

June 20-22, 2012

FEDERAL MINISTRY OF WOMEN AFFAIRS AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT TECHNICAL MEETING ON STIGMATIZATION OF CHILDREN AS WITCHES AND WIZARDS - PARTICIPATION REPORT

Venue: Bayelsa Guest House, Central Business District, Maitama - Abuja, FCT

THEME

- Stemming the Rising Incidences and Consequences of Child Witch Stigmatization in Nigerian Communities

MEETING OBJECTIVES

- To share information and experiences by various stakeholders
- To compile a situation report
- To plan for a National Conference of Stakeholders

PERSONNEL

Resource Persons

- Idris A. Kuta, Permanent Secretary, Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, Abuja
- Dr. (Mrs) Nkiru Onuekwusi, Director Child Development, Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Child Development, Abuja
- Simon Chuzi Egbede, Esq., Executive Secretary, National Agency for the Prevention of Traffic in Persons (NAPTIP)
- Yahcit Dala, National Human Rights Commission
- Hon. Justice Joy Unwana, Presiding Judge, Family Court, Akwa Ibom State
- Mr. Utibe Ikot, Programme Manager, SSNCEF (Representing Mr. Gary Foxcroft, Programme Director, SSN)
- Barr. James Ibor, Legal Officer, Stepping Stones Nigeria (SSN)
- Mrs Veronica Umaru, national Coordinator, WOTCLEF
- Dr. (Mrs) Mary Orjioke, Assistant Director, Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development

Chairpersons of Sessions

- Mrs. Maryam Uwais, Member, African Committee of Experts on Child Rights
- Mr. Emeka Ejide, Director, Child Development, Anabra State
- Justice M. A. Nasir, FCT High Court Judge
- Mrs Elizabeth Ekaette, Director, NDI, C & R, NAPTIP

Position Papers and other Participants

- Directors, Child Development from the 36 States (30 States and FCT gave reports)
- Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation (WOTCLEF)
- Federal Ministry of Justice
- Federal Ministry of Education
- Federal Ministry of Information
- Federal Ministry of Health (no report)

Total No. Of Registered Participants: Seventy (70): 45 females and 25 males.

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TECHNICAL MEETING OUTCOMES

- Information on the extent of child witchcraft accusations and related abuses in the 36 States of Nigeria shared, assessed and deliberated upon. The technical meeting confirmed that child witchcraft accusation and related abuses occur in almost every state in the country
- Extent of child witchcraft beliefs among social welfare workers in the country assessed. There is general and widespread belief in child witchcraft among social welfare and child development workers in the Ministry of Women Affairs, especially at the State level. If this is not addressed, the fight to prevent child witchcraft accusations and related abuses will be very challenging
- The role of sensitisation of local communities, parents, schools, and every facet of society came up very strong as a means of curbing the incidences of child witchcraft stigmatisation
- The need for the capacity of social welfare workers, the judiciary, and law enforcement agencies (especially the police) was recognized and highlighted
- The legal framework for the prevention and punishment of child witchcraft accusations, stigmatization, and related abuses is adequate. What is lacking is the will power to invoke the necessary laws to punishment offenders and thus serve as deterrents to others.
- There need for training on reporting for State Directors was highlighted; many Directors did not seem to understand the indicators required for the meeting and were busy trying to prove or disprove existence of witchcraft instead of reporting on extent of child witchcraft believes, cases reported, interventions by the Ministry, challenges faced and recommendations. Many of them made personal opinion papers instead of the official situational analysis of their states.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

1. KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY OF NAPTIP:

- The Executive Secretary of NAPTIP, Mr. Simon Chuzi Egbede was represented by Mrs. Elizabeth Ekaette and presented a keynote address. He thanked the Federal Ministry for organizing the meeting and noted NAPTIP had organised intervention programmes on child witchcraft menace in 2010 in Akwa Ibom, Nasarawa and Kaduna States.
- He noted that although witchcraft is rooted in the belief system of the local people, Nigeria, being a signatory of the Child Rights Convention and having domesticated it in 2003 should be perpetuating abuses on children based on witchcraft beliefs. He tied the problem to the proliferation of religious organizations "who are independent of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN).
- He stated that child witch stigmatization led to increase in child trafficking, child labour and abuse, high rate of illiteracy, increase in child mortality, increase in crime, and portrayal of the country in bad light.
- He called for synergy amongst stakeholders to fight the menace and proffered **recommendations** such as - religious leaders adopting child friendly and protective doctrines; registration and monitoring of spiritual homes; involvement of churches, traditional rulers, parents in child protection initiatives, implementation of the child rights law, social care and protection for widows and OVCs, free and compulsory education at all levels. Importantly, he called on Social

