



A CALL TO ACTION

RESPONDING TO BELIEFS THAT HARM CHILDREN

a report prepared by the **Stop Child Witch Accusations** coalition

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Jesus took a little child and had him stand beside him. Then he said to them, “Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

Luke 9:47–48

Stop Child Witch Accusations (SCWA) is an alliance of individuals and agencies responding to the reality of children experiencing serious harm or the threat of harm due to accusations of witchcraft.

Coalition members

The Bethany Children’s Trust enables and equips churches and communities in Africa and beyond to respond to the needs of marginalised children, to address beliefs, practices and circumstances that cause children harm, and to create environments where they can flourish.

Safe Child Africa is a UK-based charity which exists so that all children in Africa can live a happy and safe life, without fear of violence, abuse or neglect.

Mission Enfant pour Christ International equip and enable Christians in Togo to reach out to children, particularly those most vulnerable, and to serve them in Jesus’ name through ministry for children in prison, affected by disability, or through football ministry.

Global Youth Development exists to empower youth and children’s leaders in many locations around the world to see children transformed through the love of Jesus Christ.

Feba Radio, a Christian mission agency, works with partners and communities across Africa, Asia and the Middle East to transform lives using life-giving media to inform educate and inspire, bringing hope and change to communities in need.

CCPAS is the only independent Christian charity in the UK providing professional advice, support, training and resources in all areas of safeguarding children, vulnerable adults and for those affected by abuse.

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CONTENTS

	page
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
<hr/>	
A CALL TO ACTION	7
Our Purpose	7
the Problem	7
One Story	8
Scope of the Problem	9
Source of the Problem	9
Current Responses	11
CHILDREN IN GOD'S SIGHT	
– theological perspectives	12
Children throughout Scripture	12
Scripture and Culture	13
CHILDREN IN THE EYES OF THE LAW	
– legal perspectives	15
the Convention on the Rights of the Child	15
National Legislation	17
Christian Citizens	19
THROUGH THE EYES OF A CHILD	
– developmental perspectives	20
the Story continues...	20
RESPONSES	22
Next Steps	22
Our Part, Your Part	23
<hr/>	
ENDNOTES	25
FURTHER RESOURCES	26
BIBLIOGRAPHY	27

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Children in their thousands are suffering significant abuse and stigmatisation, or even being killed, due to accusations of witchcraft against them, and the belief that they can be 'possessed' by malevolent spirits that cause misfortune, sickness and death. Many children experience being starved, beaten, poisoned, burned and abandoned or incarcerated as a result. There are tens of thousands of cases, in many nations worldwide. While countless churches are being shining lights in their communities by caring for orphans and vulnerable children, standing up for children's rights and addressing the issues that lead to their harm, there are still other churches and church leaders that are complicit in this abuse, and even encouraging and promoting it.

Instances of witchcraft accusations against children are on the increase, particularly in societies where there is a strong belief in witchcraft and in a hidden world that seamlessly interconnects with the visible world. This increase is partly due to multiple crises faced in some societies, with all the stresses and pressures on families and communities that result. Entrenched poverty and poor governance combined with cultural, political and economic disruption plus the instability of war or natural catastrophes may all provide a context. People may then look for scapegoats in the community for the impacts on their personal or family circumstances, especially when they are frustrated and disempowered in legitimate attempts to express their grievances.

In the eyes of the accuser, a child may be singled out due to being distinctive in some way, or simply an easy target. Sadly there are some authority figures either inside or outside the church who are keen to profit from family crises and to fuel fears that a child may be a so-called 'witch', regardless of the harm that it causes. This is particularly a problem in regions where there is a proliferation of churches with leaders that have little or no theological or biblical training, and no accountability.

As for a response, there appears to be little concerted and coordinated action to challenge this widespread abuse, which continues unchecked. Christians should be urgently concerned about children being accused of witchcraft, and work to take action on their behalf. Any attempts to justify actual harm or the threat of harm to children are contrary to Christian faith, contrary to the law, and contrary to children's developmental needs.

Firstly, from a theological perspective, many verses in scripture make clear to us that God cherishes and nurtures all children and requires us to reflect that care in our attitude and actions towards children. Children are valued throughout Scripture. In the Old Testament they are a blessing to be cherished, and the vulnerable are a priority in God's eyes, who condemns the practices of nations which abused and killed their own children. In the New Testament family life is spoken of as a place where children are nurtured and encouraged with kindness, and provision is made for their needs. Most particularly, in Jesus ministry we see someone who always treats children with the utmost dignity and respect, seeking every aspect of their wellbeing (physically, emotionally, and socially). Even on occasions where a child is said to be demon possessed, Jesus lovingly restores the child (to health and to their family) without stigmatising the child in any way or causing them any harm.

Scripture also makes clear to us that demonic powers are disarmed by Christ, and do not have the excessive supernatural powers often attributed to them. Though still at work in a

limited sense in the world, they need not be a source of terror for us. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we can overcome these influences without drama, but with care for all affected. In every culture we are called under the new covenant of Christ to live a life that reflects his character and attitude. We may celebrate the good in our cultures, but must live distinctively wherever there are cultural practices that contravene God's values and purposes for human life. Most especially, our churches must reflect God's kingdom in being safe places for children.

Secondly, from a legal perspective, the law demands that we treat children well. Almost universally ratified, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child lays down the underlying principles of protecting children, providing for their needs, and promoting their wellbeing. Individuals and institutions that cause children harm (physically or psychologically) are liable to prosecution if found culpable for breaking the law.

