



**WHRIN**  
THE WITCHCRAFT & HUMAN RIGHTS  
INFORMATION NETWORK

Awareness.  
Understanding.  
Solutions.

## Public Health and 'Witchcraft' Beliefs: An Overview

Presentation by Gary Foxcroft, Executive Director, Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network (WHRIN)

## Organisational Background

**WHRIN** is a small NGO working to promote awareness and understanding of human rights violations that are committed around the world due to the beliefs in witchcraft, spirit possession, magic and human sacrifice.

The WHRIN network is made up of over 1,000 activists, academics, practitioners, policy makers and survivors of abuse.

Our vision is of a world where all people can live freely without fear of their rights being abused due to these harmful beliefs and practices.

# Working to Develop Solutions to Human Rights Abuses Linked to Beliefs in Witchcraft

- Since 2012 WHRIN has been working to raise awareness and understanding of these issues. Our work is increasingly focused on developing solutions to prevent further abuses.



- 2018 Report of the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of human rights by persons with albinism on the expert workshop on witchcraft and human rights stated that:

***“Witchcraft is a deeply rooted reality, engrained in societies that serve as a system of explanation as well as of exploitation of misfortune. It is fuelled by misbeliefs in supernatural powers and misconceptions of public health issues”.***

# Working to Develop Solutions to Human Rights Abuses Linked to Beliefs in Witchcraft

Recommendations from the report highlighted the need to:

- Improve primary health care and health education about disease to reduce the belief in witchcraft as a cause of illness;
- Carry out multi-stakeholder campaigns to dismantle myths that promote witchcraft-related harm;
- Address the beliefs and motivation behind witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks;
- Carry out education and awareness campaigns, including health awareness.

# The Link Between Public Health and ‘Witchcraft’ Beliefs

- Most cases WHRIN have documented are linked to a prevailing public health condition
- They are also located in places where access to health services remains very low
- The trigger for abuses is often a community member becoming ill or dying. The wider family and community members then often blame a vulnerable member of the community for this misfortune and accuse them of being a witch and therefore causing the illness or death.
- People who are suffering from public health conditions themselves are also particularly vulnerable to witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks.

## What do We Mean by ‘Witchcraft’ Beliefs?

- **What is witchcraft?** There is no universally accepted definition of witchcraft and the term means different things to different people in different places. Primarily witchcraft can be seen as a negative, malevolent force which is used by people – witches – in the spirit realm to bring about harm in the physical realm. It is the art of doing evil.
- The central questions that beliefs in witchcraft provide an answers for are “Why me?”, “Why now?” and “Who is to blame?” Such questions are likely to arise no matter how the disease is interpreted. Put simply, all illnesses are believed to have a spiritual dimension.

## What do We Mean by ‘Witchcraft’ Beliefs?

- **Spirit possession** is the supposed control of a human body by spirits, demons or gods . The concept of spirit possession exists in most religions.
- **Perceived Magical Powers of Certain Body Parts** – Most especially related to the killings of persons with albinism due to belief their body parts hold magical powers.
- **Family Curses** – These are believed to be reoccurring problems that steal, kill, and destroy, such as sickness.
- **Evil eye** - The evil eye is a curse believed to be cast by a malevolent glare, usually given to a person when he/she is unaware. Many cultures believe that receiving the evil eye will cause misfortune or injury.

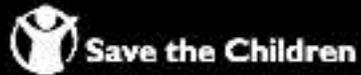
## Conditions most often associated with 'witchcraft'

- Unexplained death and illnesses
- HIV/AIDS
- Ritual Killing: Body Parts for Cures
- Ritual Rape for Good Health
- Malaria
- Measles
- Child Developmental Concerns
- Mental Illness
- Albinism
- Epilepsy
- Dementia
- Sickle Cell Anaemia
- Bloodshot Eyes
- Elephantiasis
- Arthritis
- Cancers
- Infertility
- Blindness