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Welfare Officers to be alive to their responsibilities as caregivers and be alert at all time to ensure protection of children and prosecution of offenders.

2. PAPER PRESENTATION ON "TRACKING PERPETRATORS AND PROTECTING VICTIMS OF CHILD WITCH STIGMATIZATION THROUGH THE CRA, CRL AND LEGAL SYSTEM" BY JUSTICE JOY UNWANA

- Witchcraft accusations and stigmatization have been reported in Nigeria, Congo, Saudi Arabia, and Tanzania
- The practice was previously targeted at adults but has shifted to children as targets
- "While it cannot be successfully argued that witchcraft does not exist, its existence cannot be proved, scientifically or legally. It follows therefore that there is no guarantee that these accusations are true and this means that children suffer unjustly"
- **Child witch stigmatization is a criminal offence - Chapter 20 of the Criminal Code** deals with trials by ordeal, witchcraft, juju and criminal charms
- Section 210 (b) thereof, makes it an offence to accuse anybody of either being a witch or of possessing the power of witchcraft and prescribes a term of two years imprisonment
- Section 211 makes it unlawful for any chief to permit, promote, encourage or facilitate trial by ordeal. It also makes it unlawful for him to fail to report such trial. An offender is liable to three years imprisonment
- Section 212 provides for the destruction of any place, house or grove used to hold trial by ordeal upon order of the court
- **The Child Rights Act 2003** makes specific provisions under which the rights of children can be protected - Sections 4,8, 10, 11, 14, and 15. There were concerns from Lawyers present that those provisions are not justiceable, in that they do not come with corresponding penalties for offenders
- **Akwa Ibom Child Rights Law 2008** makes it an offence for any person, group of persons or organizations to accuse a child of being a witch, punishable with 10 years imprisonment or a fine of N500,000 or both
- **Tracking of Perpetrators:** "it is obvious that the problem lies in the enforcement of the law". "Information is the key to the tracking of perpetrators and sensitization of the public to create a new mindset is imperative and this has to be taken down to the village level and local churches since these are the places where these practices are rampant".
- **Retraining of the police force is also required.** "Despite the fact that witchcraft accusation is a criminal offence, there is no report of successful apprehension and prosecution of any offender by the police. The fight will have to be taken to the police colleges where the issue will be addressed"

2. Speech by Permanent Secretary, Federal Ministry of Women

- The Permanent Secretary thanked all participants for attending and noted that the technical meeting was to prepare for the upcoming International Conference on Violence Against

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Children holding at the National Institute of International Affairs, organised by the Nigeria Bar Association

- "The plight of children in Nigeria borders on the need to build institutional capacity of responsible Agencies and their duty bearers to implement the law as it concerns the upsurge in child witchcraft phenomenon"
- "Every society, no matter its cultural, economic, social background, can and must stop violence and abuse against children".
- "The Federal Government is saddened that the family, religious institutions and the society, entrusted with the task of nurturing children to grow into responsible and productive citizens, are paradoxically At the fore-front of child witch accusation"
- He called on the states yet to adopt the Child Rights Act to do so and called on states who have adopted to ensure they are implemented
- He identified the need for aggressive public enlightenment, sensitisation and advocacy as the key to solving the problem
- "Children are our asset, our future, when we fail to take care of them today, we should not expect them to take care of us tomorrow"