The first principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child are that we should seek the best interests of the child, offering the highest standard of care. This includes the basic right to life, to not be subject to discrimination, and to have a voice in matters that concern their welfare. Case studies attest that these rights are clearly and consistently violated when children become the subject of accusations of witchcraft, to which the child is frequently permitted no defence.

Prejudicial and punitive actions against the child further violate their right to protection against torture, cruelty, and arbitrary imprisonment. This is seen in actions such as burning, cutting, poisoning, drugging, drowning, enforced fasting, locking away a child, which all violate laws prohibiting torture, unlawful imprisonment, and other such abuses, as well as causing immense psychological damage.

In Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo (two relevant examples) national legislation has been enacted to protect children's rights. However, in both cases there is variable implementation of these laws, and hence there are many recorded instances of children's rights not being accorded due attention under the law.

Thirdly, from a developmental perspective of the child, the damage caused to children who are the victims of stigmatisation and abuse through witchcraft accusations is both immediate and enduring. Childhood is interrupted as they lose out on access to education, opportunities for socialisation, play and recreation. This abuse may cause severe physical disabilities and disfigurement, emotional traumas inhibit their normal healthy childhood experiences, and the stigma robs them of their sense of self esteem. All these will continue to affect children through adolescence and into adult life.

It is important not to underestimate the serious negative implications of a single witchcraft accusation for every aspect of the child's development for months and potentially years afterwards.

Stop Child Witch Accusations is an alliance of individuals and agencies responding to the reality of children experiencing serious harm or threat of harm due to accusations of witchcraft. Our vision is to play our part in ending witchcraft accusations against children and the resulting harm, by influencing and equipping leaders to engage with harmful beliefs and practices. We are catalysing action to equip churches with essential skills, methods and approaches effective in bringing a positive change, so that all children can be valued and kept safe within their churches and communities.

We are now calling upon leaders of churches and child-care organisations, governmental and non-governmental leaders, theologians, researchers and bible societies, media agencies and publishing houses, funding agencies and champions of children at every level in society to speak out and act against this endemic abuse of children.

We call for intentional collaboration, sharing of skills, knowledge, influence and resources in order to mitigate this abuse and to work to bring it to an end. We call for the Church to lead the way in building a climate of care and understanding where every child can be kept safe, nurtured and attain their full potential. We call for the promotion of a positive culture within society that seeks the protection, wellbeing and healthy development of children, acting in their best interests, and celebrating their contribution and presence.

We are working together with key church leaders and Christian child-care agencies in locations where this problem is significant, such as the D.R.Congo, Nigeria, Togo, and elsewhere. We network with others who are seeking to respond to this concern.

Thank you for taking the time to reflect upon this urgent matter.

Please consider how you can respond. As Christian leaders we have a God-given mandate to protect these children, and to create societies where they can flourish both now and in the future. Let us not be found wanting.



A CALL TO ACTION

Belinda's story*¹

When her aunt died, 12 year old Belinda's mother accused Belinda of killing her aunt through witchcraft. She was taken to a church in Kinshasa, where the pastor confirmed that Belinda was indeed a 'witch' and guilty of cursing her aunt. Her mother took her home, where her uncle held her down and ran a burning iron over her back and legs while her mother looked on. When the uncle went to fetch acid to pour on the burns, Belinda fled. She spent the next two years living on the streets, before being rescued by a Christian child-care agency.²

* name changed to protect identity

OUR PURPOSE

Stop Child Witch Accusations (SCWA)³ is an alliance of agencies and individuals responding to the reality of children like Belinda who are experiencing serious harm or threat of harm due to accusations of witchcraft.⁴ It is the prevailing beliefs and associated practices of those who make these accusations, or who profit from them, that lead to the exploitation, abuse and even death of these children.

Our vision is to play our part in ending harm to children resulting from witchcraft accusations. We seek to work by influencing and equipping churches to explore and apprehend the roots, implications and consequences of beliefs, attitudes and practices that harm children. As leaders guide their church congregations and communities through a process of learning, this may lead to shifts in understanding and behaviour so that all children can be valued, kept safe, nurtured and have freedom to achieve their full potential.

We are linking with other agencies and individuals who share this common vision, to catalyse action for equipping church leaders with an essential grounding in theology, the law, and child development, and with methods and approaches effective for bringing about a positive transformational change.

THE PROBLEM

Children like Belinda are being abused, starved, beaten, poisoned, burned, abandoned or incarcerated – not just in their ones and twos, but in their tens of thousands, in many nations worldwide. While countless churches are being shining lights that are leading the way in their communities in caring for orphans and vulnerable children, standing up for children's rights and addressing the issues that lead to their harm, there are still other churches that are abusing children in this way. Some family and community members and church leaders are complicit in this abuse, and even encouraging and promoting it.

What is driving this abuse? It is accusations of witchcraft against children, and the belief that, through various means, children can inherit the power to supernaturally cause harm to others, either deliberately and maliciously, or sometimes unknowingly through a second persona, often at night. Perpetrators of this abuse explain and excuse their actions in terms of ‘purging evil’ from the family and community, based on their own fears and beliefs, and on the fears and beliefs of others. But such interpretations can not justify these actions.

ONE STORY

Fay and Martin’s story*

It seems unbelievable that an aunt and uncle could have doused their 10 and 11 year old niece and nephew with petrol while they slept in their beds and then set fire to them, but that is exactly what happened to Fay and Martin one terrible night back in April 2012. Their mum was dying, and the aunt and uncle believed that Fay and Martin must be so-called ‘witches’ who had put a curse on their mother.

