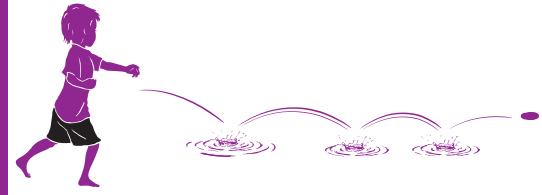




Discussion Paper



Winter 2008

Vulnerability and Control of African Child Victims of Trafficking UK Experience

There are various factors that make children vulnerable to being trafficked. These include, amongst other things, poverty, gender inequality, conflict, lack of education and social exclusion. This paper highlights the experience of the vulnerability and control of African children being trafficked to the UK. In particular, it looks at children being trafficked once they have been labelled a 'child witch'. This paper also looks at specific control mechanisms used by traffickers to maintain children's dependence and prevent their escape.

To tackle this form of child exploitation it is vital to involve local communities in challenging harmful practices. Although this is a highly specialised area of violence all professionals working with children should know how to identify and respond to it. Child welfare agencies should be addressing this by developing multi-agency guidance and procedures.

'Child Witches', Abandonment and Child Trafficking

Extent and forms

The belief that children can be 'possessed by evil spirits' or are 'child witches' is widespread across many faiths, communities and countries. However, the limited information available shows that while children are being labelled in this way across various regions, it is mainly children in certain African countries who are abandoned by their families and communities because of such labelling. This has been observed in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Nigeria, and also recognised in other African countries.

African children abandoned on the streets in their countries of origin because of accusations of 'witchcraft' are vulnerable to traffickers. Some of these children, particularly girls, are trafficked into the UK for sexual exploitation or domestic servitude.

In the UK there have also been cases of children of African background who have been accused of being 'witches' and taken out of the UK to undergo 'exorcisms' or other 'treatments' abroad. They are either abandoned whilst overseas or have 'exorcisms' performed on them by religious leaders on



payment of a fee. Since a payment is involved, often including a video of the 'exorcism', it can be argued that the child is being exploited and their removal from the UK is a case of child trafficking.

Causes and context

Studies suggest children can be labelled as 'witches' because of a change in family dynamics, poverty or due to some family or other misfortune. In Africa, the death of a parent and the arrival of a step-parent, birth of another child or a new child coming into an existing family are factors that could lead to accusations of 'witchcraft' against children. Extreme poverty and the inability to support all their children may also lead some parents to abandon them through accusations of 'witchcraft'. These accusations are lent additional justification in the eyes of families and whole communities in circumstances of family misfortune which is blamed on the 'child witch'.

A host of other reasons can also lead to the labelling, especially of a child whose behaviour does not fit with what is considered the norm. Disabled children may also be considered 'cursed' as can their mothers. A UK study showed that of 47 children that had been stigmatised as 'child witches', one third had some sort of disability, mental health issues or life limiting illnesses.

Ritual Oaths to Control Children Who Are Trafficked

Extent and forms

Anecdotal reports in the UK suggest a rising number of child victims of trafficking are controlled by their exploiters using ritual oaths, wrongly referred to as 'voodoo'. The first instance of this practice was identified in 1995 by a children's social care authority, near Gatwick international airport, when a number of unaccompanied minors claiming asylum went missing from care soon after their arrival.

Two common methods used to traffic children and young girls to the UK have been observed. A susceptible young girl

is befriended by a trafficker who becomes her 'boyfriend', promising her a good future abroad. They undergo a commitment ceremony or ritual to bind them together and provide them with 'supernatural protection'. At this ceremony the girl pledges to pay back any money spent by her 'boyfriend' in helping her go overseas. Once in the UK the girl ends up being sexually exploited and is expected to pay back mounting debts that her traffickers claim she has incurred. These are often too large to pay back.

The other method involves traffickers convincing young girls of better work opportunities available overseas. In this case when they attend a ritual oath ceremony the traffickers make the victims believe they are indebted to them and that if they disobey them the consequences would be life threatening for them or their families. The girls are instructed to destroy their passports and apply for asylum once they arrive into the UK. If identified as a vulnerable child, they are taken into local authority social care, but are known to make contact with their traffickers soon after and then go missing without trace – either being trafficked internally in the UK or out of the UK to Europe.

Causes and context

Traffickers use a variety of methods to control their victims, ranging from grooming and befriending children, through to deception about the nature or conditions of work in the country of destination to outright coercion and violence.

In Nigeria, traffickers frequently use ritual oaths to make children compliant, preventing them from running away or approaching the authorities. These ritual oaths are an essential part of African indigenous or traditional religions, but in recent years traffickers have started using them as a control mechanism over young girls they are exploiting.

The ritual oaths can have a significant influence over children, particularly since many of the children come from backgrounds where traditional religions and ritual oaths continue to be practiced. Of vital importance is for professionals to be alert to the signs of a child in such circumstances and that they speak to the child directly. Failure to do so leaves these children exposed to the danger of escalating violence and serious harm.

For further information or to contribute details of your experience or country context, contact:

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