and grave robbery by people seeking body parts for magical medicines. Penalties for such crimes under the old laws were weak and inadequate, and certainly insufficient as a deterrent.⁹¹ However, after a legislative review, the penalties have been made more severe to the point where they are generally seen as an effective deterrent, and current relevant laws (chiefly the Penal Code (2016) and the Anatomy Act (2016)) can now be considered preventative. The government of Malawi has demonstrated political will by conducting this review. The resultant amendments sealed key loopholes and significantly strengthened the laws: conviction for the ritual murder of persons with albinism, including children with albinism, now carries the maximum possible sentence. The laws now provide a stronger basis for bringing perpetrators to trial and delivering justice to survivors and victims.

Following the review, the updated legislation was widely publicized to guide investigators, prosecutors, and magistrates on the handling of offences committed against persons with albinism. In December 2016, the Malawian Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs launched a handbook on key legislative changes.⁹² The handbook analyses, simplifies, and compiles all offences relating to attacks against persons with albinism and references the relevant laws. It aims to improve legal responses to crimes against persons with albinism by bringing together all applicable charges that can be filed against suspected perpetrators⁹³. Investigators, prosecutors, and magistrates were also orientated on the revised laws.

These measures resulted in improved prosecution and sentencing. Several perpetrators have since been convicted and given severe sentences. On 15th August 2019 Justice Maclean Kamwambe of the High Court of Malawi handed the most severe punishment allowed under

the law to a person convicted of the 2017 strangling and ritual dismemberment of a person with albinism.⁹⁴

The Malawi Police Service and judiciary have also actively sought to improve access to justice for victims of these ritual attacks. On 3 May 2016 the Chief Justice of Malawi issued a directive to all magistrates advising that cases of this type should be referred only to magistrates with higher jurisdiction such as Chief Resident Magistrates, Principal Resident Magistrates and Senior Residents.⁹⁵ Considering the challenges facing the judicial system in Malawi, this was a significant development.⁹⁶ The MPS has also established a special unit to investigate cases involving ritual attacks against persons with albinism, including children, with a view to expediting investigations and prosecutions.⁹⁷ The MPS Action Plan on Protection of Persons with Albinism (2021-2023) aims to strengthen the capacity of this unit to investigate more sophisticated organized crimes, using advanced evidence collection techniques and equipment.⁹⁸

The government of Malawi, along with various non-state actors, implemented a range of further programmes and initiatives to end ritual attacks against persons with albinism. In 2018 the government developed the National Action Plan (NAP) on Persons with Albinism (2018-2022), within the framework of which various interventions have taken place that have helped prevent ritual attacks⁹⁹.

Raising awareness around witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks

Driven by the need to counter an escalation of attacks on persons with albinism, many African countries have begun to adopt policies that could serve as a basis for strengthening child protection systems around a broader range of issues related to witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks.

A central part of the response has involved raising awareness among the public and relevant stakeholders. To date, these efforts have largely focused on addressing ritual attacks, but they could be expanded to include witchcraft accusations against children.

In Tanzania, the Ministry of Health, Community Development, Gender, Elderly and Children has worked in collaboration with civil society stakeholders to implement the National Action Plan on the Elimination of Violence Against Women and Children (2017/18-2021/22). One purpose of this programme is to educate the community on the impact of negative social practices and behaviours. While the plan does not focus on witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks, it does include relevant provisions in this area – For instance, under Response and Support Services thematic area, the plan seeks to:

“...support interventions that address effective and timely response services for women and children, including children living and working in the street, women, **children with albinism, elderly suspects with witchcraft**, and child labour.”¹⁰⁰ (emphasis added)

The government of Tanzania has been particularly active in awareness raising in areas where abductions, killings and attacks of children and people with albinism have been more prevalent (i.e. the Mwanza, Tabora, Shinyanga, Kagera, Mara, Katavi, and Rukwa Regions).¹⁰¹ Public campaigns were introduced by the government as one mechanism through which to address the myths that lead to discrimination, attacks, killings and/or mistreatment of persons

with albinism.¹⁰² Top government leaders spoke about the attacks in public speeches. Public engagement through public forums and media – including special live programmes on television and radio and dedicated newspaper articles – was used to increase awareness and understanding of albinism. Non-governmental organizations, religious leaders and musicians were also involved. The President's public condemnation of these practices further strengthened the campaign.¹⁰³