They took the children to a revivalist church, where a prophetess (an authority figure within the church) confirmed that the children were indeed witches, and that they had cursed their mother and caused her sickness. After demanding payment and then praying over them, she claimed that the children’s powers had been weakened, and that they should be brought back regularly for prayers.

Once home, Fay and Martin’s aunt and uncle menaced them with a machete, while threatening to ‘chop them into small pieces’. They then purchased the petrol and matches which they used to set the children on fire ‘like dry tinder’ (as the grandfather later described it). As their beds blazed, the children ran outside like human torches into the yard of their home in Kinshasa, and flung themselves into a water barrel. There they stayed all night, while their relatives brandished knives at them and continued to threaten to ‘finish them off’.

Someone called the police. The aunt ran away, but thanks to the energetic advocacy of EPED,⁵ a Christian agency caring and campaigning for children accused of witchcraft, the uncle was imprisoned.

* names changed to protect identities

Tragically, these are just two of tens of thousands of children in the Democratic Republic of Congo (the DRC) alone who are suffering horrific abuse related to witchcraft accusations. In the world today, countless children perceived to be possessed by evil spirits are being subjected to serious abuse through harmful ‘deliverance’ rites. Many are abandoned on the streets. Some are even killed.

If just one child suffered in this way, it would be a crime against that child and demand a swift and rigorous response. However, multiple thousands of children are suffering from this intentional abuse. Collectively, it is on the scale of a crime against humanity.

SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

Not merely a localised problem, this phenomenon is not limited to one nation or even to one continent,⁶ though there are nations in which the incidence of witchcraft accusations against children are more prevalent, and have almost become a societal 'norm'.

In his August 2009 report to the Human Rights Council, Philip Alston the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions stated:

Shockingly, it is children that are increasingly targeted. A report for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees published in January 2009, "Witchcraft Allegations, Refugee Protection and Human Rights", says the abuse of children accused of witchcraft is common in countries that have suffered years of conflict where traditional social structures have disappeared and where child soldiers have often emerged as a threat. And in countries where sudden deaths from diseases like AIDS are common, where there are few if any prospects of a better life, and where revivalist churches confirm signs of witchcraft, children are often accused of supernatural powers and persecuted.

In his report, Alston offers an insight into the size of the problem and its geographical spread:

Reports from the DRC suggest that most of the 25,000 to 50,000 children living on the streets of the capital, Kinshasa are there because they have been accused of witchcraft and rejected by their families. In 2009, the Committee on the Rights of the Child noted that in the DRC "violence against children accused of witchcraft is increasing, and that children are being kept as prisoners in religious buildings where they are exposed to torture and ill-treatment or even killed under the pretext of exorcism."⁷

Statistics

Accurate statistics for the number of children affected by accusations of witchcraft are difficult to find, due to a lack of good research. It is also a challenge to find accurate counts of the number of children living on the streets in any particular city or locality. In 2006, Human Rights Watch published a report that an estimated 30,000 children lived on the streets⁸ of Kinshasa, of whom about 70% had been accused of 'sorcery' at home before coming to live on the streets. Further research carried out for UNICEF in 2010 show that the situation had not improved.⁹

SOURCE OF THE PROBLEM

From where do these accusations arise? From a purely functional perspective of the role of witchcraft within contemporary African societies:

Witchcraft accusations continue in part because individuals in poor communities seek supernatural explanations for the seemingly inexplicable deaths and misfortunes that plague their societies. The effects of poverty destabilise communities making them more susceptible to the entrenched reality of witchcraft accusations. In addition, people with legitimate frustrations about the lack of economic development in their communities, and without political outlets to express these grievances, may scapegoat marginalised members of their communities through witchcraft accusations.¹⁰

Underlying Factors

Looking at historical contexts (such as Europe at the end of the Middle Ages), a higher incidence of witchcraft accusations may be associated with periods of cultural, political, and economic disruption in society, or instability increased through war, or through ecological changes resulting in natural catastrophes, such as earthquakes, floods and droughts. This is particularly the case in societies where there is a strong, pre-existing belief in witchcraft and in a hidden world that seamlessly interconnects with the visible world.¹¹ Consistently poor and corrupt governance over decades appears to be another feature of societies where witchcraft accusations against children are flourishing today.

An accumulation of these conditions creates a crisis situation in society, with increased stresses on communities and families. Once this has a tangible impact on personal circumstances, then there may arise an attempt to seek a scapegoat to explain the crisis.

Tangible impacts may include any of the following...

- illness or death in the family, or an unexplained accident;
- loss of employment, or other reduction of income;
- crop failure, or death of livestock;
- marital breakdown;

...to name some examples.

It is not necessarily children who are the target of such accusations. However, in sub-Saharan Africa the targeting of children has emerged as a relatively recent phenomenon over the last 15 years, and appears to be on the increase.

In the eyes of the accuser, a child may be singled out by attributes that mark the child as distinctive in some way, such as...

- children with medical or health conditions, such as autism, Aspergers syndrome, albinism, Downs syndrome, epilepsy, dyslexia or dyspraxia, or other learning difficulties;
- children who are exceptionally bright, perceptive or intelligent;
- children who exhibit challenging behaviour;
- symptoms of trauma, such as bedwetting, mood swings;
- normal childhood or adolescent phases;

...to name some examples.

