

# Witchcraft Accusation, Persecution and Violence against Women and Children: Evidence from a Nigerian community

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## Abstract

This study investigates witchcraft-related violence against women and children in Ikot Abasi community of Akwa-Ibom State, Nigeria. The possible factors that have promoted such violence form the central subject of the study. The study employed a survey research design. Convenience and purposive sampling methods were adopted to select 149 and 5 participants respectively; interview was the instrument employed for data collection and thematic analysis was the method adopted in the analyses of the data. The findings indicate a widespread belief in the existence and the effects of witchcraft on individuals' lives among the people of Ikot Abasi community, and such beliefs have promoted a subjective accusation and provoked animosity against women and children accused. The study concludes that the premises that form the basis for witchcraft accusations are baseless and unjustified because there are no clear measures that can be used to determine if a person is possessed. Also, the major factors that shaped participants' views on witchcraft and its accusation and that make women and children vulnerable are traditional and religious institutions, increasing liberation of women, physical disability among others. Therefore, there is an urgent need for a public enlightenment and campaigns against the danger in, and implications of associating problems to witchcraft.

**Keywords:** Witchcraft accusation, Gender-based violence, Mystical abilities, Stigmatization, Nigeria

## Introduction

Nigeria is one of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa with a long history of belief in the phenomenon of witchcraft (also called *ogbanje* or *aje* among other names) (Chineyemba, 2019). There is a dominant perception among all social classes (including educated and uneducated) in Nigeria that problems in life have a spiritual origin (DeFraia, 2012). People seem to be engulfed with fear that witches have a significant influence on their successes and failures, and being healthy and unhealthy (Okon, 2012). Also, witchcraft is often attached to individual fertility (potency) and infertility (barrenness) (Kohnert, 2007). In fact, an average

Nigerian would blame witchcraft for his poverty, unemployment, economic stagnation, collapse of business and other adversities (Eboiyeh, 2017). Similarly, anyone who is successful (be it in education, business or career) is believed to possess mystical abilities (Battarbee et al., 2009; Ajala & Ediomu-ubong, 2010).

Such opinions usually result in the persecution, discrimination, stigmatisation, torture and all kinds of violence toward persons who are purportedly possessed (Sambe et al., 2014). Generally, the justification for such violent reactions, according to Eboiyeh (2017), rests on promoting public good and safeguarding social harmony. The prevailing perception of the effect of witchcraft appears to have normalised and legitimised the use of violence against individuals accused. As a result, witchcraft-related violence is pervasive in Nigerian society (Sambe et al., 2014).

It is important to note, however, that attributing problems to witchcraft and witchcraft accusations are not peculiar to Nigeria alone (Geschiere, 1998; Isioma, 2019). Evidence has revealed the existence of such beliefs and numerous cases of witchcraft allegations and violence in several countries including African countries such as Angola, Liberia, Ghana, Gabon, DR Congo, Cameroon, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda among others (Secker, 2012; Kohnert, 2007; Geschiere, 1998). In addition, countries like China, Nepal, Thailand, Ukraine, Italy, and Denmark were reported to hold a similar belief in witchcraft and violence against individuals accused of witchcraft (Okon, 2012; Crawford, 1967; Parrinder, 1963; Hemphill, 1966). Thus, witchcraft accusation appears to be a global phenomenon that exists in nearly all societies.

In times past, allegations of witchcraft or being possessed by witchery are usually targeted at elderly women in Nigeria (Eboiyeh, 2017). In recent time, however, young women, teenagers and children have also been included in the circle of witchcraft accusations in many communities (Kohnert, 2007). The inclusion of these groups as Secker (2012) has noted remains unclear; nonetheless, it could be a result of the decline in the generation or population of elderly women in some of these communities. The ill-treatment of these individuals appears to be a collective response in many communities in Nigeria (Isioma, 2019; Onuzulike, 2013). Unfortunately, the manner in which they are battered and lynched as Omunukuma (2010) has stressed, has not been recorded in many of the countries where such beliefs are common in the past few years. Although there are no official statistics or any systematic data gathering to validate this claim (Osonwa, et. al., 2012); however, the Nigeria-Watch Database Records reported that over 1,500 women and children were killed for witchcraft-related issues between 2006 and 2015 (Akinpelu, 2015). Also, there are continuous media reports that disclose how women and children accused of witchcraft are maltreated (Okonkwo et. al., 2021).

Generally, witches are persons who are supposedly possessed by an evil spirit which makes them cause harm, bring bad luck to people that are close to them (Battarbee et al., 2009). Therefore, anyone accused of witchcraft is considered an associate of demons and should not be associated with or live. There are several reported cases where husbands battered and/or killed their wives, fathers abused and executed their children, and children murdered their

mothers, siblings killed their sisters, and community members lynched women and children because of witchcraft (Kohnert, 2007, 1996; Offiong, 1983).