In Benin, where ritual infanticide has been identified as a key issue in the north of the country, the government established monitoring and awareness committees covering 12 northern municipalities. These committees are expected to educate their communities, set up active surveillance for early detection of cases of children threatened with ritual attacks, and facilitate denunciations of attackers. NGOs, particularly Franciscans International, have been active in raising awareness of infanticide and alerting people to – amongst other things – the fact that the practice is illegal and perpetrators can be subject to criminal prosecution.¹⁰⁴ Efforts by the government to enhance birth registration and increase the number of children born in health clinics are expected to mitigate further against infanticidal practices.

In Morocco, where issues of witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks are not currently receiving much attention, efforts have been made to raise awareness about child rights and general issues of violence against children. These efforts could be expanded to address witchcraft-related violence. The Ministry of National Education, Vocational Training and Scientific Research has made significant efforts in schools, where prevention education has been carried out on violence in general and on various related themes including but not limited to drug use, physical and sexual violence and HIV. The ministry has an Integrated Strategy for the Prevention and Fight against Violence against School Children. This was developed in 2007 with the objective of creating and implementing a coherent, comprehensive strategy for protecting school children, based essentially on coordination between three closely-related components: preventing violence; detection, care, and follow-up of schoolchildren who are victims of violence; and promoting children's rights.

The African Union has paid attention to these attacks and killings. In October 2021 the AU sponsored a Pan-African Colloquium on Awareness on Albinism in Kinshasa, DRC, under the initiative of President Félix-Antoine Tshisekedi Tshilombo of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, then also the AU Chairperson. The Colloquium culminated in the adoption of the Kinshasa Declaration, which, among other things, recommends that member states adopt policies for "...raising awareness among parents, students, traditional chiefs, teachers and opinion leaders."¹⁰⁵

8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 Conclusion

According to the study behind this report, hundreds of thousands of children in Africa are thought to be accused each year of what is widely considered across Africa to be a particularly heinous crime: witchcraft.

Accusations of witchcraft almost always inflict psychological and physical violence on children, and carry the risk of further harm including neglect, homelessness, physical disability and even – in the worst cases – death. While communities may fear the dangers of witchcraft and seek to secure themselves from attack, these accusations against children can result in undeserved loss of life or lifelong psychological and physical consequences.

This must change.

To protect children from the harm of witchcraft accusations, it is not necessary to deny that “witchcraft” exists. Rather, it is important to prioritize child protection, while preventing the abuse of children by addressing the belief that such abuse can in any way secure communities from perceived danger. Communities fearing harm from witchcraft must find ways to make themselves feel secure without inflicting abuse and violence on a child, regardless of how dangerous they may consider that child to be. Many communities are devising rituals of protection that serve to protect everyone in the community while purifying those believed to bear evil forces, all without harming children. These should be encouraged.

Since the source of a purported witchcraft attack is always open to doubt, people fearing danger and damage from malicious invisible forces should be encouraged to discuss and debate the best ways of making themselves safe. Research shows that security can be achieved without inflicting damage on a child with an accusation.¹⁰⁶ Children must be protected from accusations and any other involvement in discussions of blame. Communities must be encouraged to devise better ways of dealing with these problems, ways that uphold the best interests of the child.

Faith communities, and especially religious leaders, bear special responsibility for protecting children from witchcraft-related accusations and violence. It is not true that all religious leaders combatting witchcraft are in the cynical business of seeking financial reward; but there are instances in which children accused of witchcraft are subjected to cleansing rituals in places of worship that must be understood as harmful for the child, whatever the purported spiritual result. The confluence of widespread anxiety about witchcraft with a fertile market for solutions puts additional responsibility on faith leaders and communities to protect the most vulnerable children. Given that all religions recognize the sanctity of the life and dignity of the child, religious leaders have crucial roles in protecting children from any risk of violence, including that which is associated with witchcraft accusations, and in encouraging others to do so as well.