Sadly, there are those who are keen to profit from family crises and to fuel fears that a child may be a so-called 'witch', regardless of the harm that it causes. These may be authority

figures either inside or outside the church, who may gain financially or in terms of personal status by performing ‘exorcisms’ or ‘purification’ rites, in some cases demanding payment for their prayers. Churches that are led by those who have had little or no theological training or sound biblical teaching, and who have little or no accountability to a regulating body are prolific in many areas of the world. Some church leaders in resource-poor situations barely possess a Bible. In these contexts, erroneous doctrines, syncretism and harmful beliefs can and do prosper.

Belief and Practice

None of this is to deny that people’s belief in spiritual powers or in witchcraft may be valid. Indeed Christians do believe in the power of God, and in the reality of evil. However, the moment these beliefs are used to justify actual harm or the threat of harm to children, then we are clearly acting contrary to Christian faith, contrary to the law, and contrary to children’s developmental needs and wellbeing.

CURRENT RESPONSES

What is being done in response to this abuse of children?

Precious little! – to put it simply. While there is a growing amount of research into this phenomenon, and some churches and agencies that are intervening and advocating on behalf of many children who are victims of witchcraft accusations, there is little concerted and coordinated action to challenge the widespread abuse, which continues unchecked.

Why should we care about children being accused of witchcraft? Why should we take action on their behalf? Urgent and impelling reasons arise from our understanding of God’s intent, our knowledge of the law, and our awareness of the human developmental needs of each and every child.

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CHILDREN IN GOD'S SIGHT

– theological perspectives

As the Christian community, our response begins with a theological perspective: the value of children in God's sight. Many verses in scripture make clear to us that God cherishes and nurtures all children and requires us to reflect that care in our attitude and actions towards children.

CHILDREN THROUGHOUT SCRIPTURE

Children in the Old Testament

- Children are given as a blessing from God (for example: Genesis 17:16, 24:60; Deuteronomy 7:14; 1 Samuel 1:15–20; Psalm 127:4–5).
- Vulnerable children are to be a priority. This is particularly seen in numerous references to God's concern for orphans, and desire for people to care for them (for example: Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 10:8, 24:17–21, 26:12–13; Psalm 68:5, 82:3–4, 146:9; Isaiah 10:1–2; Jeremiah 7:5–8; Zechariah 7:9–10; Malachi 3:5).
- God detested the deplorable practice of child sacrifice in the nations of the region, and God's people are prohibited from engaging in this infanticide (Leviticus 18:21, 20:2–5; Jeremiah 32:35; Ezekiel 20:31).

Children in the New Testament

- God's desire is that where there have been fractured relationships, parents and children should be reconciled (Luke 1:17; see also Malachi 4:5–6).
- Family life is to be a place of mutual respect. Young children are exhorted to obey their parents "in the Lord". More notably, parents are admonished to refrain from provoking or exasperating their children, which may lead to them becoming angry and embittered (Colossians 3:20–21; Ephesians 6:1–4).
- Paul uses the accepted norm of parents providing for their children as a positive example, saying that likewise he will expend all his energy to seek the very best for those in his care (2 Corinthians 12:14–15).
- Paul also highlights a father's encouragement and a mother's gentleness as examples of the kindness with which he (as a church leader) should treat others (1 Thessalonians 2:7–8, 2:11–12).

Children in Jesus' ministry

- Jesus welcomed children at every opportunity, and always treated children with the utmost respect and dignity. Jesus tells the disciples that they too should welcome

children and treat them well. There is no record of Jesus ever turning away a child who comes to him, or a parent who comes to him for help on behalf of the child (Matthew 18:2–5, 19:13–14; Mark 9:36–37, 10:13–16; Luke 9:46–48, 18:15–17).

- Jesus made clear that children can relate to God, and have spiritual insight (Matthew 11:25; Luke 10:21).
- Jesus sought children’s health and wellbeing, physically, emotionally, and socially. This is seen in the many occasions in which he heals a sick child, even raises a child from death, and restores the child to the care of the family (Mark 5:38–42; Luke 7:11–15, 8:51–56; John 4:47–51).
- On the rare occasions in which a child is brought to Jesus and believed to be in some way influenced by an evil spirit, Jesus addresses the spirit (calmly and without any drama), releases the child from the power of evil and restores the child’s wellbeing, without in any way abusing or harming the child, physically or emotionally (Mark 7:25–30; Mark 9:17–27; Luke 9:38–42).
- Jesus reserves his harshest judgment for those who seek to cause children to sin (Matthew 18:6).
- Jesus defended children’s creative spontaneity, and their right to have a voice (Matthew 21:15–16).

These accounts of children in Jesus ministry stand in clear contrast to all practices which stigmatise children in any way, and cause neglect, harm or abuse to them.

SCRIPTURE AND CULTURE

Demonic Powers in Scripture

In a theological reflection on witchcraft practices and beliefs in Malawi, van der Meer states that we ignore biblical teaching if we dismiss all demonic displays of power as mere delusions or psychological fantasies. On the contrary:

Bible writers ...affirm the existence of such evil supernatural forces in the form of Satan and the demons but without the sense of fear which is so prevalent in Malawian society. Neither does the Bible affirm the excessive supernatural powers attributed to evil spirits or their humans allies such as Satanists, witches and sorcerers.