4. REPORTS FROM THE SOUTH-SOUTH

- **BAYELSA:** six cases of child witch accusations were reported to have been handled by the Director, Child Development, Bayelsa State, including a child who died. The report showed obvious absence of monitoring by the Bayelsa Ministry of Women Affairs.
 - ✓ **Recommendations:** sensitization of communities and awareness creation among stakeholders.
 - ✓ **Weaknesses:** lack of monitoring; The Director also reported that the Ministry had "fear of harm when a child confesses to be a witch without anyone beating the child" and this showed lack of understanding of issues surrounding witchcraft accusations by government social workers.
- **RIVERS:** The state reported that cases of witchcraft accusations are rare, although four cases were reported including one of Princess Blessing Uche who was branded a witch by her mother and chased out to roam the streets of Port Harcourt in December 2009. The State claimed to have taken action to arrest mother of the girl and charging her for 'child abuse'.
 - ✓ **Challenges:** inadequate funding; abandoned children are being housed in a remand home
- **CROSS RIVER:** The Director reported that the child witch phenomenon is fast growing in the state due to poverty, ignorance, lack of awareness, unnecessary accusations and false prophecies. However, he did not report on number of cases handled by the Ministry but noted that the Wife of the State Governor has established a Destiny Child Centre where street children in the State are sheltered and receive education

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- ✓ **Recommendations:** need to conduct research on the phenomenon to gain a broader understanding of the issues involved; awareness creation; capacity building; community mobilization; intervention programmes for already existing street children
- **EDO:** Report upsurge of street children in Edo State; Four cases of child witchcraft accusations/stigmatization were handled by the Ministry in 2010. The children were sent to a 'correctional centre for temporary shelter and social enquiry has been done on their historical background'. Visits were paid to their parents and they were taken to Catholic Priest for counseling and prayers. The State is establishing local government child rights committees; four Local Government Areas (LGAs) have been established so far.
 - ✓ **Challenges:** the police is slow to respond and does not report cases of abandoned children to the Ministry and sometimes put the children into custody; inadequate vehicles for rescue workers.
- **AKWA IBOM:** the Director of Child Development, Akwa Ibom, Mrs Veronica Okon arrived late, while the meeting was almost rounding up. While giving her belated report, she noted that "**the issue of child witchcraft stigmatization is not something that should be swept under the carpet**". She stated that there has been the issue of child witchcraft in the state even before the child rights law was adopted and that the state has an active surveillance team that has been taking street children off the streets to a model centre built by the state government. She also claimed that a child rights implementation committee has been formed in the state, when asked by SSN (Utibe Ikot) to mention the NGOs on the Committee, she had nothing to say. When also challenged about the model children centre, she conceded that it was a temporary facility, the 'security village' and that the government is making plans to build a centre. Other Directors challenged her on her report that the state government is preventing NGOs from operating shelters in the state, she claimed: "we discovered that some NGOs were inviting churches to exorcise children and some NGOs were not registered. When all that is sorted out, NGOs will be permitted to operate".

5. REPORTS FROM THE SOUTH EAST:

- **IMO:** the Director claimed that cases of witchcraft accusations are generally very rare in the state and that no case has been reported to the Ministry.
 - ✓ **Recommendations:** The Director called on states to adopt the child rights law and called for wider publicity in the media
- **ENUGU:** general belief in witchcraft reported and the Ministry reported four cases handled by it, all involving accusation of house maids as witches. One of the cases is said to be in court, "**the maid was forced to eat faeces from the toilet**"
 - ✓ **Challenges:** most of the cases were reported late, the **Child Rights Law is yet to be passed in Enugu State**"
 - ✓ **Recommendations:** advocacy and sensitization, establishment of children centre in every state, 'hack down of false prophets', proper referral of cases to appropriate agencies and adequate documentation

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- **EBONYI:** no case of child witchcraft accusation reported by the Ministry except for a case of three children who stoned their grandmother to death after accusing her of witch. The children were arrested and charged for murder but were freed by the State Chief Judge. Ebonyi State has passed the Child Rights. Ebonyi State also reported that children are also abandoned
 - ✓ **Recommendations:** need for sensitization to create awareness on the existence of Family Court and Juvenile Unit in the State

- **ABIA:** reported that incidence of child witchcraft accusations is not common in Abia State and no case has been reported to the Ministry although there is a “home that harbours child witches from neighbouring states for prayers of deliverance”. The State has adopted the child rights law.
 - ✓ **Emerging Issue:** When asked by Stepping Stones Nigeria (Utibe Ikot) if she was referring to Peace Sisters and if the neighbouring state was Akwa Ibom, she said yes. The Chairman of the session recommended that the Akwa Ibom Government be notified of such children. SSN frowned at Abia State Government granting registration to a group that exorcises children, an illegal practice according to Section 210 of the Criminal Code.

