

## **B-MAG response to article published in The Independent**

Sir,

We respond to the article recently published in the Independent newspaper entitled 'Coronavirus could cause rise in Witchcraft and Possession allegations, Police say', by Lizzie Dearden. The article reports the concerns of Inspector Davis that vulnerable people may be exploited in the current crisis including through accusations of witchcraft and spirit possession and the unscrupulous use of ceremonies including deliverance or exorcism.

Whilst we agree with the comments attributed to Inspector Davies that it is important to be aware of the risks for some children that arise through the attribution of witchcraft, it is vital that appropriate responses are needed by informed, culturally sensitive and trained practitioners applying the child protection framework to prevent further tragic deaths and serious injuries. However, the reporting in the article fails to account for the progress made, including by Inspector Davis and others, in the National Working Group, and by groups, such as the one we represent, in developing knowledge and understanding of the problem of Child Abuse Linked to Faith and Belief (CALFB). Important over the past 20 years or so have been the efforts to dispel negative narratives within an increasingly hostile environment for BME communities; to work with the relevant communities to ensure that no culture or religion overrides the care and protection of children; and to hear their voice as victims and witnesses within safeguarding processes and criminal proceedings, as in the case of Victoria Climbié, Kristy Bamu and others.

The article appears to be speculative as there is no evidence base or data to suggest that the current pandemic is linked to a rise in CALFB cases, nor does it comment on the manifest and many strengths within these communities, that the vast majority would not under any circumstances inflict abuse on children. The timing of its publication is unpropitious in the wake of ONS findings that ethnic minorities are disproportionately represented in COVID deaths, and for Black people specifically, higher than originally considered; reportedly Black males are 4.2 times more likely to die from a Covid-19 related death and Black females are 4.3 times likely than white ethnicity males and females.

Indeed, the article distorts by limiting the discussion to the prevalence of CALFB to African and Asian communities in the article appears to perpetuate negative narratives, overlooking the fact that CALFB occurs within other religious and cultural groupings, including the dominant community in the UK, as in the case of foster carer, Eunice Spry, in 2007.

Given the achievements to date in addressing this type of abuse, we are concerned that speculations such as these lead to false or discriminatory thinking regarding safeguarding practice for children and families, and may distract from and disrupt efforts to establish the impact of Covid-19 on the health and welfare of BME children.

Yours faithfully,

Dr Mor Dioum, Dr Stephanie Yorath and Professor Stephen Briggs on behalf of the BME-Migrant Advisory Group (B-MAG); Safeguarding Children and Young People

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