He expands this by adding a note that argues:

The Bible does not attribute much power to magic and witchcraft but exposes it as a fraud and far inferior to the power of God (Acts 13:6–12).¹² In as far as evil spirits are concerned, the Bible teaches that the spiritual powers, described as Satan and his demons, have been defeated and disarmed, they have been rendered powerless by Christ (Colossians 2:15).¹³

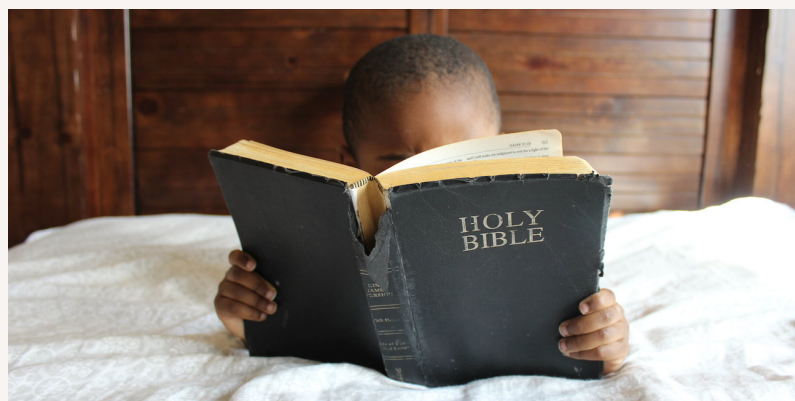
Scripture makes clear that, although disarmed, the powers will continue to be at work in the world and in human lives until Christ comes again, but he has given us his Holy Spirit to resist these influences, and to deal with them as Christ did, in ways that respectfully and lovingly care for the person affected, and never to harm them (see Mark 7:25–30, 9:17–27; Luke 9:38–42).

Practices that are Contrary to God’s Intent

In our diverse cultural expressions there is much that celebrates the initiative and creativity that all humans share as people who reflect the image of an active and creative God. However, whenever our cultural practices contravene God’s values and purposes for human life, then Scripture makes clear that we should distance ourselves from these practices and live distinctively.

- This was true for the people of God in historic times (for example: Exodus 23:23–24; Leviticus 18:3, 18:30).
- Equally it is true for us under the new covenant revealed by Christ (1 Peter 1:14–16, 2:9–12).

As Christians living under the new covenant of Christ, our practices must reflect the character and attitude of Christ. Our churches are to be havens for the vulnerable and the marginalised. Not least, we must ensure that they are always a safe place for children.



CHILDREN IN THE EYES OF THE LAW

— legal perspectives

Our response to the questions of why we should engage with this issue continues with the legal perspective: the protection of children under the law.

Almost every nation on the planet has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (the UN CRC). Hence, while the implementation of the law may vary in some details from one nation to another, the underlying principles of protecting children, providing for their needs, and promoting their wellbeing, are upheld by the law almost universally.

Individuals (such as parents, relatives), institutions (such as churches), and leaders of institutions (such as pastors), are all subject to the law, and hence all may be subject to prosecution if found to be culpable for breaking the law.

As Christians we might not naturally use the language of rights, perhaps preferring to talk of children being nurtured into fulfilling their destiny as humans created in the divine image. Even though we don't start from a secular or humanist viewpoint, the rights advocated in the Convention are not contrary to the principles of scripture.

CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

First Principles

- article 3.1 **best interests of the child** asserts that “in all actions concerning children, ...the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration”
- article 3.3 **high standards of care** states that any “institutions, services and facilities responsible for the care or protection of children shall conform with the standards established ...particularly in the areas of safety, health, in the number and suitability of their staff, as well as competent supervision”

Primary considerations for the child's interests and care are clearly and consistently violated when children become the subject of accusations of witchcraft, or demonisation, as attested in the case studies included in this paper, among many others.

Basic Rights

- article 6 **right to life** affirms that “every child has the inherent right to life”, and that the survival and development of the child should be pursued to “to the maximum extent possible”.
- article 2 **non-discrimination** states that the child should be protected from any discriminatory action “irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status” (article 2.1) or

punitive measures arising from the child's "status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the child's parents, legal guardians, or family members" (article 2.2).

- article 12 **freedom of expression** allows the child to express their own views, and for these to be given due consideration (article 12.1), and further insists that the child be given "the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative ...in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law" (article 12.2).

Accusations of witchcraft against children are frequently handled prejudicially in informal settings by people with no judicial experience, and against which the child is allowed no defence.¹⁴ In such instances the result is serious discrimination and punitive measures which in some cases lead to the death of the accused.

Particular Rights

- article 19.1 **protection from harm** confers the right for children to be protected "from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse" whether in the care of the parent or other person entrusted with care of the child.
- article 37a **against torture and cruelty** states that "no child shall be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment".
- article 37b **against arbitrary imprisonment** states that "no child shall be deprived of his or her liberty unlawfully or arbitrarily" and that any "arrest, detention or imprisonment of a child shall be in conformity with the law".

Torture (as defined by the UN Convention on Torture) includes "any act by which severe pain, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person, information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed."¹⁵

To put that in specific terms...

Actions such as acid burning, fire branding, setting alight, use of scalding hot liquids (water, oil, wax), cutting (with knives, razors, machetes), beating with any implement, for the purposes of extracting a confession, or to punish or 'purge' or 'cleanse' the child, or the threat of any of these, all constitute torture.

Actions such as poisoning, drugging, forcing a child to eat or drink anything harmful or unidentified, constitutes abuse, and when these, or the threat of any of these, is done for the purposes of extracting a confession, or to punish or 'purge' or 'cleanse' the child, then this constitutes torture.