The research behind this report has found that, except for the work being done by a handful of NGOs, few organizations and states in Africa are home to systematic efforts to prevent this abuse. Few prohibit accusations. Services for children who have suffered the harm and violence related to accusations are few and far between. This area needs urgent attention.

Ritual attacks that inflict violence on innocent children for purposes such as gaining wealth and power, avoiding ancestral wrath or purifying the perpetrator from disease or pollution are less common than witchcraft accusations, but they result in appalling levels of crime and extreme violence. Whatever the motivating force for ritual attacks, responses in recent years from countries, international organizations like the UN, and international and local NGOs have resulted in more effective policymaking efforts to address the issue, culminating in the African Union's Action Plan. In the coming years, activists and organizations are set to maintain pressure on African states to uphold their obligations under global, regional, and national legal instruments to protect vulnerable populations, and particularly children with albinism. This activism and policy reform must continue and be supported.

The primary purpose of this report is to explore ways in which child protection systems can be strengthened by paying greater attention to witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks. The good news is that the basic frameworks of international standards and treaties and national laws are already in place. While every country struggles with a scarcity of human and financial resources, and often with extraordinary needs that require attention, progress has nonetheless been made in recognizing and institutionalizing children's rights. Structures and services for victims and children at risk of crimes and extreme violence are taking shape across Africa.

However: despite an important emphasis on vulnerable children, and despite widespread violence against them that takes several forms, witchcraft issues have generally been neglected in child protection systems.

There is opportunity in the fact that these issues often intersect. Addressing witchcraft accusations and attacks can serve to strengthen general child protection systems in Africa, and vice versa.

The call for child protection systems and professionals to address these neglected crimes is not a call to design new systems, or to create parallel programmes. It is a call to emphasize the importance of introducing a crucial additional element into existing child protection systems, thereby providing a more holistic framework for protecting and caring for all children. Recognition of this dimension of harm suffered by children should be considered a way to cement child protection elements into more effective systems.

The challenge facing all actors at local, national, and international level is to develop and resource better ways of protecting all children from all forms of violence and abuse, including violence and abuse associated with witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks.

8.2 Recommendations

With the African Union Plan of Action on Albinism addressing attacks on persons with albinism, recommendations for strengthening child protection from all ritual attacks should hinge on raising awareness and disseminating information about the Plan, and advocating for its extension to cover witchcraft-related ritual attacks and violence.

Since all forms of violence associated with witchcraft proceed from the initial act of accusation, preventing accusations should be the primary focus of protection interventions.

For this reason, authorities responsible for enacting and implementing child protection laws should emphasize the seriousness of the crime of accusation. Where such laws are not in

effect, there should be strong advocacy to implement them. Moreover, special advocacy efforts should be deployed to raise awareness about the harms that such laws aim to prevent and address; to make relevant legislation widely known and understood; and to enhance the capacity of all relevant professionals to enforce those laws and provide justice for victims.

In raising public awareness, campaigns to outlaw and prevent witchcraft accusations against children should proceed in a manner that prioritises child protection. Communities fearing witchcraft should be required and encouraged to seek other means of making themselves feel secure other than accusing children. These could involve religious and healing rituals to strengthen the spiritual security of the community without putting children at risk. The nature and character of such approaches to collective protection will vary across the continent depending on religious and cultural contexts. What should be insisted on, however, is that children must not be subjected to accusation, or to any consequent form of abuse.

There are two dimensions to child protection in relation to witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks, just as there are with all other forms of abuse: (1) preventing accusations and attacks in the first place; and (2) minimizing the harmful impact of accusations once they have occurred. In keeping with the age-old adage “an ounce of protection is worth a pound of cure,” preventing accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks against children should be the first priority.

How might this be done?

This report calls for a number of priority actions to be taken by the following key stakeholders.

