

Witchcraft Accusations and Women's Empowerment in Makeni, Sierra Leone

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Abstract

The article examines the impact of witchcraft accusations on women's empowerment in the Makeni Township. The study employs a survey method, which includes the administration of questionnaires, focus group discussions, formal interviews, and reviewing related literature. Results indicate that older women are more prone to witchcraft accusations, and men who are often witch hunters mostly make these accusations. The paper also shows that older women are targeted mainly because of traditional or cultural conceptualizations, which direct witchcraft accusations to women only because that is how it is, poverty, and terminal illnesses. This study also shows that Witchcraft has a less positive impact on women and affects their chances of being empowered. Women accused of witchcraft practices suffer much inhuman treatment, including public ridicule, shaming and damning them, social exclusion, and sometimes, even death. However, the paper concludes that women's accusation of witchcraft practices are linked firmly to their poor socioeconomic status, thus making it exemplary that witchcraft accusation is both a cause and effect of lack of empowerment for women.

Keywords

Witchcraft, Women, Empowerment, Accusations, Makeni

1. Introduction

Throughout history, accused witches have been executed by hanging, drowning, and burning. Unfortunately, the persecution of accused witches is still widespread in most communities worldwide.

Witchcraft accusations occur for both men and women and in the recent past, women and children are increasingly falling victim to such allegations.

Often, people believe and can charge an entire family for Witchcraft, even if only one individual in the family is suspected. However, women, especially older women, are usually targeted for witchcraft accusations. In Tanzania, for example, 17,220 women were abused on allegations that they were practising Witchcraft between 1998 and 2001 and that 10% of them lost their lives (Bailey, 2003).

Therefore, Witchcraft, a superstition among most African Countrymen, Sierra Leone not being an exception, is a systematic act of violence against women. It has been a shameful blot on humanity. Thus, it is an extreme form of human rights violation to accuse a woman, especially the aged, widows, single, childless, and poor women, of a witch capable of inflicting ailments on others and for which they are publicly ridiculed, abandoned, and sometimes even killed.

Contemporary studies have indicated that witch-hunting and accusations relate more to socioeconomic implications than superstitions (McCoy, 2004). Therefore, this phenomenon is understandable from both a conflict and feminist perspectives of Witchcraft. Therefore, this is a conspiracy against women to keep the backstage of empowerment, thus using Witchcraft as an instrument in political, social, and economic struggles. Thus, witchcraft accusations are considered gendered violence, where men target women in economic wealth, spiritual or social positions.

Additionally, women who turned their traditional skills to profit-making ventures placed themselves in competition with men and positions of vulnerability to witchcraft accusations (Christian Day, 1992).

This practice also conforms to the notion that women are weaker sex (morally) than men and, therefore, more susceptible to the clutches of the evil spirit; hence, they can be quickly drawn to the practices of Witchcraft (Jaishankar & Ronel, 2013).

However, in Sierra Leone, many have seen the intervention of the Human Rights Commission as a blessing to women accused of Witchcraft. However, this study aimed to explore the concept of witchcraft accusations and how it affects women's Empowerment in Sierra Leone, primarily because witchcraft accusations affect health, academic performance, and general behaviour in society.

Thus, the main objectives of the study were to:

- Understand the causes of Witchcraft in the study area;
- Determine the influence of Witchcraft on women and their empowerment;
- Assess the gendered nature of witchcraft accusations in Sierra Leone;
- Suggest possible solutions to the problem of Witchcraft.

2. Witchcraft in Traditional Settings

A witch in the African context goes out to cause harm to other people in the community. According to Matsobane J. Manala (2004), witches in Africa fly at night away from their sleeping bodies and cause harm to the souls of others who are not like them and eventually inflict sicknesses on them that will lead to their

demise. Therefore, in the traditional perspective, a witch can cause harm to others only because that is what they do. For instance, in Sierra Leone, a witch is a person who can look so poor and miserable in real life and is so rich and powerful in the witch world. They can also use different implements to perform specific functions, such as using empty ground nutshells as powerful boats to sail across long distances of water to commit atrocities in people's lives. Hence, witch hunters can perceive the oldest and poorest woman in a community as powerful and wealthy in the underworld.