- **Anambra:** Mr. Emeka Ejide, the State Director for child development exhibited deep rooted belief in child witchcraft, although he claimed that the phenomenon is not common in the state. In his report: “every misfortune, death, sickness are caused by witches...., witchcraft is passed down to relatives and children except delivered spiritually. Children and families are victims of witchcraft attack in Anambra State”
 - ✓ **Recommendations:** Quoting the Director: “Cases of witchcraft if timely authenticated, must be handled by experts who are spiritually endowed with divine power; the expert who can deal with the devil and its agents in the Christian tradition are known as exorcists group; churches should identify exorcists and create exorcist centres for exorcism”

6. REPORTS FROM THE NORTH CENTRAL:

- **BENUE:** no report or incidence of witchcraft reported. However, there are other cases of child abuse such as rape (12 cases reported), using children for begging. **A case of a mother killing her albino child was reported.**
 - ✓ **Challenges:** Child Rights Law (CRL) has been adopted but no family courts
 - ✓ **Recommendation:** implementation of the CRL

- **KWARA:** reported that child witchcraft stigmatization is not common in the state but stories of mothers passing on witchcraft on to their children before dying has been heard. “We also hear stories that some children confess in some spiritual houses after or during prayer meetings”.
 - ✓ **Challenges:** people are not making official reports to relevant ministries

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- ✓ **Recommendations:** no child should be stigmatized as a witch because there is no way to confirm this; there should be proper documentation of available cases in schools or anywhere

- **KOGI:** reported that witchcraft stigmatization comes up as a result of death of somebody in the family. In most cases the woman is accused of killing her victim and is publicly disgraced. Children are not subjected to similar ordeals and no case of child witchcraft stigmatization has been reported.
 - ✓ **Recommendations:** need to embark on sensitization to places where children are stigmatized; people should be educated on possible reasons why children behave abnormally; prohibition of stigmatization of children should be included in the child rights law.

- **PLATEAU:** Significant reports of child witchcraft accusations in Plateau, especially among children who have lost their parents and are under the custody of relatives and those from broken homes. Children from indigent families are the ones most vulnerable to being labeled.

NGOS such as Gidan Bege in Jos are working on the phenomenon, sensitizing communities and encouraging people who claim to have been bewitched to go seek medical attention.
 - ✓ **Recommendations:** all stakeholders must work together to address this social ill, religious organizations should give spiritual counseling and teachings to their followers that children cannot have the power of witchcraft; parents must sit up to their responsibilities; NGOs and relevant ministries must come to the rescue of branded children through **alternative family placements, institutional rehabilitation, reformation and reintegrating the children back into the society and empowering them for self reliance in their adulthood.**

- **NASARAWA:** Child witchcraft accusations exist in Nasarawa State and children aged 2-18 are affected - children living with both parents, orphans, disabled children, house girls and house boys, pupils, etc. Six cases were reported to the Ministry and about 120 children were involved.
 - ✓ "In Yelwa, an old woman initiated some children into the cult and these children also initiated other children in the primary school. The community reacted by organizing fasting and prayers for spiritual deliverance, children were not maltreated"
 - ✓ In Akwanga, a case of Comfort, her father poured acid on her face and body. He was arrested and the case is being handled by a Magistrate Court in Lafia
 - ✓ A case of 42 children intercepted by the police, suspected to have been kidnapped or trafficked. Investigations revealed that the children were accused of witchcraft and were being taken to a native doctor in Niger State for 'purification'. The parents were arrested and charged to court
 - ✓ A workshop was organized by NAPTIP in October 2010 to create awareness on the menace to stakeholders