Actions such as burying alive or drowning constitute murder, or if the child survives, then attempted murder.

Actions such as enforced fasting, or starvation, is a form of physical abuse, psychological abuse, maltreatment and neglect of care.

Actions such as locking a child away for a period of time constitutes unlawful imprisonment.

Actions such as stigmatising a child for any reason constitutes emotional and psychological abuse.

All of these abusive actions against children have been recorded in cases where children are accused of witchcraft. Violation of these particular rights is common, and should be viewed with utmost severity under the law.

Furthermore, where a child is stigmatised by such accusations, subject to unlawful detention, and subject to torture, other key developmental rights are frequently denied including...

- articles 28 and 29 **right to education and learning**; and
- article 24 **right to health and wellbeing**; and
- article 31 **right to leisure and recreation**.

None of these are readily accessible to children who are arbitrarily subject to accusations of witchcraft. Social ostracisation and fear of harm limits their capacity to access these services and opportunities.

NATIONAL LEGISLATION

After ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (the UN CRC), governments then enact legislation to enshrine and enforce those rights in their national law. Other international covenants, such as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, add further weight, and their measures may also be incorporated into national law.

In several nations there is evidence of a clearly identified problem with children being accused of witchcraft, and being stigmatised and abused as a result. Here we will focus on just two examples, and look briefly at the legal provisions and protections for children.

Nigeria

Nigeria has ratified, without reservation, the UN CRC in 1991, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child in 2003. However, implementation appears to be variable as Nigeria is a republic of 37 federated states each of which has its own state laws, though there are moves to harmonise laws across different states.

The most comprehensive piece of domestic legislation for children is the Child Rights Act 2003. This broadly incorporates the provisions of the CRC in 278 sections and 11 schedules, and is intended to ensure a uniform legal provision and protection for children across all Nigerian states. It supersedes the somewhat limited former Children and Young Person's Act 1958, and defines new child protection systems, including allowing for children to express their voice in matters concerning their welfare. However, implementation is variable, and to date only 26 of the 37 federated states have enacted the Child Rights Act at state level. The

Child Rights Act makes no mention of witchcraft accusations, although the Criminal Code 2004 (Section 210) does prohibit accusations of witchcraft against both adults and children.

Democratic Republic of Congo

The DRC has ratified the UN CRC in 1990, and this has the status of full legal authority (under article 215 of the Constitution of the DRC) over and above any national legislation. In addition, the Constitution itself makes further explicit provision for children in a number of key points, namely that:

- article 40 confers on parents both a right and a duty to care for and educate their children.
- article 41 prohibits the maltreatment of children, specifically mentioning accusations of witchcraft and sexual abuse, which are crimes punishable by law.

Further protection is offered under the Child Protection Code 2009, namely:

- article 9 states that “no child can be subjected to torture or cruel, degrading or inhumane treatment. Anyone harming a child in this way can be fined or imprisoned.”
- article 160 states that “anyone accusing a child of witchcraft will be imprisoned from one to three years and fined 200,000 to 1,000,000 Congolese Francs.”

Historically the Family Code 1987 has offered some limited protection of children, but the provisions of the Child Protection Code 2009 are much stronger. However, actual implementation across the nation remains variable, and children’s rights are frequently ignored, or fail to be upheld.

Togo

Togo ratified the UN CRC in 1990, and two key Optional Protocols in 2004 and 2005, and is party to the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. In the 2002 revision of its 1992 Constitution the state declares that it “protects youth from all forms of exploitation or manipulations”.

In 2007 it sought to implement provisions of the CRC in Togo’s Children’s Code. However this is partial at best, as the Children’s Code does not fully recognise children as rights holders, and many provisions are not in compliance with the CRC. In theory the CRC should take precedence over domestic legislation but it seems that courts frequently do not refer to it. In 2016 the Togolese Parliament adopted a revision to the Criminal Code which ensures the crime of torture is properly recognised.

Independent monitoring agencies (such as the Child Rights Information Network and the International Catholic Child Bureau) report some improvement to access to justice for children in recent years, however there are still many hurdles for children who are accused and abused.

CHRISTIAN CITIZENS

God's Kingdom is one of righteousness, justice and peace. As Christian individuals and members and leaders of churches, we should live in righteousness, strive for justice and work for peace within our communities. This means living within the law, and ensuring the law is upheld on behalf of those who are especially vulnerable and marginalised (Romans 13:1-5). Failure to do so brings the church into disrepute and devalues our Christian witness.

Not least this means that we must fulfil the law in respect of the protection of children.

States Parties shall ... protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parents, legal guardians or any other person who has the care of the child.

UN CRC article 19.1

THROUGH THE EYES OF A CHILD

– developmental perspectives

Children's lives are lived very much in the moment. New experiences are constantly shaping their lives, and the process of human development can never be deferred to a future occasion, it happens here and now.

For children who are the victims of stigmatisation and abuse, the impact is both immediate and enduring. Experiences of childhood are curtailed, as all the hopes and possibilities are extinguished by the nightmare of the traumas they face, through the physical and emotional violence inflicted upon them.

It is important not to underestimate the serious negative implications of a single witchcraft accusation for every aspect of the child's development for months and potentially years afterwards.

THE STORY CONTINUES...

Let's pick up the story of Fay and Martin again...

