THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF ELDERLY WOMEN ACCUSED OF WITCHCRAFT IN A RURAL COMMUNITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract
This study examines the experiences, fear of being killed, and reactions towards accusations of elderly women, accused of witchcraft. The respondents were elderly women with an average age of 65 years who had retired in rural South Africa. They responded to semi-structured interview questions, aimed at documenting the accusations and insults, hurled at them daily by members of community. Thematic analysis indicated the community’s hostile reaction towards the women. The following themes and corresponding sub-themes were established: demographics, cultural factors, with sub-themes of old age and circumstances, surrounding death; and socio-economic factors, with sub-themes of poverty, unemployment, and jealousy. Based on their personal experiences, the community did not have concrete evidence of their accusations, which stemmed from external factors, over which they had no control. These findings were explained as being the authorities not protecting victims against all accusations. These accusations of witchcraft happened despite the protection of the constitution, the bill of rights and relevant legislation. In conclusion the law enforcement agencies must enforce the law to protect the elderly women in the communities.

Keywords: witchcraft, elderly women, cultural factors, socio-economic.

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1. Introduction

The study examines the experiences, fear of being killed, and reactions towards accusations of elderly women, accused of witchcraft. “Witchcraft is defined as the ability of a person or group of people to cause harm to others by use of supernatural powers” [1, 2]. The problem of accusations of witchcraft represents a serious violation of the human rights of the victims, more particularly in Africa. Most notably in Mozambique and Tanzania, cases of witchcraft allegations and abuse are specifically identified among the rights violations that affect elderly people [3]. This results in such people being subjected to physical and psychological abuse by their respective communities [4]. There is a concern that superstitious belief is behind an unacceptably high level of mistreatment, perpetrated against older women in Africa [5].

Characteristics of the elderly, commonly used to accuse people of witchcraft (such as oldage, bad health, red or yellow eyes, wrinkled skin, missing teeth, or a hunched-back stance), are impossible for them to escape [6–9]. The context, in which accusations of witchcraft are made, are associated with demographic, socioeconomic, psychological, and cultural factors [10]. Factors, such as economic wellbeing and strained relationships among community members, also play a major role in accusing elderly women witches [7, 11]. When such tragedies appear in the community, the suspects are often “first and foremost sought among those neighbours, with whom victims had already been in problematic relationships before the misfortune occurred” [11].

The belief is still entrenched in Africa and also the practice is still prevalent in the continent [4]. Similarly, in Ghana, suspects are accused of being responsible for a variety of calamities, including inexplicable illnesses and untimely deaths, as well as a series of unexplained misfortunes in a family or the community, and are consequently persecuted [5] – to the extent of being burned or stoned to death. In Africa, it is generally believed, that witches have the power to harm other people by virtue of the inherent quality, which enables them to leave their bodies and make spiritual journeys for the attack [10]. Some people believe that witches have the ability to induce disease in humans, animal sickness, poor luck, untimely death, impotence, and other disasters [12, 10].
The goal of the study is to explore the lived experiences of elderly people, accused of witchcraft, in order to fully understand the traumatic experiences they go through as human beings. The research question is as follows: How do South African elderly people, accused of witchcraft, perceive their experiences of the accusation they have to deal with on a daily basis?

2. Materials and Methods

Research design

The study is underpinned by interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which is concerned with the detailed examination of personal lived experience, the meaning of experience to participants and how participants make sense of that experience [13]. As such, it can provide insight into the experiences of elderly women, accused as witches. The researchers become a part of the process, as they describe and explain human phenomena, working with their participants, to achieve an in depth understanding of experiences [14].

Participants and setting

The study was carried out between in 2021. The participants were ten women within an average age of 65 years from rural South Africa who were convenience sampled. The participants consisted of women who had been verbally abused by accusations of witchcraft. These women were mainly Sesotho speaking. The participants were unable to defend themselves because they were old, sick, weak, and vulnerable.

Data collection and procedure

The participants completed a semi-structured in-depth interview regarding their experiences of constant accusations of witchcraft. They described their traumatic experiences of being wrongful accused of witchcraft by people who had known them for years in the community. The credibility and transferability of this qualitative study depends heavily on the care and consistency of the applied research practices [15]. It is thus required from a researcher to be “thorough, careful and honest in carrying out the research, but also being able to show others that you have been” [16].

Ethical clearance Procedure

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Central University of Technology [HREIC 14/01/21]. The participants consented to participate in the study. The researcher emphasised to the participants that they participated in the study voluntarily and could withdraw anytime without any repercussions. In addition to that they were assured that they would remain anonymous and assured that the data would be kept confidentially. The participants were interviewed at their places of residence.