Additionally, community people quickly consider people with chronic body wounds as witches. Generally, therefore, witches are associated with danger and wickedness, and nobody appreciates the label of a witch. However, witches are known to cause evil not by intent, thus making the fact that witches suffer from an involuntary compulsive disorder that forces them to do evil deeds to other people, which also implies that they are victims (Manala, 2014). Against these facts, therefore, the understanding of Witchcraft refers to applying magical powers to inflict harm and misfortune on others, which might not be intentional due to the ideology that it might be due to occult power or supernatural possibilities without being knowledgeable of it. Thus, as Matsobane J. Manala (2014) puts it, it is an evil penumbra of human wickedness, an inborn preternatural power to harm and kill, enjoyed for its own sake. However, the concepts and principles of Witchcraft in Africa have changed with modernization creeping in. Witchcraft and sorcery are now used to interpret worldly and national political events, especially concerning the attainment and loss of political power and other state issues (Larry, 2004).

3. The Concept of Women's Economic Empowerment

Women's economic empowerment is widely seen as a critical catalyst for facilitating various other forms of empowerment. Women's empowerment enables them to assert their presence in society, granting them a platform to express their opinions, expand their options, and cultivate a sense of dignity and confidence. The World Bank's 2019 definition of economic empowerment, according to the World Economic Forum (WEF) in 2020, calls for facilitating women's participation in markets at both the policy and agency levels. Women's economic empowerment is crucial for realizing women's rights and attaining broader development objectives, including economic growth, poverty reduction, health, education, and welfare (Golla et al., 2011). According to the author's perspective, women's economic empowerment is contingent upon their possession of two key attributes: the capacity to achieve and progress in economic endeavours and the authority to formulate and implement economic choices. According to the World Inequality and Gender Observatory, in order to attain complete economic empowerment for women, it is imperative to develop a comprehensive understanding of the respective positions of women and men within the labour market and the broader economy, as well as the implications that arise from gender dis-

parities.

The increasing prominence of women as a significant driving force in development is a matter of utmost importance that demands the attention of policy-makers and non-governmental organizations. In Africa, women experience social and economic disadvantages compared to men. The economic empowerment of women, particularly in Makeni, encounters many obstacles. Despite the numerous initiatives and programs implemented by governmental and non-governmental entities within the Makeni Municipality and its environs, the current state of affairs needs to meet the intended outcome. Many women residing in Makeni continue to experience dependency and face challenges in attaining economic autonomy within their families and broader society. Despite their significant contributions in many capacities, such as mothers, teachers, nurses, farmers, and other essential societal positions, women have historically faced marginalization in their full participation in economic, social, and political activities. The phenomenon is commonly observed through limited political representation, regressive cultural customs, inequitable labour rights, insufficient involvement in decision-making processes, restricted property ownership rights, and limited educational opportunities. According to a report by UN Women in 2020, the overall consequence of this phenomenon has been restricting women to a state of financial deprivation and socioeconomic vulnerability.

Providing economic empowerment to women can have mutually beneficial outcomes, not just for women but also for society. Promoting women's capacity to attain their rights and well-being is concurrently associated with reducing household poverty, augmentation of economic growth and production, and enhancement of efficiency. Extensive research has identified compelling justifications for promoting women's economic empowerment. This is primarily because economic empowerment is a highly effective avenue for women to realize their capabilities and promote their rights. Given that women constitute the majority of individuals living in poverty globally, it becomes imperative to address the issue of women's economic empowerment to achieve poverty reduction objectives effectively. The economic inefficiency of gender discrimination is evident. When a sizeable portion of the population is unable to compete fairly or reach its full potential, national economies decline. Collaborating with women proves to be a strategic decision in business. The acquisition of appropriate skills and opportunities enables women to contribute to the growth of businesses and marketplaces.

Additionally, women must have access to economic opportunities and possess agency in determining how the benefits derived from these opportunities are utilized. By leveraging these benefits, women can make strategic choices and engender favourable life transformations (SIDA, 2019).