## Conditions most often associated with ‘witchcraft’

Table 1- Signs of witchcraft in a child, according to pastors and families

| Physical signs  | Character   | Behaviour  | Invisible signs   |
|---|---|--|---|
| Strange appearance, ill-health, thinness, too small for their age, pot-bellied stomach or a mal-nourished look, scabies on their head, dirtiness, red lips or eyes, deafness, ugliness, young body but old face, epilepsy | Aggressive, untidy, disobedient, sad, mentally retarded, impolite, full of hatred, mysterious, disrespectful, quick-tempered, unruly, liar, hypocrite, too nice, too wise, provocative, too open, courageous, jealous, too fearful, stubborn, incomprehensible, solitary, too clever, weak, naughty, violent, fearless, quiet, rude, mad, curious, incredulous, selfish, insensitive, lazy, inattentive, ruthless, wants to be superior, doesn't like visitors, creative and full of initiative, ungrateful | Steal, never look people in the eyes, transform themselves or their toys, do not sleep at night or sleep badly, eat a lot, practise sexual abandon, do not hear or do not listen to what is being said to them, have epileptic fits, wet the bed, defecate in their clothes, talk to themselves, sleepwalk, collect rubbish, wander, don't study, go out even when they are ill. | They eat human flesh, they cast spells over their family, they have spiritual sex and this causes sterility, they are dangerous murderers and assassins at night, they go out at night to bewitch people, they have the power to go out even if they are shut in, they are behind natural disasters such as the destruction of roads and unemployment, they paralyse social life, cause road traffic accidents, epidemics |



### The Invention of Child Witches

in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Social cleansing, religious commerce and the difficulties of being a parent in an urban culture

## Linking Pathogen Prevalence and ‘Witchcraft’



- Recent study, which was published online Oct. 30 in the Royal Society journal highlighted that, in places where infectious diseases were historically widespread, "people were more likely to believe in the devil, the malevolent power of the evil eye and in witches who channel evil".

# Vulnerable Groups - Children



# Vulnerable Groups - Elderly



## Vulnerable Groups - Women



## Vulnerable Groups - Disabled



## Vulnerable Groups – Non normative Bodies



**Mozambique: Wave of Murders Based on Africans' Belief That the Heads of Bald Men Contain Gold**

# Human Rights Violations Linked to Public Health and 'Witchcraft' Beliefs

- Killings
- Mutilation
- Exploitation and sale of persons, organs and body parts
- Ritual rape
- Burnings
- Banishment and displacement
- Grave desecration
- Robberies, both of property and human remains
- Torture, cruel, inhuman and / or degrading treatment
- Stigmatisation of victims and their family members



## Witchcraft and Public Health Epidemics - Ebola

NGO worker, Sierra Leone - “The impact of beliefs on witchcraft on both the medical and community education is immense. We work in communities highly affected who just fail to respond to key messages on staying safe and attribute family members dying to witchcraft, children surviving to them be witches you name it. I was in a village where a corpse was dug out of the grave , because a few of the elders felt they were haunted by the dead man' spirit for not giving him a full traditional burial. The whole community then took part in the washing of the corpse... the result is they are dying like flies, getting very sick and still attribute this to the curse of the dead man. I have never seen burial teams and ambulances so active, all because of the belief in witchcraft.”.



- There also exists the belief that the health professionals are witches who aim to use parts of their victims' corpses in powerful sorcery.
- In some areas the hostility against medical teams has resulted, not merely in riots, but in their being chased away by a weapon-wielding mob.
- In 2019 in DRC two facilities of Medicins Sans Frontieres was burned down due to local beliefs in witchcraft.

## Witchcraft and Public Health Epidemics – HIV/AIDS

- Widely documented that belief in magic and witchcraft contributes to misconceptions and the spread of HIV in Africa.
- Symptoms of AIDS - diarrhea, tuberculosis, and wasting are the classic symptoms of poisoning through witchcraft.
- Many believe that HIV may have spiritual causes, notably witchcraft attacks or loss of protection from ancestors through violating cultural taboos.
- Widows in some parts of Africa are expected to engage in unprotected sex in order to "cleanse" them. The belief is that the husband's spirit will return otherwise, cursing the family.
- As Adam Ashforth observes, 'a disease or complex of symptoms better suited to interpretation within the witchcraft paradigm than AIDS would be hard to imagine.'