Because of the severe extent of their burns, Fay and Martin were in hospital for several months. Throughout that time, EPED volunteers visited them daily to give them loving care, friendship, food, company and counselling. Tragically, their mother has since died, and these two children were left physically wounded, emotionally traumatised, and robbed of their true identity and childhood.¹⁶

Initially Fay was unable to walk, but thanks to undergoing extensive physiotherapy and nursing care is now on her feet again and back to relative normality, though both she and Martin still carry the scars of their ordeal. During their recovery, their access to schooling was sporadic at best, but they hope to be able to return to school soon.

A pastor and his wife who work for EPED are in the process of formally adopting Fay and Martin, so that they can know the security and care of a loving family again.

These two children were extremely fortunate to receive medical care, without which they would almost certainly have died from their injuries and subsequent infections. And the emotional support and counselling has enabled them to recover their sense of self worth, and minimise the psychological impact of their experience.

However, such interventions are rare indeed. Most children in this scenario would get no help at all, and simply end up on the streets.

Note the following implications of one accusation of witchcraft against two children.

- for several months in hospital, they had no access to education and learning, and have missed out on much of the curriculum, and may have to retake one full year. They may need extra educational support (which may not be readily available), as a result of their traumatic experiences, to help them focus on learning again.
- reduced opportunities in education in turn leads to reduced opportunities for work and employment later in life.
- equally during their time in hospital these children had no normal access to play and recreation, which is a basic need for healthy human development. Due to the extent of their physical injuries and scars, their future capacity for engaging in any sports or physical recreation may be severely reduced, potentially for their whole life duration.
- similarly, possibilities of socialisation with peers are also extremely limited when you are in intensive care in hospital. Childhood friendships, which are an important part of healthy social development, are interrupted.
- family relationships have also clearly broken down in this instance, and members of the extended family needed to encourage and provide support for them throughout their childhood and adolescence have abandoned and even turned against them.
- physical injuries, disabilities and disfigurement may continue to pose limitations on their capabilities throughout their lives. As adults, they may have reduced options for employment, or reduced capacities for different types of work.
- in addition there may be a social stigma associated with certain disabilities and disfigurement that (through no inability of their own) will result in limited capacity to function freely in many social situations.
- for one of these children, without the physiotherapy received (which is rare), mobility would have become a daily perpetual challenge throughout life, even perhaps requiring use of a wheelchair.
- if the children continue to live in the same locality, it will prove impossible to avoid encountering places which will tend to trigger the emotional trauma again, due to the traumatic associations in the children's memory. This can make the hope of emotional healing a long process.

Here we have highlighted just a few of the developmental impacts on these two children which, even with the very best medical provision and mental health care, will continue to affect them every day, for the rest of their lives.

Let's not forget, we are not talking about an accidental injury here, which would be tragic in itself. We are talking about the deliberate violent mutilation of children. Perhaps one of the worst effects of this type of abuse is that it bestows on the child a false identity and robs them of a sense of self esteem, along with their very childhood.

RESPONSES

As members and leaders of Christian churches and child-care agencies, we intend that our churches and organisations are part of the solution, seeking the very best for all children and young people in our care and within our wider communities. We intend to challenge and influence churches and communities who continue to be part of this problem and ultimately to help them to become part of the solution too. As Christians we must lead the way in upholding our biblical principles and the law in respect of the protection of all children, and the provision of what they need to fully flourish throughout their childhood and beyond.

Working with partners in localities affected by this phenomenon, we have conducted surveys and identified an emerging urgent need for churches and church leaders to be adequately equipped with relevant training, skills and approaches to begin to bring about a change in people's attitudes, understanding, beliefs and practices that harm children in their families and communities.

Specific areas of understanding that may need to be explored with affected communities are:

- normal child and adolescent developmental processes;
- common childhood illnesses and disabilities: their effects, and appropriate responses;
- common mental and emotional health issues of children, effects of grief and trauma, and appropriate responses;
- God's heart for children: what the bible teaches about how children are to be valued, protected, and nurtured;
- spiritual possession: what the bible teaches about spirit influences, and how to respond appropriately.

Skills and approaches need to take account of the local cultural context, but must be free to challenge this where it contravenes the law or biblical principles, or in any instance where culture supports (whether tacitly or openly) the causing of harm or threat of harm to children.

NEXT STEPS

We have shared our concerns and our vision to catalyse action.

We are now calling upon leaders of church streams and denominations, agencies specialising in the church's engagement with children, child-care organisations, governmental and non-governmental leaders, theologians, researchers and bible societies, media agencies and publishing houses, funding agencies and champions of children at any level in society to speak out and act against this endemic abuse of children.

We call for intentional collaboration, sharing of skills, knowledge, influence and resources in order to mitigate this abuse and to work to bring it to an end. We call for the Church to lead

the way in building climates of care and understanding where every child can be kept safe, nurtured and attain their full potential. We call for the promotion of a positive culture within society that seeks the protection, wellbeing and healthy development of children, acting in their best interests, and celebrating their contribution and presence.

OUR PART

We are working together with key church leaders and local Christian child-care agencies in locations where this problem is significant (such as the D.R.Congo, Nigeria, Togo, and elsewhere). We network with others who are seeking to respond to this concern.

SCWA shares its strategy for equipping the church to address beliefs that harm children, and we evaluate methods and explore approaches for mitigating the negative impacts of witchcraft accusations. We encourage research focused on this issue, to improve our knowledge of the problem, its scope and impact. We also are actively engaged in the formulation of informational resources and training materials aimed at bringing a change in beliefs and practices, so reducing incidents of accusations and abuse in affected communities.