Factors such as the low representation of women in governance, religious, cultural, and societal disparities resulting from policies and practices that marginalize women based on gender, and the adverse health effects of gender-based violence hinder women's socioeconomic empowerment in Sierra Leone. The

prevalence of witchcraft beliefs in Makeni City has rendered women susceptible to accusations, perpetuating a stigmatizing environment that fosters discrimination. Consequently, this devaluation of women's significance and potential within society has had profound implications for their growth and empowerment.

4. Methodology

This study was conducted in Makeni City, in the Northern Province of Sierra Leone, the administrative centre of Bombali District, and popularly known, like other areas in the country, for issues surrounding Witchcraft and sorcery.

This study's research design included primary and secondary data sources. Texts, journals, and other publications were used to elicit information for the study and structured questionnaires were used to obtain primary data for this work.

Additionally, a simple random sampling technique was used to administer the instrument to a sample size of 120 respondents in the study area, including women and girls accused of Witchcraft, traditional healers, local authorities, witch doctors, and other Non-Governmental Organizations.

SPSS was used to analyse the data, which will be presented in simple statistical designs, including frequency tables and charts.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Causes of Witchcraft Accusations in the Study Area

It is imperative to acknowledge that Sierra Leone is a diverse nation encompassing multiple ethnic groups, each characterized by distinct witchcraft-related beliefs and rituals. In the city of Makeni, akin to several traditional societies worldwide, a rich and varied array of beliefs about Witchcraft are deeply ingrained within the customs and traditions of the local populace. The study findings indicate that several factors contribute to individuals' vulnerability to Witchcraft charges in Makeni City. These factors include terminal illnesses, albinism, physical impairment, disaster, bad harvest, and persistent poverty. An interview with traditional authorities revealed that deviating from established traditional norms and conventions may be interpreted as engaging in practices associated with Witchcraft. Makeni is a self-contained indigenous community whereby residents are anticipated to govern their behaviour by prevailing societal norms and conventions. Individuals who depart from established societal norms are susceptible to accusations of Witchcraft. As mentioned earlier, the allegations engender disenchantment and alienation and impede the potential for personal development and empowerment among the accused individuals, as they may encounter challenges in integrating into the broader societal context.

During a Focus Group Discussion conducted with elderly individuals, a pre-

valent sentiment emerged on the apprehension towards the accumulation of riches by specific younger individuals. They connected their wealth and the realms of magic, sorcery, Witchcraft, and the occult. The people interviewed recounted events about the engagement of young individuals in ritualistic activities to accumulate a fortune, attain recognition, and secure positions of political power. Significantly, individuals experiencing poverty attributed their ongoing economic suffering and persistent impoverishment to the wealthy, impeding progress and impinging upon the advancement and empowerment of the most susceptible members of society.

Furthermore, many natural phenomena that defy conventional explanations can be attributed to the practice of Witchcraft. The interview findings suggest a perceived association between albinism and Witchcraft. Women who give birth to individuals with albinism face discrimination and are accused of engaging in adultery and practising Witchcraft. Mothers of individuals with albinism are often compelled to provide sworn statements attesting to their fidelity during pregnancy. In some instances, they may be coerced into admitting to practising Witchcraft.

5.2. Category of People at Risk of Witchcraft Involvement

The act of levying accusations of Witchcraft can yield significant and frequently detrimental consequences for an individual's psychological well-being and their ability to achieve socioeconomic advancement. These factors impact individuals' social, psychological, and physical well-being. It is imperative to acknowledge that the ramifications of these allegations extend beyond Makeni and might manifest in many cultures worldwide where belief systems surrounding Witchcraft persist.

Women, who are predominantly subjected to accusations, may experience a decline in their social status and encounter instances of prejudice. The allegation of engaging in Witchcraft can result in notable psychological discomfort, hence impeding one's progress in personal growth and hindering the attainment of empowerment. Witchcraft accusations can potentially split families apart because the accused may experience abandonment from their family members, increasing their vulnerability and sense of emptiness.