## Witchcraft and Public Health Pandemics – Covid-19

- Throughout history and all around the world, beliefs in witchcraft intensify during times of general social anxiety
- Covid-19 is expected to lead to a significant rise in cases of harmful practices linked to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks
- This will likely be the result of the mystification of the virus; lack of medical understanding of the virus and symptoms; and through the actions of community leaders professing alternative cures
- In Africa the social and economic impact of the lockdown itself is likely to have a far greater impact than the virus itself

**India:** Hindu priest beheads man in human sacrifice at Indian temple in a bid to end coronavirus

**Haiti:** Girl dies after witch doctor gives her turtle blood to drink as 'coronavirus cure'

**Kenya:** Miji Kenda elders, conducted traditional rituals in the community's sacred forest, cursing the "COVID-19 evil spirit."

**Kenya: DARK FORCES** - Matuga residents say witchcraft killing business - They say sorcerers have intensified their work in the area and ruined the local economy.

**Africa:** People with albinism are being blamed for the spread of the coronavirus in Africa because of their 'whiteness'

**Tanzania** - President John Magufuli has been singled out as an outlier in the fight against COVID-19. He was quoted saying God, not masks, is the answer to fighting the pandemic.

## The Role of Witchdoctors and Traditional Healers

- Lack of access to public health facilities and spiritual beliefs drive those in need to witchdoctors and traditional healers
- Many witchdoctors and traditional healers claim to be able to cure various illnesses
- In Sierra Leone for example there are two psychiatrists and around 45,000 witchdoctors
- They are both a key part of the problem and the solution





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## The Role of Witchdoctors and Traditional Healers



Traditional healer David Conteh mixes pastes and tinctures out of powders, roots and leaves to drive away evil spirits, he says



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## The Role of Faith Leaders

- Those with sickness are often taken to faith leaders to cure the illness, which is seen as having a spiritual source
- Exorcism is a key tool used by faith leaders to drive out the devil or evil spirits
- This is often commercialised, with those affected paying large fees for 'treatment'
- Faith leaders are a significant part of the solution to combating these practices

**LIBERTY GOSPEL CHURCH** Invites all to **SPECIAL FREEDOM OFFER**

**DELIVERANCE FROM DIFFICULT WITCHCRAFT ATTACKS**

**DATE: 4th - 8th OCTOBER WED - SUN 2017**

*Are you suffering from:*

- \* Witchcraft attacks
- \* Obstacles and difficulties
- \* Failures or frustrations
- \* Joblessness with disappointments
- \* Confused life and unproductivity
- \* Untimely death, miscarriages and barrenness

**Then attend this special warfare programme.**

**VENUE:** Liberty Gospel Church, 32A Adeniji Akande Avenue, Off Osiele Way, Isolo Area, Lagos.

**TIME:** Morning: 7am - 11am, Evening: 6pm - 10pm

☎ 07030563706  
✉ helenukpai@yahoo.com  
👤 Pastor Mfonido Ukpabio  
👤 PastorUkpabio

**Lady Apostle Helen Ukpabio**  
Founding President  
Speaker

**PASTOR MFONIDO UKPABIO**  
HOST

## Previous Interventions



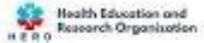
### MYTH

Epilepsy is caused by witchcraft

### FACT

Epilepsy is caused by a number of environmental & genetic factors. However, an underlying cause is sometimes not found.