Data analysis

Analysing the data individually allowed the narrative to ‘open up’ and reveal the experiences of the participants as various ‘individual parts’ and then as a ‘whole’ [17, 18]. Throughout the data analysis, six key steps supported the rigour, transparency, and coherence of the findings. [18] propose a six-step analysis as follows: Firstly, read and re-read the transcript to get to know the data. Secondly, make initial notes to systematically capture observations. Thirdly, develop emerging themes for each case, attending to reflexive echoes. Fourthly, search for connections across emergent themes for each case. Fifthly, move to the next case. Sixthly, look for patterns across cases.

3. Results and discussion

Data analysis resulted in three main themes: firstly, demographic (old age); secondly, cultural belief with the sub-theme of circumstances, surrounding death; thirdly, socio-economic factors with sub-themes of poverty, unemployment and jealousy. The findings are presented and discussed below.

Theme 1: Demographic

The belief is held by many communities that most old women are witches. In most cases, these are women who do not have the support system of their families and live alone. A witchcraft-labelled elderly woman adds:

“It all started as rumour from my neighbour that I am witch when their father died. They accused me of the cause of his death and the rumour spread like wildfire that I am a witch. This led to the community paranoia and mistrust. Everyone sees me as a witch in the community where
I lived all my life. They blame for living long because I use a strong muti. I live under constant fear that I might be attacked, which I won’t be able to defend myself. I am staying alone, all my children are working outside town and their father has passed away” (Respondent # 3, in her 80’s).

“I am in my late 70s. I am unable to defend myself against this youngster who always hurls insults at me because their parents labelled me a witch. Children as young as my grandchildren insult me with all sorts of bad insults. I had wrinkles on my face because I am old, to them is a sign of being witch. I am not in position to report it to their parents because this disease passed to the children and they too see you as a witch. I feel helpless in this mad community where children are taught to disrespect their elders” (Respondent #7, in her 70s).

“I am isolated in the community, no one wants to come closer to me because I am seen as a witch. The children when I call them to send them to do me chores, they all laugh at me and run away from me. I fear if I can get sick and die here no one will bother to check my whereabouts when they do not see me for days. It is traumatic to live in the community, I am also planning to stay at the old age and sell my house. At the old age I will live in peace without constant stigma of being labelled as a witch” (Respondent # 9 in her late 60s).

The elderly population of women, accused of witchcraft, were exposed to great threats of being attacked and isolated in the community [19]. They experienced suffering because of the society’s negative attitude towards them [5]. According to research, vulnerable elderly women in Ghana are more likely to be accused of witchcraft [20–22] and eventually ended being mistreated and murdered [23]. This is confirmed by [24] that elderly women are more subjected to abuse by the society than any other group.

**Theme 2: Cultural factors**

According to [25], witchcraft practices form part of each society’s cultural phenomena. Every community around the world holds specific traditional cultural practices and beliefs, some beneficial, others harmful, more particularly to elderly women.

“The newly wed couple back-opposite to me were very sick and they consulted a “witchdoctor”. I think he told them that the old woman in the community is the cause of their illness. Because people are not good in keeping a secret, another woman told me that there is an old woman who wants to see couples fighting and eventually divorced, so as the man can marry her daughter” (Respondent # 8 in her late 70s).

“I am the cause of her not getting pregnant. Being barren is not a choice and I am being blamed by these couples in the community, because I am only an old woman around here” (Respondent # 7, in her 70s).

The accusation of witchcraft arises in the socio-cultural nature of communities. The accusation of witchcraft usually arises when they are threatened [10]. Many Africans, when having suffered a misfortune, illness, or death in the family, seek the service of a witchdoctor to identify who is bewitching them [26]. More often, the culprits are old woman who then must face the consequences [27]. However, we argue that, at least in Sub-Saharan Africa, deep-seated traditional culture and, in particular, witchcraft beliefs, cannot be ignored in the examination of social capital [28].

**Subtheme 1: Circumstances surrounding death**

People believe that death cannot occur without a witch, causing it. It is against the belief that the death of a person is blamed on others:

“I am accused of being the cause of the death in the community. I do not understand because people die like my children who died because were sick, now I am the cause of their death. I am God” (Respondent # 4).

“The community problems are targeted towards us. Even HIV pandemic when people were dying we accused as witches.” (Respondent # 10).

The elderly women, accused of causing illness in the community, are subjected to forms of violation and persecution. It is sad, that death in the community in most instances is pinned on witches who are elderly women, ignoring the cause of the death [10]. The accusations behind witchcraft are mainly based on mere suspicion or rumour or gossip that circulate within the community, whenever its members are faced with a tragedy. In many instances, when misfortunes are
experienced, traditional healers and diviners are called upon to determine and explain the source of the misfortunes and also reveal the identity of the offending witch [26, 29].

Theme 3: Socioeconomic

Inequality in a society causes unnecessary jealousy – people even accusing well off, but elderly women as witches. Such women may live longer because of a healthy life style and can afford better health facilities.