Findings from the research reveal that the most vulnerable and accused persons are older women. Children, people with terminal illnesses like HIV/AIDS, and people with albinism also formed a more significant part of those commonly accused of Witchcraft (See **Figure 1**). These accusations stigmatize women, most often affect their social interactions, and deprive them of sustainable economic empowerment.

5.3. Categories of People Who Accuse Others of Witchcraft

The research community frequently encounters instances of witchcraft accusations. Frequently, individuals tend to perceive one's unwillingness to assist others as a

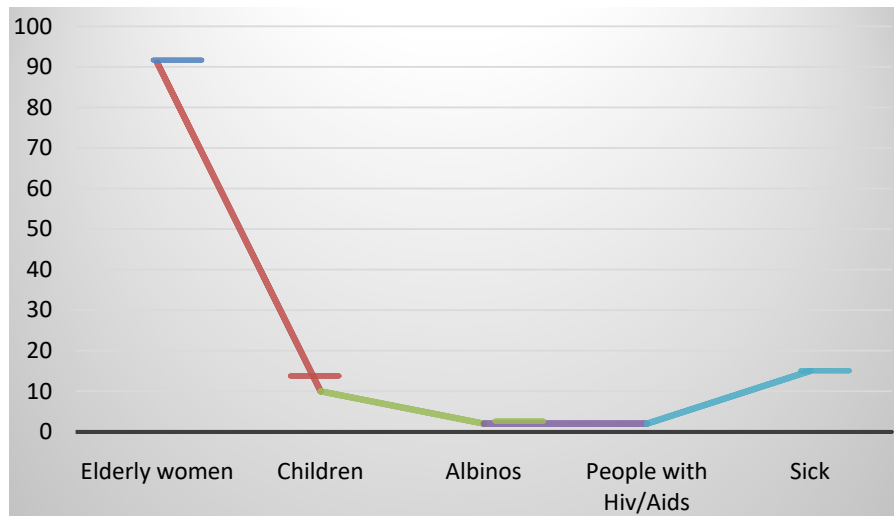


Figure 1. Category of people at risk of witchcraft involvement. Source: Field Survey March 2022.

manifestation of Witchcraft, resulting in the stigmatization and shaming of the affected individual, depriving them of their ethical standing within communities. Specific individuals whom allegations of Witchcraft have targeted have been compelled to move to different communities to establish a new existence devoid of the burden of public disgrace and humiliation. This study revealed that traditional healers are most commonly known for that function among those guilty of accusing others of Witchcraft. In many instances, individuals frequently use the services of traditional healers or practitioners, sometimes referred to as witch doctors¹ in order to counteract the influence of witches within a specific community. Next in line are the individuals with whom you share the local community. The findings of the study suggest that neighbours become suspicious of individuals who become successful. They draw a potential association between the accumulation of wealth, particularly among impoverished communities, and the prevalence of sorcery and Witchcraft. Interestingly, family members are the third category of individuals who level accusations of bewitchment against their relatives (Table 1).

The study highlights why older women are primary targets of witchcraft accusations. Some respondents stated deep-seated cultural beliefs that older women are retired witches lead to witchcraft accusations. However, 32 (26.6%) mentioned that poverty and the need to apportion blame and seek redress for adverse events are responsible for such accusations; 27 (22.5%) illustrate that some connect to conflict over property ownership where the removal of older people will expedite occupation by other family members. In comparison, 20 (16.6%) identified that the lower status of women in the community often leads to witchcraft accusations. As a result of these accusations, however, older women were mainly exposed to public ridicule, social exclusion, deprivation, and marginalization.

¹People who possess spiritual powers and charms to dispel witch.

Table 1. Respondent responses about categories of people who accuse others of witchcraft.

Responses	AF	RF (%)
Traditional healers	55	45.8
Neighbours	23	19.1
Family members	19	15.8
Town people	13	10.8
Town authorities	8	6.6
Tribal authorities	2	1.6
Total	120	100.0

Source: Field Survey March 2022.