African Union and its organs, including the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights and the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child:

1. **Develop** a Regional Framework/Action Plan on witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks against children
2. **Coordinate and intensify** awareness raising on the risks and grave consequences faced by children
3. **Provide technical support and guidance** to Member States as they design and implement laws and policies to prevent and address witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks
4. **Encourage** Member States to consolidate national data systems; to gather reliable, disaggregated data on witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks against children; and to include relevant data in State Party reporting
5. **Compile and share** information on witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks and their impact on the enjoyment of human rights, including by children.

Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in Africa:

1. **Prioritise** witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks among cross-border issues affecting children and requiring urgent action from Member States
2. **Coordinate** countries’ efforts to protect children on the move who face witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks
3. **Strengthen** monitoring of the movement of children into and out of Member States with a view to improving protection of those vulnerable to witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks.

National human rights institutions:

1. **Improve** public awareness of witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks as human rights violations, notably regarding the right to life and the protection of children from all forms of violence, including human trafficking
2. **Investigate and report** allegations of child rights abuses related to witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks against children in their respective countries, and assess the measures taken to protect the victims and to fight the impunity of the perpetrators.

National governments:

1. **Clarify and publicize** the ways in which existing international and domestic laws and policies designed to protect children can be used to prevent witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks, protect child victims and prosecute offenders
2. **Train the social workforce and child protection professionals** to recognize, prevent and address the violence and abuse caused by witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks, and to protect child victims
3. **Enable service providers in the health, education and security sectors** to report any risks or consequences of witchcraft accusations or ritual attacks among the children with whom they interact in the same way that they are, or should be, mandated to report other forms of violence against children
4. **Support** NGOs involved in child protection to address concerns related to witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks
5. **Undertake** national studies and collect reliable, disaggregated data on the scale and magnitude of witchcraft accusations, ritual attacks and violence against children, and include the relevant data in State Party reporting
6. **Collaborate** with religious and faith leaders, communities, community based organisations, traditional healers and others to promote positive change in public attitudes towards witchcraft and ritual attacks, conceive alternative methods of securing communities from the perceived danger of witchcraft practices, and safeguard and protect children in those communities.

Stakeholders – advocates, campaigners and implementers of programmes:

1. **Work to create public awareness** of the negative consequences of witchcraft accusations and the violence they inflict on children's wellbeing
2. **Collaborate with** communities and local authorities – including but not limited to parents, teachers, local government and law enforcement officers, healthcare providers, traditional and religious leaders and healers – in community-based prevention. Identify and support local champions who will advocate for children and uphold their best interests
3. **Explore** alternative modes of conflict resolution when witchcraft accusations underlie or intersect with other social conflicts – as is typically the case
4. **Develop, and support the provision of,** services to children, including good practices in providing safe shelters and psychosocial support when required
5. **Support efforts to prosecute** perpetrators of witchcraft accusations and obtain justice for victims.

Service providers and caregivers:

1. **Provide psychosocial support to victims and families**
2. **Provide education on human and child rights**, including the teaching that accusations of witchcraft amount to abuse and violence that should be reported to law enforcement, and for which victims can seek redress
3. **Educate** parents, guardians and caregivers about ways to safeguard child victims, including handling the physical or behavioural traits associated with witchcraft
4. **Provide** temporary places of safety for children at risk and/or victims, ensuring that these places are not perceived as “witch camps” and/or that the protective agency is not seen as a perpetrator of witchcraft.

International organizations and funding partners:

1. **Support the ongoing provision of services** by established agencies and/or their scale-up to reach more vulnerable children, rather than setting up new short-term projects
2. **Include** the requirement to address witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks in existing and future child protection programmes
3. **Support research and data collection** that examines child rights violations and abuses related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks against children in Africa.

APPENDIX: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF FALSE CONFESSIONS TO WITCHCRAFT ACCUSATIONS

Witchcraft accusations often result in confessions by the accused. Indeed, when a person is accused of witchcraft, there is typically no escape other than through confession in the hope of forgiveness, whatever the truth of the plea. Children are particularly susceptible to being forced to make false confessions. People working in child protection systems where witchcraft accusations are prevalent should therefore be aware of the psychological dynamics of false confession.