These acrimonious feelings towards women and children have not received considerable attention from the government at all levels in terms of putting in place adequate measures to protect the victims and educating the public on the respect for human rights. In addition, the area of witchcraft allegation and violence in Nigeria is under-researched. Therefore, there is a need for an urgent attention from the government, security agencies, civil society organisations and academic researchers to explore this phenomenon in order to understand the contributory factors to witchcraft-related violence and to recommend policies and approaches to address the issue. Hence, it is on this account that this study seeks to examine the witchcraft accusation-related violence against women and children in Nigeria. It is hoped that the study will fill the gap in scientific investigation on witchcraft accusation and associated violence in Nigeria and Africa at large.

### **Research objectives**

The objectives of this study are to investigate:

- i. The factors that made women and children vulnerable to witchcraft accusation, and
- ii. How the belief in witchcraft has provoked animosity against women and children in Ikot Abasi community of Akwa Ibom state.

### **Conceptualising witchcraft**

Witchcraft generally refers to the use of spell, magic, bewitching or charm by an individual or a group. Individuals who practice witchcraft are known as witches and are understood to be possessed by demons or devils which give them certain powers to inflict hardship and misfortune on other people (Omunukuma, 2010). Witchcraft, according to the online Encyclopaedia Britannica (2017) is 'the exercise or invocation of supernatural powers to control people or events, typically involving sorcery or magic'. Similarly, Okon (2012) defines witchcraft or witches as individuals widely believed to have been consumed by an imaginary nefarious and destructive spirit capable of hindering human progress and social development.

Witchcraft is often associated with a group of human beings who converge secretly in the late hours of the night to carry out their rites and rituals and discuss the kind of harms to be inflicted on their victims (Ashforth, 2001). Behaviour attributed to witchcraft includes indulging in cannibalism, magic and wickedness (Eboiyeh, 2017). Additionally, witches are believed to have the power and ability to metamorphose into different animal forms and travel in spirit over wide distances. As a result, they can reach their victims any place in the world (Akinpelu, 2015). Offiong (1983) noted that a witch is required to command her soul to escape from the body and turn into a bird or other animals in order to be able to join her group in the assembly. Through their mystical abilities, witches have the power to transfer the soul of any individual (victim) into any form of animal and then slay and feed on it (Geschiere, 1998; Omunukuma, 2010). Also, they can eliminate their victims through childbirth, suffocation,

drowning, accidents, illness and diseases (Crawford, 1967) and have the ability to cause stillbirth, miscarriage, infertility, failure in marriage, loss of job and bad luck (Kohnert, 1996).

Furthermore, witches are believed to engage in annual sacrifice or offering. Every member is expected to offer a human body or soul, or an animal as a sacrifice. This sacrifice will enable members to renew their membership and advance in rank; and failure of any member to offer sacrifice may result in severe consequences (Adinkrah, 2004). The soul of the victim is usually taken through a spiritual call. That is calling the victim's soul through an evil spirit to appear before the group, then they will do whatever they wish on the soul (Eboiyeh, 2017). However, the group have a right to accept or reject whatever that is offered as a sacrifice by any member. Besides, there is a hierarchy in the composition of the group. Usually, there is a leader whose decision bounds on every member even though collective decisions are often made with the endorsement of the leader (Offiong, 1983).

This study defines witchcraft or witches as individuals (usually women and children) generally perceived (by a group) to be possessed by an evil spirit and have mystical abilities to engage in charms, spell and magic and capable of inflicting harm on people believed to be their victims. They can cause misfortune and unexpected hardship, miscarriage, childbirth, sickness and incurable diseases, accident and death among others.

### **Violence against women and children (accused of Witchcraft) in Nigerian society**

Violence against women (and young girls) is one of the most prevalent and devastating human rights violations around the globe in the past decades. It is a term used to describe the most extreme form of discrimination and/or violent actions that are primarily targeted at, or exclusively committed against women and girls (UN Women, 2015). This form of violence includes physical and emotional abuse, rape, sexual assault and harassment, domestic violence, femicide and so on. Generally, it is often referred to as gender-based violence (UN Women, 2015).

Gender-based violence cuts across all ages, ethnicity, and social and religious backgrounds; and can occur anywhere- at home, work, school, street and other public places (Krahé, 2018). Thus, perpetrators can be anyone including loved ones such as husbands, parents, siblings, friends and family members, boss and colleagues, teachers and guardians, neighbours and strangers (Ellsberg & Heise, 2013). Human rights activists and researchers have identified various factors that encourage the violation of women and children's rights. In Nigeria, for instance, the rights of women and children are generally infringed upon repeatedly due to the traditional beliefs and cultural practices on gender and age-based discrimination (Ajala & Ediomu-ubong, 2010; Okonkwo et al., 2021), lack of will on the part of the authorities to prosecute the perpetrators and curb the act, the archaic legal procedures that fail to protect the victims and put the onus of proof on the accuser, and admissibility of evidence of rape, sexual and physical abuse in the court of law, among others (Battarbee et al., 2009; Secker, 2012).