5.4. The Influence of Witchcraft on Women's Empowerment

Concerning the positive influence of Witchcraft on women's development, the majority of the respondents, 105 (87.5%), totally responded negatively, indicating that they are not aware of any positive influence of Witchcraft on the development of women. Additionally, it was made clear that most women accused of Witchcraft, whether true or not, are primarily in impoverished states. Family and community exclusions and the stereotyped thinking associated with women and Witchcraft further perpetuate this lack of development on women's side. Thus, empowerment programs for women, especially those associated with witchcraft accusations, must be improved in the Makeni community. The challenges women in this community face are enormous, which keeps them in a constant state of a vicious cycle of poverty. Those who often flee their communities of origin because of the social reproach present move to other towns and cities where survival is also very tough for their kind. They often live in slum areas where diseases, arm robbery, and other ills of society are predominant. Against this backdrop, the empowerment possibilities of these women are in shambles.

5.5. Gendered Nature of Witchcraft Accusation

Other genders are involved in witchcraft accusations, but women are the highest of those usually accused of Witchcraft (See **Figure 2** below). As a result, women faced a series of physical, emotional, and psychological abuses. It was, however, further understood that most of the witch doctors were men and were primarily involved in witchcraft accusations against women. This fact leads to doubts about how genuine these men are against women and is therefore linked to the Marxist and feminist concepts of witchcraft accusations against women. However, some international organizations like the Human Rights group have made strides in sensitizing communities in the study area and controlling the level of punishment levied on women accused of Witchcraft.

5.6. Genders Involved in Witchcraft Accusations

In Makeni, a community characterized by patriarchal norms, men hold dominant positions across various social domains, including government and cultural activities. Consequently, women and children emerge as particularly susceptible and marginalized groups. The gender composition of traditional leaders and witch doctors predominantly consists of men, hence aiding their ability to form judgments regarding women. The study’s findings indicate that a significant proportion of those implicated in allegations of engaging in witchcraft activities are women and children.

6. Possible Solutions

In order to control the rate and level of witchcraft accusations against women in the study area, a series of recommendations are given by the respondents, including the need to have better sensitization programs about witchcraft accusations, capacity-building programs for women accused of Witchcraft, better investment on education; abolish banishment laws of Witchcraft; and women’s involvement in decision-making processes (See **Figure 3** below).

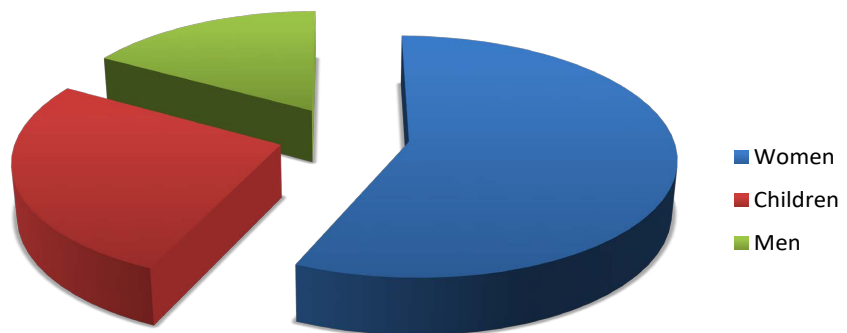


Figure 2. Genders involved in witchcraft accusations. Source: Field survey, March 2022.