Until recently, confession to a crime was considered unassailable proof in most legal systems. However, social psychologists have begun to develop more sophisticated understandings of how and why people might confess to crimes they had not committed. The following insights are relevant for child protection systems in Africa.

In their pathfinding work on the psychology of false confession, Kassin and Wrightsman distinguish between three different types of confession, which they classify as “voluntary”, “coerced-compliant” and “coerced-internalized”.¹⁰⁷

Voluntary false confessions can arise from factors such as a desire to protect someone else, or a “pathological need for fame, acceptance, recognition, or self-punishment”.¹⁰⁸ In the context of a world in which witchcraft is a widely recognized danger, other factors might include the desire to arouse fear by asserting one’s power, or the desire to demonstrate one’s future blamelessness by confessing and renouncing appalling sins committed in the past – even if such confessions are untrue. Such confessions are a staple of Pentecostal “deliverance” testimonials in which a person demonstrates the power of being “born again” by renouncing the crimes of witchcraft.¹⁰⁹ These voluntary confessions are not necessarily insincere – but whether they are genuine or not is irrelevant. What matters is the persuasive performance of a plausible narrative of misdeeds and repentance in a social setting conducive to a ritualized breaking with the past.

“Coerced-compliant” confessions are made for instrumental reasons, usually after intense interrogation. While the extreme case of confession under torture is well recognized, many such confessions are made under less “enhanced” circumstances. Indeed, as the US-based Innocence Project has found, some 25% of convictions reviewed and overturned with DNA evidence were obtained based on a suspect’s confession.¹¹⁰ Innocent people confess not only to make the pain stop, but with the expectation that they will be able to prove their innocence later, or else that they will receive mitigated punishment.¹¹¹ In cases of witchcraft in contemporary Africa, compliant confessions are common. Being publicly denounced as a witch before an assembly of your community must feel coercive in the extreme. Persistent questioning by a parent or caregiver, perhaps provoked by the child’s night terrors or his or her recounting of a troubling dread, can prompt a child to “confess” voluntarily to engaging in witchcraft during the night regardless of the actual truth.

The third category, “coerced-internalized” confessions, refers to those made by suspects who genuinely, but wrongly, believe in their guilt, usually as a result of the confusion and anxiety aroused by the process of interrogation. As Kassin puts it: “This type of false confession is particularly frightening because the suspect’s memory of his or her actions may be altered, rendering the original contents potentially irretrievable”.¹¹² The phenomenon, Kassin argues, is closely related to that of “false memory,” or “recovered memory,” debates over which wracked the psychology and legal professions in the 1990s in relation to cases of child sex abuse, and particularly those of “ritual” abuse.¹¹³ One of the most famous instances of what Kassin calls a “coercion-internalized” confession was that of Paul Ingram, who confessed multiple counts of child abuse, including one concocted by the sociologist Paul Ofshe to demonstrate Ingram’s actual innocence despite his being convinced he committed crimes.¹¹⁴ Evidence of the internalizing of false confessions has been widely documented in recent years, both in experimental studies and criminal cases, particularly in the light of DNA evidence.¹¹⁵

In cases of African witchcraft, the potential for internalized confession is heightened by the fact that persons accused of witchcraft must countenance the possibility that they may have been witches without being aware of the fact. This possibility is inherent in the phenomenon of witchcraft itself and is widely reported in ethnographic literature. For example, given that witchcraft can involve putative action in a separate dimension of existence (which may be experienced much like the world of dreams), it is conceivable that witches have no awareness or memory of their actions in this other domain once they return to the quotidian realms of the waking world. Or, in cases where the activity is considered a product of demonic power – as many Africans now conceive of the power of witches – a person may be the instrument of Satan without being aware of the fact.

ENDNOTES

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- ⁵ Reimer-Kirkham, Astle, Ero, Panchuk, & Dixon. (2019). Albinism, spiritual and cultural practices, and implications for health, healthcare, and human rights: a scoping review. *Disability & Society*, 34 (5), 747-774.
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