It is important to recognise that no one person, church or agency holds the whole solution or answer to this challenge. In key localities we will hold an Action Forum to draw together community leaders and church pastors, along with theologians and others with expertise in child rights and human development, in order to catalyse responses to this issue. We aim to ensure that all parties championing the cause of children can contribute their perspectives and experience.

Out of the Action Forums held in Togo and the D.R.Congo we have already seen a diversity of concerted responses at different levels, locally, nationally, and regionally. We anticipate that further initiatives will emerge in due course.

YOUR PART

What can you do to get involved? There are five key responses which we are encouraging at this time:

- **connect** with us through our Facebook page < facebook.com/SCWACoalition/ > and our Twitter feed < twitter.com/stop_cwa/ > and discover more through our website.
- **share** this “Call to Action” paper with others in your church, organisation, or network of contacts, and encourage them to learn more and raise awareness of this issue.
- **fundraise** to help support the continuing role of SCWA in promoting engagement and practical responses, as we work with partners in different locations.
- **pray** for those who are working with children affected by accusations of witchcraft and for an end to this abuse. You can sign up for our regular News & Prayer letter online at < stop-cwa.org >.

- **engage** with the SCWA Steering Committee via < info@stop-cwa.org > if you (or the agency or church you represent) are already actively involved in responding to this issue. Please let us know any expertise, research, training materials or other relevant resources that you are able to offer.

Thank you for taking the time to reflect upon this urgent matter.

Please consider how you can respond.

This is our watch. These are our children. As Christian leaders, we have a God-given mandate to protect them, and to create societies where they can flourish both now and in the future. Let us not be found wanting.

How to get in touch with us

If you wish to get in touch with us directly, having read this Call to Action, then the SCWA Steering Committee can be reached as follows:

Stop Child Witch Accusations

email: info@stop-cwa.org

webform: <http://stop-cwa.org/contact/>

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Current Chair of the Coalition

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ note: all the names in the case studies have been changed to protect the identities of the children
- ² EPED: Équipe Pastorale auprès des Enfants en Détresse, Kinshasa, D.R.Congo
- ³ SCWA: Stop Child Witch Accusations, which translates as: Arrêtez d'Accuser les Enfants de Sorcellerie
- ⁴ note: in this paper we are using the term 'witchcraft' to refer to the use of inherent, malevolent powers by someone who is a 'witch' in order to inflict harm on another person; terms such as 'sorcery' or other words with a similar meaning may be used in different contexts.
- ⁵ EPED: Équipe Pastorale auprès des Enfants en Détresse, Kinshasa, D.R.Congo
- ⁶ one limited survey in 2012 identified locations in Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America: Robert Priest, *Where do Missionaries Encounter Witch Accusations?*, in Missiology Matters online blog, August 2012
- ⁷ Philip Alston, *Protection and Promotion of All Human Rights: report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions to the UN General Assembly*, Geneva: Human Rights Council, May 2009
- ⁸ Human Rights Watch, *What Future? Children in the Democratic Republic of Congo*, Vol. 18 No. 2a, New York: Human Rights Watch, April 2006
- ⁹ Aleksandra Cimpric, *Children Accused of Witchcraft: an anthropological study of contemporary practices in Africa*, Dakar: UNICEF, April 2010
- ¹⁰ Chi Adanna Mgbako, Katherine Glenn, *Witchcraft Accusations and Human Rights: Case Studies from Malawi*, in George Washington International Law Review, 2011
- ¹¹ Filip De Boeck, "Le Deuxième Monde" et les "enfants sorciers", in *Politique Africaine* Vol. 80, Paris: Editions Karthala, 2000
- ¹² note: a similar relevant instance is the story of Elisha and the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18:25–39
- ¹³ Erwin van der Meer, *Evangelical Missiological Reflections on the Problem of Witchcraft in Malawi*, in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, Illinois: Wheaton, October 2009
- ¹⁴ ...and quite apart from the fact that the child has rarely committed any criminal offence, in which instance the child would be subject to further protection under article 40 of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*.
- ¹⁵ article 1.1 of the *UN Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment*.
- ¹⁶ Susie Howe, story from The Bethany Children's Trust, written from a first hand report by EPED, April 2012

FURTHER RESOURCES

On SCWA's website, the resource hub contains a range of resources and information (in French and English) for those seeking to engage with those affected by child witch accusations. This includes theological papers, training tools, advocacy items, research and more. We are frequently adding new resources.

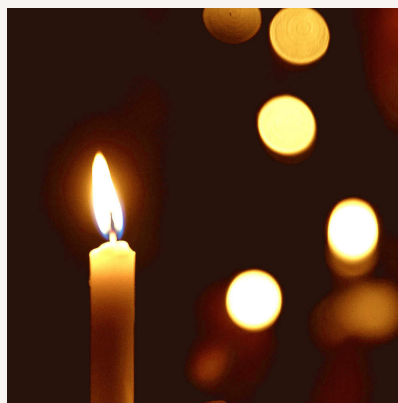
- visit < <http://stop-cwa.org/resources/> > and search or filter to find what you need.

For more theological insights, we highly recommend the Carl F.H. Henry Center for Theological Understanding hosted by the Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. They have a blog focused on the issue of witchcraft accusations.

- visit < <http://henrycenter.tiu.edu/witchcraft-accusations/> > for more.

For further legal resources in respect of children's rights in specific localities around the world, we recommend the Child Rights Information Network. In their online library they have a wealth of reports and a database of legal instruments which can be searched by region, country and language.

- visit < <https://www.crin.org/> > and select the 'library' tab for more.



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