"The inequality in this society has led people accusing me of witchcraft. The people in this community live in poor condition and poverty is rampant here. People cannot understand why I can afford the lifestyle, forgetting that my husband is a teacher just like me" (Respondent # 1 in her 70s)

"I am a very sick person, I am in out of hospital, but to my neighbours I am accused of witchcraft. They argue that I am being punished for all the misery I caused to the other while I was young. Some even suggest that my magic power is the one that is eating me because I cannot use it anymore to witch others"(Respondent # 9 in her late 60s)

One popular theory involves the concept of scapegoating, which states that particular people may be accused of witchcraft in the context of social tensions, produced by things like economic malaise, uneven development, famine, drought, failed medical systems, and epidemics like HIV/AIDS [30]. The wealthy accuse the poor of bewitching them, while the poor blame the wealthy of profiting from witchcraft. When the well-to-do fail to meet the expectations of their poorer neighbours and relatives for support, social tensions result.

Subtheme 1: Poverty

Many respondents, often accused of witchcraft, lived in abject poverty. In addition to being old, many of them were single or barren and had no social support at their disposal – as was espoused by the participant:

"I am living in an abject poverty I am surviving from handout from good Samaritans, but I am labelled a witch. When people pass at my house they will pass funny remarks. In some instances when you will hear them saying is this witch is still alive. They only rejoice when they hear you are sick, and think you are closer to death. I am too weak to fight back"(Respondent # 2 in her 70s).

"It’s worse when your relatives accuse of witchcraft, because their children are not well behaved, you are the cause of bad behaviour. You blamed for even the children opting to stealing and not attending school. You are accused of casting a bad luck on them not to succeed"(Respondent # 5 in her 80s).

In many communities around the globe, people who are successful and those from poor backgrounds are more often accused of witchcraft [10].This is the case in Malawi where people, accused of witchcraft, are generally people who struggle to make ends meet [31]. Illiteracy in some communities plays a significant role where elderly women are accused of witchcraft. This has led many people to believe that calamities, such as droughts, famines, pests, and diseases, have resulted from the efforts of poor elderly women who did not want to see the progress of the energetic ones. Sickness and troubles are attributed to envy on the part of relatives and their spiritually powerful allies [32].

Subtheme 2: Unemployment

For the past decade, South Africa has experienced high levels of unemployment among the youth. Economic factors, such as unemployment, are often blamed on witchcraft:

"My children are all working and qualified in their respective fields now, I am accused of casting misfortunes to their children who do not get jobs" (Respondent # 2 in her later 70s).

"With all unemployment in the country is blame on me that I have a magic potion for my children. They are fortunate because her mother has the power to give them a lucky mixture, that makes them employer to like them and eventual employ them"(Respondent # 8 in her 70s).

At the same time, high unemployment fuels further witchcraft because “people are suffering and are thus more inclined to turn upon their neighbours [33]. Such a response demonstrates ignorance of the socio-economic problem of unemployment, for people blame the social problem (unemployment) on witchcraft. It is sad, that the global problem of unemployment is still attributed to witchcraft.
**Subtheme 3: Jealousy**

The jealousy does play a role of being eventually end up, accused of witchcraft. Success is seen as a part of witchcraft in African culture. If you are successfully, you must be using a powerful muti to keep your customers or people fear you.

“I live all my life as model citizen in this community, running a crèche. Most of the kids went through my care. I do not think I have done bad things to warrant this accusation” (Respondent # 2 in her 70s).

“My late husband left me a business when it started flourishing, then the rumours started that I have body parts, buried in my shop, it is why customers I attracted to me. This requires a blood sacrifice for servicing, when relatives die there is a strong suspicion that I am behind that to keep my wealth. I am now accused of being the person behind these killings” (Respondent # 5 in her 80s).

There is a belief that witches are jealous and use magical power to cause harm on their victims [34]. Rich people are prime suspects of having gained their wealth through blood rituals [33]. On the other hand, the rich harbour suspicions that the poor use witchcraft to dispossess them of their wealth, leading them to use traditional healers for protection [35]. The accusation that witchcraft is born out of jealousy cuts across the society, including both ordinary and leadership [36, 37]. President Mugabe publicly accused his former deputies Joyce Mujuru and Emmerson Mnangagwa of using witchcraft to succeed him as president [38].

**Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

This initial study is based on a rigorous, qualitative analysis of a six-participant sample. The small sample size from only one South African district would not allow for findings to generalise to other South African communities. Future studies should also target the accusers to elicit their views on witchcraft.

**4. Conclusion**

It is unfortunate that in some African communities elderly women face violence and bear the brunt of being neglected. Government should enforce the Witchcraft Act to protect elderly women against wild accusations, which endangers their lives. Furthermore, civic organisations and community leadership should provide support for the aged, more particularly aged women. Protection of elderly women could be integrated into the assistance, provided by volunteer non-governmental organisations (NGOs). – communities would derive value from such assistance and would start respecting their contribution. The provision of safe homes for the elderly across South Africa would reduce neglect, as well as witchcraft accusations. Criminal law should be enforced to deal with perpetrators of such violence and abuse again elderly women.

**Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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