The Global Gender-Gap Index consistently ranked Nigeria among the countries where gender parity and ill-treatment of women and children are widespread (see 2015, 2016, 2017,

2018 and 2019 reports). Despite the provisions of the law that forbid all forms of discrimination and violence in Nigeria, women and children still experience a tough situation (Fawole et al., 2008). Child marriages, paedophile, inhumane widowhood practices, gross discrimination against the physically challenged and childless women, sexual harassment, genital mutilation, denied property/inheritance right, trafficking and slavery, and witchcraft accusation are all still common in many communities in Nigeria (UN Women, 2015).

The factors responsible for the increased persistent vulnerability of women and children in Nigeria remain a major concern among researchers. Human rights activists, civil society organisation and scholars have identified some key elements that may be responsible for the increase, however, all these elements have not been subjected to rigorous scientific investigations. Among the major factors include:

*Cultural beliefs:* Cultural belief is a major factor that plays a significant role in Witchcraft accusations in Nigeria and other African countries. There are beliefs common among all ethnic groups in Nigeria that women and children are fragile and feeble being and can easily be apprehended by evil spirits (Afigbo, 1991; Okonkwo et al., 2021). For instance, women are believed to have 'spiritual husbands' who often have sexual intercourse with them while sleeping. Anytime a woman experiences nocturnal emission (wet or sex dream) during her sleep, she is made to believe that she has a 'spiritual husband' which is a sign of being possessed by a spirit (Onadeko, 2008). Besides, a female's body is assumed to be attractive not only to men but also to the spirits, as a result, they are more likely to be apprehended by an evil spirit which then turns them into witchcraft (Sambe et al., 2014).

In addition, it is believed that children are susceptible to diseases and all forms of illness and are much more likely to demonstrate specific behavioural traits such as mood swing, aggression, stubbornness, laziness, and withdrawal from people and social events (UNICEF, 2010). When children demonstrate any of these behaviours, they are alleged to be possessed by an evil spirit (Secker, 2012). Similarly, children with physical disability or deformity, mental disability and recurring illness are often believed to be agents of evil spirits and are accused of witchcraft (Omunukuma, 2010; Isioma, 2019).

*Increase in women liberation:* Women liberation or freedom from reliance on men which increasingly upsets some of the cultural practice is also a significant factor in witchcraft accusation in Nigeria. Women are gradually becoming more independent and successful in education, businesses and careers. Many of them are creative and more prosperous than their male counterparts. Ngara et al. (2013) and Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) reported that Nigerian women are becoming more active and recognised in the political sector, as investors and prime mover in policy design in both public and private sectors. In addition, many of them compete with their male colleagues for high ranking positions and are doing great in their area of specialisations. Thus, the cultural belief that a woman is house-material that supposed to be under the control of a man who should be the breadwinner of the family is fading away gradually (Osonwa et al., 2012). However, women who are more successful than their husband and/or male counterparts are believed to have used witchcraft to cast a spell on them, thereby hindering their progress (Jayeola-Omoyeni et al., 2015).

*Role of religious Institution:* The belief in witchcraft is often fuelled by the religious leaders who label children and women witches, and claim that they hinder progress and are responsible for the misfortunes of their family members. Mungai (2014) like UNICEF (2010) reported that churches play a key role in witchcraft accusations in Africa. Pastors and prophets from all divisions of Christianity have continued to demean and stigmatise women and children deliberately by pronouncing them witches in the name of spiritual healing (Oyetade, 2018). Foxcroft and Secker (2010) and Isioma (2019) revealed that over 31 per cent of witchcraft accusation in Akwa Ibom in the southern part of Nigeria was made in the church. Adegoke (2010) and Oyetade (2018) Osonwa et al. (2012) added that witchcraft accusation in churches has become a lucrative business because church leaders continue to use this as a trick to make members come for deliverance from the spell cast on them by the witch. Besides, huge fees are charged to exorcise or deliver the possessed individuals.

*Representation of women and children in movies:* The belief in witches and accusation of witchcraft are further intensified by the kind of representation given to women and children in the Nigerian movie industry (Nollywood). In all circumstances, women and children play the role of the witch in the movies. This kind of image further popularizes and increases the public belief in the women and child witches, and heightens the fear and suspicion which make them more vulnerable (Eboiyeh, 2017; Onuzulike, 2013).

### **Incidents of witchcraft accusation and violence in Nigeria**

Most of the incidents of witchcraft accusations and violence against women and children are usually reported in the media. For this reason, this paper gathers some of the reported cases that resulted in violence and inhumane treatment in some states in Nigeria from the online-newspapers and blogs to have a clear understanding of how the beliefs in, and accusation of witchcraft have triggered animosity against the accused persons. The cases highlighted are the few among several other reported and unreported occurrences.