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- ✓ **Recommendations:** massive creation of awareness on the negative effects of child stigmatization; enactment of law of child witchcraft stigmatization and penalty to offenders
- **NIGER:** Niger reported that there are no cases of witchcraft accusations in the state but this was discredited by assessors who reported that the syndrome was actually on the rise in the state

7. REPORTS FROM THE NORTH-EAST:

- **YOBE:** child witchcraft accusations not common; no reported case in either towns or villages. The Islamic practice condemns the practice and there is no mention of trial of witches in the Qur'an.
 - ✓ **Recommendations:** there should be public enlightenment and sensitization right from the community level; religious leaders should preach to discourage the practice
- **BORNO:** no cases reported of children, but there are cases of adult witches and wizards and they are handled in courts.
 - ✓ **Recommendations:** sensitization and advocacy should be extended to local communities; traditional and religious leaders should be involved; recorded cases should be shown to the public through videos and posters to discourage them.
- **ADAMAWA:** there is a general belief that a female witch gives birth to children who are witches. Most children are mostly found in prayer houses where they are taken for deliverance.
 - ✓ **Recommendations:** *"The act of witchcraft is evil as such there should be public awareness on the need to handle such children with care and proper counseling to stop them from using evil powers to harm other fellow human beings".*
- **Yobe, Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, and Gombe have not passed the Child Rights Law. Only Taraba has passed the Child Rights Law in the North East.**

8. REPORTS FROM THE SOUTH WEST

- Lagos, Ogun, and Oyo States presented one report and stated: "we are not ignorant of the fact that there are allegations of child witchcraft but these are rarely reported"
 - ✓ Three cases were reported: a case of an eight years old girl in Lagos accused of being responsible for the death of her mother by her father and step mother. The father inflicted burns on the girls with a hot pressing iron. The man is still in detention, pending determination of the case and arrest of the step mother

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- ✓ In Ogun, a girl was reported by her mother to have been given sweet by her friend in school. The girl was said to have found herself in the midst of strange people at night while sleeping
- ✓ In Oyo, an Alfa (An Islamic cleric) was maltreating some children in his custody by chaining them. They were referred to him by the children's parents for stubbornness and truancy. The Alfa was charged to court but prominent elders in the state intervened and the man was cautioned and released.
- ✓ **Recommendations:** supervising ministries should be adequately funded by government; children should be properly monitored

9. REPORTS FROM THE NORTH WEST

- **ZAMFARA:** the people of the state shy away from discussing issues of witchcraft and the state ministry has not received any case of child witchcraft accusation. Need for sensitization stressed.
- **KEBBI:** no reports of child witchcraft accusation
- **JIGAWA, KANO, ZAMFARA: no reports**

10. POSITION PAPERS BY SSN

SSN presented two position papers namely: Witchcraft Accusations: Nigeria Situation (presented by Utibe Ikot on behalf of Gary Foxcroft) and Witch Hunt and the Law by Barr. James Ibor. The papers were well received and generated lots of discourses, especially in reinforcing the need for a right based approach towards child abuse and providing an independent and object assessment of the situation. The papers are attached herewith.

11. REJOINDER BY LEO IGWE

- Worried about the strong belief in Child Development Workers at the meeting, Leo Igwe who was serving as the Master of Ceremony made a written rejoinder and distributed to participants. Many civil society representatives at the meeting shared similar views.
 - ✓ He called on Nigerians to disabuse their minds of hearsay, make belief, and tell tales of witchcraft, which he stated, was a myth
 - ✓ That using witchcraft to explain accident, death, strange behavior, etc was driven by ignorance and fear
 - ✓ That those entrusted with tackling child witchcraft stigmatization, who still believe that children can be witches, are part of the problem and lack the competencies and disposition to effectively address the problem
 - ✓ That the Federal government should organize a seminar to challenge and dispel belief in witchcraft
 - ✓ That it is totally absurd to know that one who claims to be fighting stigmatization still believes that children can be witches. It is totally unacceptable.

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12. MEETING CLOSING

The meeting adjourned on the morning on Wednesday, 22nd June 2011. Resource Persons were given part refund of their transport fares and paid a honorarium of Twenty Thousand Naira each. The Ministry promised to send a communiqué to all attendees by email but that is yet to be done, at the time of filing this report.

Report Filed By:

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