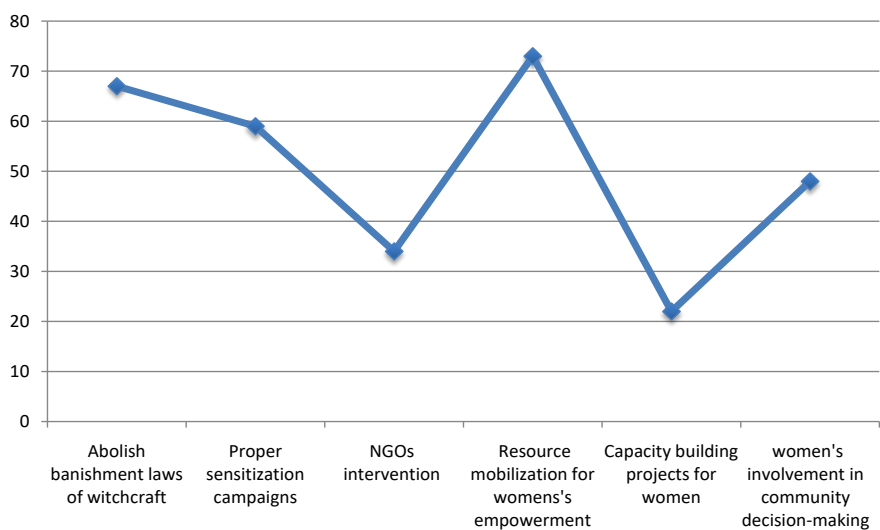


Figure 3. Respondents’ suggestions. Source: Field survey, March 2022.

7. Summary of Findings

Witchcraft refers to the utilization or rousing of believed enchanted powers with the intention of exerting control over individuals or occurrences. These activities commonly encompass the involvement of sorcerers, charms, and magical elements. There is a prevailing belief that they exhibit heightened activity during nighttime periods when engaging in their ceremonial practices.

Recent research has suggested that the phenomenon of witch-hunting and the act of making accusations are influenced chiefly by socioeconomic factors rather than superstitions (McCoy, 2004). Hence, the understanding of this phenomenon can be elucidated by examining it through the lenses of both conflict theory and feminist theory about Witchcraft. Thus, a concerted effort exists to undermine women's progress by employing the practice of Witchcraft as a tool in the context of political, social, and economic conflicts. As a result, the act of accusing individuals of Witchcraft can be understood as a form of gendered violence, in which men specifically target women who possess economic prosperity, spiritual authority, or social standing.

There are several impediments to the socioeconomic empowerment of women in Sierra Leone. These include the underrepresentation of women in positions of governance, disparities arising from religious, cultural, and societal norms that marginalize women due to gender, and the adverse health consequences of gender-based violence. The predominance of witchcraft beliefs in Makeni City has created a situation where women are vulnerable to allegations, leading to a stigmatising atmosphere promoting discrimination. As a result, the devaluation of women's worth and potential within society has significantly impacted their personal development and ability to exert influence. The study concludes that women and children are mostly accused of Witchcraft by traditional healers, neighbours, and relatives. The impacts of these allegations have robbed them of their self-esteem and moral worth and have forced many to move to other communities in search of a new beginning. The study concludes that the absence of women's empowerment in the studied area is a cause as well as an effect of the charges of Witchcraft.

8. Conclusions and Recommendations

8.1. Conclusions

This study has made it clear that Witchcraft's accusation of Women is linked to the meagre socioeconomic status of women and the deep-rooted stereotypical thinking of both men and women in the study area. Furthermore, the paper posits that older women, especially poverty-stricken ones, are more prone to witchcraft accusations.

Thus, it further clarifies that the lack of women's empowerment is both cause and effect of witchcraft accusations in the study area. The paper also showed that Witchcraft has no positive effect on women and instead makes them the victims, as they suffer the consequences of the act's existence.

Finally, the paper has shown clearly that witchcraft accusation is a gendered concept because women are accused of involvement in witchcraft practices, and male witch hunters or doctors mostly make these accusations.

8.2. Recommendations

The following recommendations are advanced from the study concerning Witchcraft accusations and Women's Empowerment in Makeni.

- First, the country should have freemason schools and study areas to care for witches and wizards.
- Second, the government should enact laws prohibiting the harmful practice of Witchcraft in the study area and the country as a whole.
- Third, community authorities should check the undue penalization of those accused of witchcraft practices.
- Fourth, clear benchmarks must be established to standardize checks about who a witch is and who is not to avoid the false accusation of women as witches.
- Finally, there should not be indiscriminate accusations of older women of Witchcraft in the community.
- This study cannot be considered exhaustive by any means, so the need to conduct similar studies in other witchcraft-prone areas must be emphasized.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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