One of the alarming cases of witchcraft accusation in Nigeria was the case of a 9-year-old boy, Nwanaokwo Edet from Akwa Ibom State, who was forced by his father to drink acid after a pastor condemned him as a witch behind his father's and other family members' misfortunes. Edet later died in the hospital (CBS News, 2009). The police were reported to have arrested a 60-year-old man, Yakubu Vong for burning an 8 years old girl to death after accusing her of being a witch in Sabon Layi village in the north-central of Plateau State, Nigeria (Chris, 2015). Similarly, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of October 2016, a 40year-old Akwa Ibom man, John Friday Akpan was detained by the Nigeria police division in Cross River State for tying his two children- Elisha and Esther in a dark room for several days without food and water on allegations of witchcraft. Mr. Akpan confessed to the police that he heeded the instructions of a witchdoctor (Daniel, 2016).

In addition, three siblings: Comfort- 3year-old, Hope- 15year-old and Godbless- 5year-old, were accused of killing their parents with witchcraft by their grandmother, Christina in Calabar Southeast of Nigeria. The three children were living with Christiana following the death of their parents. Christina was HIV positive and was suffering from severe complications

for not taking the anti-retroviral drugs regularly. A pastor in the community declared the children witches and accused them of killing their parents and responsible for Christiana's illness. The children were tied to a tree and beaten with a hot machete to confess (BBC News Report, 2018).

In Falu, a village in Guyuk Local Government Area of Adamawa State, a 32-year-old pregnant woman, Ayina Afraimu, was attacked and beaten to death by the members of the community for alleged witchcraft and that she was responsible for the sickness and deaths of some people in the village (Alabi, 2017). On August 13th 2013, reports revealed the arrest of Erazale for the attempted murder of his sister, Miss Esther Erazale. Mr Mathew accused his sister of casting a spell on him which prevented him from getting married. When he couldn't bear her witchcraft anymore, he hit her with a sledgehammer on the head (Niyi, 2013). On July 7th 2013, two siblings of the same parents- Omolayo Ojeifo, 25 years old and Taiye Ojeifo, 20 years old in Lampese, Akoko Edo Local Government Area of Edo State killed their mother, Mrs. Itowo Ojeifo for allegedly being a witch responsible for their difficulties and failure in life (Niyi, 2013b).

## **Materials and methods**

### **Study settings**

The present research focuses on Ikot Abasi community, a small town and a local government area located in the Mangrove Swamp and Rainforest of the Eastern Niger River Delta region of Akwa Ibom State, Southern part of Nigeria. The town is made up of the Ibibio ethnic group with about 132,023 inhabitants (National Population Commission, 2006). It is a male-dominated community, therefore, the socioeconomic and political activities are considered the affairs of men (Chineyemba, 2019). Ikot Abasi is bounded by Mkpato Enin and Eastern Obolo Local Government Areas in the east, Oruk Anam Local Government Area in the north and the Atlantic Ocean in the south. Additionally, because of its location, Ikot Abasi, served as the collecting point of slavery during the colonial period. Today, the town is known for its arable agricultural produce and serves as a trading centre for cassava, sweet yam, maize, fish, and palm produce among others (Umoren, 2013). Ikot Abasi was purposely selected for this study because of the wide cultural practices that attach much importance to the beliefs in magic and witchcraft among the Ibibio ethnic group, and above all the widespread witchcraft accusation and inhumane treatment of accused individuals (Offiong, 1983; Ajala & Ediomu-ubong, 2010; Osonwa, et al., 2012).

### **Population and sampling technique**

The population of the study includes all the residents (male and female), between 21 and 57-year-old, of Ikot Abasi community. Convenience and purposive sampling techniques were used to select a total of one-hundred and forty-nine (149) and five (5) participants respectively. Therefore, a total of 154 people participated in this study. The 149 participants were the sample drawn from the general population in order to gauge public opinion about witchcraft accusations and related issues while the 5 participants include a witch doctor, 2

Christian pastors, and 2 social workers. The opinions of the witch doctor and pastors were considered necessary to find out the perceived influence of religious institutions on witchcraft accusation and to have a better understanding of the supposed spiritual work of witchcraft and its effects on people. Also, the professional idea and experience on witchcraft-related issues made the selection of the social workers necessary for providing adequate insight into the phenomenon in the area (Salihu & Gholami, 2018).

The witch doctor is a (male) member of the community and a traditional priest believed to have mystical powers to neutralise witchcraft spells and conquer any witchery. People usually visit him for spiritual assistance. He lives in a forest-like environment with no meaningful structure in the area, except a hut under a tree where he attends to his clients. This description matches Geschiere's (1998, p. 821) depiction of traditional witch doctors (Nganga) in Cameroon where he observed that typically all of them are 'traditional figures mostly without any schooling, living in modest mud houses, often at the outskirts of the villages. They kept a low profile'. The witch doctor was visited by the research team and informed about the objectives of the study and the implications for policymaking on issues relating to witchcraft.