#EpilepsyMyth



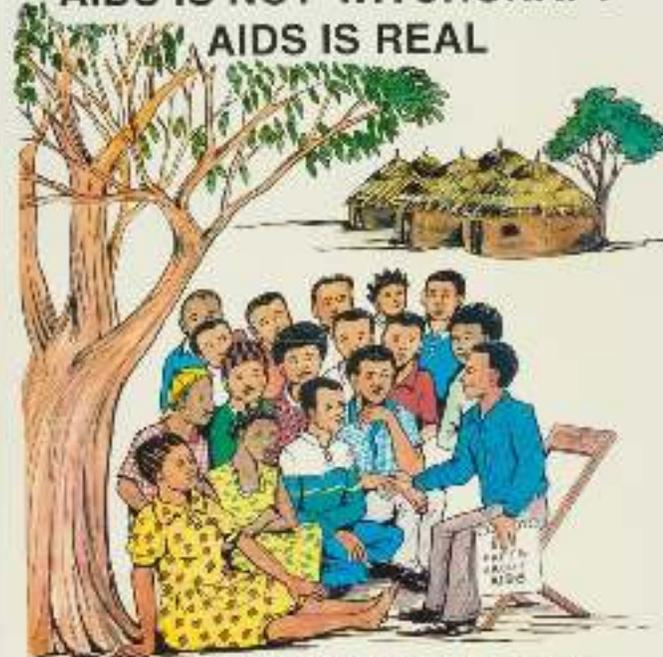
### FACTS ABOUT EPILEPSY



- Epilepsy is a disease like any other disease.
- Epilepsy is not caused by witchcraft or evil spirits.
- You cannot catch epilepsy through the saliva of the patient.
- Epilepsy can be treated and controlled with modern drugs.
- Help the patient having epileptic fit: remove him from harmful objects.
- Remember, epilepsy can be treated; see a medical doctor today!

Illustration by the National Institute of Health, The United States Department of Health and Human Services

### DON'T BE FOOLED AIDS IS NOT WITCHCRAFT AIDS IS REAL



### AVOID SEX BEFORE MARRIAGE STICK TO ONE PARTNER OR USE A CONDOM

WHRIN/HERO/UNA/WHO/UNAIDS



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## Previous Interventions

**Albinism in Malawi**  
Promoting inclusion for children with albinism

All children are a gift from God...my baby just has albinism

**ACCEPT ALBINISM**

**TAAM: The Albino Association of Malawi**  
Promoting the Advancement of Persons with Albinism in Malawi  
Machochiwe House, 11, Gwelo, Malawi  
Dr Patricia Lund in the UK you can also email: [p.lund@coventry.ac.uk](mailto:p.lund@coventry.ac.uk)  
Patricia Lund in Malawi: [patricia.lund@taam.org.mw](mailto:patricia.lund@taam.org.mw)  
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Coventry University

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### Albinism in Africa

**Information for children and young people**

In this booklet Dr Patricia Lund of Coventry University ([p.lund@coventry.ac.uk](mailto:p.lund@coventry.ac.uk)) shares her experiences of working with people in Zimbabwe, South Africa, Malawi, Zambia and Ghana by answering questions she has been asked over the past 20 years.

Thanks are due to the many people who have contributed, including families with albinism, teachers, health care professionals, education officials, development workers and academic colleagues.

Development of this booklet was supported by Coventry University (UK), The Commonwealth Secretariat and Sightsavers.

Special thanks to the families living with albinism and members of the albinism associations in both Zambia and Malawi, for their support and ideas.

Illustrations: [www.teresa-robertson.co.uk](http://www.teresa-robertson.co.uk)

## Previous Interventions



For three years, Standing Voice has supported a talented collective of advocates and performers from across Tanzania in their mission to demystify albinism through interactive theatre. In a captivating display of creativity and courage, the Hadithi Storytelling and Performance Group harnesses the power of song, dance and participatory drama to dispel popular myths and spark community dialogue around albinism.





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## The Way Forward

- Demystification of public health conditions is clearly a significant part of the solution to prevent further human rights abuses linked to beliefs in 'witchcraft'
- A response will need to:
  - ✓ Acknowledge the reality of the beliefs
  - ✓ Include voices and perspectives from communities, public health workers, faith leaders, witchdoctors and traditional healers
  - ✓ Be adaptable to different cultures and beliefs
  - ✓ Be simple, cost effective and scalable



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# Thank You!

[www.whrin.org/witch-way-forward](http://www.whrin.org/witch-way-forward)

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