Among the highly esteemed churches in Ikot Abasi, the two selected Christian pastors (a male prophet and a female prophetess), are notable clergymen and clergywoman of the community. The male pastor was assigned by his church to speak with the researcher, while the female pastor was the overseer of her church and volunteered to participate in the research following a letter of request for a discussion on the subject. These churches were purposely chosen based on the previous knowledge of the researcher and the information gathered from the members of the community on numerous deliverances carried out in the church. Also, the two churches have weekly/monthly programs on evil-excision. It is important to point out that four churches were initially surveyed using criteria such as witchcraft-excision and deliverance related programs, size of congregation and peoples' opinion. A letter was written to all the churches, however, only two churches responded and agree to put forward a participant. Finally, the Social workers (a male and a female) are also members of the community and government employees seconded to serve at Ikot Abasi Local Government from Akwa Ibom State Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development. All the participants were informed of the research implications of the study and were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality of information provided for the study.

### **Data collection**

The research employed a survey research design. Interview was the instruments used in the collection of information (qualitative data) for this study. Interviews with participants were conducted with the support of three research assistants (Onuzulike, 2013). It covers such areas as the socio-demographic background of the participants (age, gender, level of education, marital and employment status), the belief in the power and influence witchcraft has on personal life, and issues regarding Witchcraft accusation against women and children and the reactions that result from it. Interviews with the witch doctor and some participants were conducted in local Ibibio language and Pidgin-English, while English language was used with



the Christian priests, Social workers and some other participants. Each interview lasted for about 25 minutes.

### **Analysis**

Information gathered from the interviews was coded and analysed using thematic analysis. The interview transcripts were first read repeatedly to define and identify related themes after which coding was done to relevant portions of the transcripts. An assessment of semblances and differences in the coded transcripts indicated the links between codes that defined the themes.

## **Results**

### **Socio-demographic information of the participants**

Information gathered from the interview indicate that a total of 93 (60.4%) of the participants were male, while 61 (39.6%) were female. Also, participants' age was between 21 and 57-year-old. Majority (61%) of them were between 21 and 39-year-old, while 38% were between 40 and 57-year-old. Many (47%) were married, 19% divorced and 34% single. Moreover, many of the participants (77%) had at least secondary education, while the remaining (23%) had informal education such as vocational and entrepreneurial training. Also, the majority (42%) of the respondents were self-employed, 24% were civil servants, 19% were unemployed, and 12% were employees of private establishments.

### **Widespread belief in witchcraft**

Discussion with the participants revealed that there is a widespread belief in the existence and powers of witchcraft as well as its associating influence on the lives of the individual (both educated and non-educated) participants. Many of the participants recounted that they had experienced or are presently experiencing the effects of witchcraft in their own lives and/or witnessed someone (usually relatives) who had experienced or are presently suffering from the effects of witchcraft. For instance, one of the (male-educated) participants noted that *'witchcraft is real and witches can do anything to you, especially if you offend any of them'*. Another (male-uneducated) participant claimed that *'witches exist for real, they are everywhere in our community. They are the reason why many of us are poor and why our communities are not developed'*. Similarly, another (female-educated) participant opined that *'to think that witchcraft does not exist is to risk one's life or let me say, to underestimate what witches could do to you is to be naïve'*.

In addition, information gathered from the Christian priests echoes the above results. The female priest described witchcraft as *'wicked and destructive evil spirits. They have the power to harm and cause all kinds of mischiefs in peoples' lives'*. The male priest also noted that *'witchcraft causes sickness, calamity and hardship such as stillbirth and miscarriages, loss of job and collapse of business and happy home, and death'*. Similarly, the witch doctor stressed that:

*Witches have the power to do anything bad. They can cause death in different ways- sickness, accident, stillbirth, child delivery, suffocation and so on. They usually call (spiritual-call) their victims to death. Also, they can bring bad luck to their victims- loss of job, unable to get employed and married, the downfall of business, unable to complete schooling, loss of memories and so on'.*

However, the social workers do not belief in witchcraft. Their descriptions are centred on the prevalent opinions. The female social worker noted that *'people believed that their adversity, unemployment, sickness and death are caused by witches in their family. Our people do not understand that the economic situation in the country has any effects on their living conditions. Even the lazy youths attribute their laziness to Witchcraft.*

### **Witchcraft accusation**

Interviews information on witchcraft accusations indicates that (both elderly and young) women and children were vulnerable to being accused of witchcraft. The results suggest that the presence of an elderly woman and/or children with certain behavioural problems in a family or community where other members are experiencing some difficulties in their lives indicate that they are possessed by witchcraft and that they are responsible for the predicaments. Among the claims laid by the participants include:

*'...if anyone experiences any difficulty, be it sickness or loss of a job or other problems, he should check if there is an elderly woman in his family or around him. Problems and difficulties don't just come to people, they are caused by witches who don't want you to succeed'.*

*'Many of the elderly women in our communities are witches; they belong to one occult or the other. Anytime you see an elderly woman talking to herself, it means that her fellows are around her that time'.*

*'...the presence of an elderly woman in a family is dangerous; certainly, it will be unconnected with other members' hardship, misfortune, health challenges and even death'.*

Some participants also claimed that there are children who are similarly possessed by evil spirits which turned them into witches. For instance, a participant noted that *'children with deformity are agents of the devil and evil spirits, for this reason, it is easy for witches to possess and make use of them to cause harms.* Another participant observed that *'a family that has a child with some unusual behavioural traits (like mood swing) is likely to face challenges and difficulties such as bad luck, accident and other misfortunes. This is because children with strange behaviour are witches.*

The interview information further affirmed that a woman will be accused of witchcraft, if she is more successful than her husband and/or male counterparts. She will also be alleged as someone responsible for other members' difficulties. Many of the participants were of the view that the presence of a successful young woman (by her career or business) in a family can be associated with other members' (usually her husband and male counterparts) misfortunes. A participant noted that *'how can a woman or wife triumph and be more successful than her*

*husband; it is only possible for those with supernatural powers*'. Following this view, another participant believed that *'it is almost impossible for a young woman or a wife to be more successful than her husband unless she has exchanged his good fortune with ill-luck'*. Also, in situations whereby a new couple got married and then a downturn is experienced by the groom's family; a participant noted that *'the bride is possessed and has definitely brought ill-luck to the entire household'*.

### **Why women and children are vulnerable regarding how possession is determined**

While responding to the question on why women and children are vulnerable to witchcraft accusation and how to determine if a person is possessed, the male pastor opined that:

*...women are weak, emotional and fragile beings so are children- they are young and weak. For these reasons, they are easily consumed by the spirit of darkness. It is difficult to discover if a person is possessed, but with fasting, prayers and the power of my Lord, the people of darkness shall be known and conquered.*

The female pastor said that:

*The spirits cannot exist on their own for long, they need living souls (human beings) to exist and carry out their evil works. It is common in women and young girls; however, that does not mean men are not possessed by the spirit also but it is not common*'. She further noted that *'it is important I say this, not that women and children possessed by the evil spirit are witches but it is the spirits which live in them that take control of all their lives; they have no control over their behaviour when the spirit strikes. They are not the ones doing the evil of witchcraft, but the spirit'*.

The witch doctor also shares the same view. He stressed that *'women and children are closer to the evil spirit than man; gods do not do evil, human beings do. It is very rare to see a man possessed by an evil spirit'*. Also, in his response to the question on ways to discover if a person (woman or child) is possessed, he noted that:

*It is easy to discover that of a woman. Witches have a certain evil look and always try to communicate spiritually when they encounter people like me. ....it is difficult for people without power to detect child witches because of their innocent looks and the sympathy people have for them or the thinking that they are just children. But with spiritual power, it is easy.*

Among the major signs to detect if a woman or child is possessed by witchcraft according to the witch doctor include:

- a. *when a woman or child talks to herself or laughs alone all the time for no reason, it shows that her evil spirits are around at that period,*
- b. *...when a child likes to play alone and does not like to associate with or ignores others, or always experience a sudden change of, or unstable behavioural patterns,*

- c. ...when a woman or child does not have or show sympathy to anyone afflicted with problems or calamity in the family; although not all because some witches show sympathy to avoid suspicion,
- d. ...when a woman has fortunes more than her husband, it is a sign that she has bewitched her husband, and
- e. ...when a child is born with disability or deformity is a sign of evil spirit.

Majority of the participants shared the above views and opinions of the priests and witchdoctor. Their responses appear to have been largely influenced by the preaching and intonation of both the priest and witchdoctor. A participant opined that *'all the signs to tell if a person is a witch is known to everyone in this community. We hear our pastors and traditional witchdoctors say it often'*.

However, the female Social worker noted that:

*Witchcraft accusation is a common problem in this part of the world. Women and children are targeted because of the cultural beliefs that women are weak, emotional and voiceless. Similarly, children (most especially those with certain personality problems) are viewed in the same way because they cannot defend themselves. ....people often based the accusation on flimsy excuses without any reasonable evidence. For instance, sickness or death of a son or daughter is often blamed on or attributed to the witchcraft of grandmother or an elderly woman in the family. Also, the death or misfortune of a husband is attached to the witchcraft of the wife, stepmother or mother-in-law. What we see around here is that any woman who has a flourishing business or good income better than that of her husband is in trouble. She would be accused of using her husband's destiny with her witchcraft. Our people don't believe women can do anything better than their male counterparts'.*

The male Social worker also recounted similar views with that of the female social worker. More importantly, he stressed a salient factor that also makes women and children vulnerable to witchcraft accusation. According to him *'.....another notable factor is the representation of women and children with physical challenges in movies'*.

Furthermore, while responding to questions on whether movies have also influenced their perception of witchcraft, majority (42%) of the participants admitted that though the traditional and religious institutions play a primary role in the belief in, and accusation of witchcraft, however, the movie industry has also influenced the way witchcraft is perceived. According to their narrations, images of witchcraft in movies disseminate, spread and remind them of the evilness of witchcraft and further intensifies their fears. This in effect, exposes and makes the accused persons more vulnerable. However, some participants discounted the role of movies; they claimed that movies are only demonstrating what they already knew and experienced.

### **Participants' reactions to witchcraft accusations**

Interview information shows that majority of the participants would handle or treat individuals accused of witchcraft in a violent and abusive manner. Aggressive acts such as beating and lynching, setting alight, alienation and exclusion were the common reactions participants recounted. It thus appears that the widespread beliefs in the existence and influence of witchcraft powers on people have ruthlessly provoked animosity against women and children accused of witchcraft. For instance, a participant aggressively said that *'death is the wage of witches. Any person accused of witchcraft should be mobbed'*. Another participant noted that *'I will suffocate a witch before she uses her evilness to harm me'*.

The two social workers also confirmed the fact that people violently treat accused women and children. The female social worker noted that:

*The general beliefs in witchcraft and the perception that witchcraft has an influence on failures have incited violence and inhumane treatment against women and children accused of witchcraft. They are sometimes humiliated, forced out of the community, starved to death, set alight or lynched by the mob.*

Nonetheless, one would expect that the female participants would show a sense of empathy and/or would not be aggressive towards their fellow women accused of witchcraft for reasons of being vulnerable to the same course. Surprisingly, interviews with majority (52) of the female participants indicate that they would react to an accusation of witchcraft the same way as the male participants; while very few (9) of them noted that they would involve the witch doctor or church to either exorcise the evil spirit from the accused or seek a counter spiritual power.

Speaking about the excision of the evil spirit and violence against individuals accused of witchcraft, the witchdoctor condemned the ways people handle cases of witchcraft accusation. He stressed that:

*Although if one critically looks at the evil works done by witches, one would not pity the way people treat them. But I always urge people to seek counter spiritual attack and also bring the witches to me so that I can exorcise them instead of beating or killing them'.*

In the same vein, the two pastors also condemned the ill-treatment of women and children accused of witchcraft. The male pastor said that *'people should understand that they are human beings like them but they are just victims of the evil spirit and anyone (except the Children of God) can fall victim. Therefore, we (here in our ministry) encourage people to bring them for deliverance'*.

### **Discussions**

Basically, the findings indicate that there is a wide belief in the existence and powers of witchcraft among the participants of this study. There appears to be an extensive perception held by both the educated and uneducated participants that supernatural powers of witchcraft have a significant influence on individuals' lives and living conditions; and that problems or individual misfortune, hardship and calamity have a spiritual origin. Consequently, the

existence of individuals accused is threatened. The findings suggested that the presence of an elderly woman and/or a child with behavioural problems and physical deformity in a family where other member(s) has health problems, misfortune, or unable to get a job, get married and have children and so on predict that such woman and child are possessed and are responsible for these adversities. Their vulnerable conditions automatically qualify them to be agents of evil spirits and invariably witches.

In addition, such beliefs also threaten the presence of a successful young woman or lady in a (career and business) family where the husband and/or other family members are not as successful as she is. That is a young hardworking career woman who is successful and earns more income than her husband and/or other male counterparts in the family, who can afford materials things that her male counterparts could not afford, who provides for the needs of her family members (usually her children, husband, in-laws and siblings) is labelled a witch because of her status. This suggests that the common impression among some people in Ikot Abasi is that women are not expected to be successful or do better than their male counterparts. Women seem to be relegated to housekeepers and their successes and achievements appear to be attached to their husbands'. Therefore, if a woman's success does not have any link to her husband's, or is more successful than other male counterparts in the family, she is believed to be involved in witchcraft or has used her mystical abilities to arrogate other peoples' fortunes and prevent them from being successful.

Moreover, given the fact that Ikot Abasi, like other communities in Akwa Ibom, is a male-dominated community, the socio-economic and political activities are in the domain of men (Chineyemba, 2019). However, in recent times, men seem to be losing control of dominance over women, especially in some key sectors perhaps due to the increase in women's (and girl's) education and their involvement in businesses and politics. This is because these new opportunities allow women to compete with them (Foundation For Partnership Initiatives in Niger Delter [PIND], 2018). Therefore, this study like other previous academic investigations observed that the social position of women in Ikot Abasi and other communities in Akwa Ibom is gradually shifting away from the usual full-housewives (Ngara et al., 2013; Osonwa et al., 2012).

It can be inferred that a woman's socio-economic status also plays a fundamental role in witchcraft accusations. Thus, witchcraft ascription founded on the belief that any woman who is more successful than her husbands and/or other male counterparts is a witch is obviously based on the fact that some women have a comparatively stronger economic strength than the men. Studies in this line of research have also established that frustrations and anxiety resulting from the growing competition between women and men for the available resources are major causes of violence against women in many African countries (Nadel, 1952; Sambe et al., 2014).

On the whole, participants' opinions on witchcraft accusations appear to have been largely fuelled by the thoughts spread by the traditional witch doctors, religious priests (churches) and the movie industry on the existence and the influences of supernatural powers on people. Participants' narratives, therefore, implicate and suggest that religious and traditional institutions, as well as the movie industry, play a significant role in witchcraft

accusation in Ikot Abasi community. In this way, the findings of this study is in agreement with the views and results reported by Onadeko (2008), Sambe et al. (2014), Mungai (2014), UNICEF (2010) and Oyetade (2018) reported that churches play a key role in Witchcraft accusations in Africa. Pastors and Prophets from all divisions of Christianity have continued to demean and stigmatise women and children deliberately by pronouncing them witches in the name of spiritual healing.

Additionally, the findings indicate that majority of the participants (regardless of gender and level of education) would show no empathy or concern for the women and children accused of witchcraft. It appears that their strong beliefs in the powers and influence of witchcraft have promoted an unprecedented feeling of annoyance and animosity towards individuals accused. This, therefore, suggests that an average person from Ikot Abasi community who believes in the existence and the likely influences witchcraft could have on an individual's life would show aggression towards any woman and children accused of witchcraft. This finding aligns with the results reported by Ajala and Ediomu-ubong (2010), Chineyemba (2019) and Osonwa et al., (2012) that the widespread belief in witchcraft among Ibibio has largely stimulated violence against individuals accused of witchcraft.

Furthermore, another important implication that can be drawn from the findings of this study is that there are no clear measures used in ascertaining who a witch is, and determining what behaviour constitutes a witch; therefore, it can be argued that the accusations of witchcraft are subjective, baseless and unjustified. For instance, sickness, diseases and other related adversity could be caused by different factors such as individual recklessness, attitude to cleanliness, and environmental problems among others. Also, stillbirth, miscarriage, infertility and barrenness could result from stress, lack of adequate care and medical attention, recklessness and the likes. In the same way, loss of job, unemployment and collapse of business could be a result of the general economic problem in the country, lack of employment opportunities, individual efforts, personal skills and employability, attitude to work and qualification. Hence, witchcraft accusation based on these perceptions is a clear indication that women and children are being subjected to maltreatment, violence and persecution.

Finally, the view that talking to oneself is a sign of Witchcraft (as the witchdoctor stressed) may require scientific validation. Hemphill (1966) observed that individuals suffering from mental illness such as psychosis, schizoaffective disorder, delirium and depression often exhibit certain behaviour that makes people think they are possessed by demons or evil spirit. Persons suffering from schizoaffective disorder, for instance, may demonstrate unclear or confused thinking, hearing voices that others do not (imaginary voices), engage in bizarre conversation and delusions (Lommen & Restifo, 2009). Similarly, psychologists have stressed that emotional or psychological distress predicts different symptoms in individuals suffering from psychosis (a state of the mind characterised by an impaired relationship with reality); unstable mood and complete withdrawal from people among others are the possible behavioural outcomes (Brewin & Holmes, 2003). Accordingly, women (particularly the elderly ones) and children accused of witchcraft based on talking to themselves or dissociating from

other people and/or social events may be suffering from mental disorders that made them demonstrate such behaviour.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

The study examines the witchcraft-related violence against women and children in Ikot Abasi community of Akwa-Ibom State, Nigeria. From the findings presented, the paper concludes that the premises which form the basis for witchcraft accusations (against women and children) among some people in Ikot Abasi community, are subjective and groundless because there are no clear measures that can be used to determine if a person is possessed. Also, the major factors that shaped participants' views on witchcraft and its accusation and that make women and children vulnerable are traditional and religious institutions, increasing liberation of women, physical disability among others. Hence, there is an urgent need for a public campaign (through the media, workshops and seminars, and town-hall meetings) against witchcraft accusation and violence (in general) against women and children.

Nigerians need to be educated about the dangers and implications of the belief in the powers and influences of witchcraft. In addition, people should be educated, in all languages spoken in Nigeria, that calamity and misfortune like loss of job, accident, sickness, diseases, and death could result from several factors such as economic condition, negligence and recklessness, environment and personal problems among others. Moreover, gender equality and individual achievement should also be part of the orientation program. Men should be enlightened that women are like them. That women also have the knowledge, skills and ability to be prosperous if given the opportunity. Besides, that personal effort (of both men and women) combined with the necessary skills can lead to success. Moreover, the general public should be informed that children with disability and behavioural traits are victims of circumstance. That they are not agents of the evil spirit, their conditions are a result of many factors such as environment, lack of medical attention, or complications during prenatal period or birth among others.

Furthermore, the human rights organisations and activists, security agencies and stakeholders should stand up against the religious institutions and witch doctors that pronounce women and children witches. Also, the movie industry that spread the wrong impression about women and children as witches should be cautioned. Finally, the Nigerian authority (most especially the executive and legislature) should legislate and enforce laws and policies to address all witchcraft and human rights-related challenges against women and children. In doing so, peoples' conduct will be checked and the rule of law would be upheld without fear or favour.

### **Limitations**

A study of this nature is not devoid of a number of limitations. The findings analysed are distinctive because they basically focused on the perception of one particular ethnic group with their wide practices attaching importance to witchcraft. Thus, the findings are reliable. However, it is important to note that, the study may include some inaccuracies resulting from



such lapses as the methodology and interpretation. Moreover, the findings are not generalizable to other African countries or other cultures in Nigeria. So, whether the findings apply to other ethnic groups is unknown. For these reasons, the findings are expected to incite criticisms and further research. However, the researcher is confident that the findings are valid and accurate.

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