

HTMS Ambassador Programme

Spiritual & Ritual Abuse

The UK is one of the highest reporting countries in the world for Spiritual & Ritual Abuse. Data shows that reporting has increased over the years, with Leeds and Manchester local authorities recording the most cases.

In 2011, Parliament created a National Working Group to bring together professionals and encourage multi-agency working in the area of spiritual and ritual abuse, to safeguard children and adults. The working group includes many organisations and statutory agencies, as well as the Catholic Church.

What is Spiritual & Ritual Abuse?

Spiritual & Ritual Abuse (SARA) is defined as the abuse, harm or exploitation caused by someone through the use, manipulation or grooming of the victim's beliefs, superstitions, traditions or faith, to justify inflicting harmful practices on them, including accusing them of witchcraft.

It also exists where the abuser themselves uses their own beliefs to justify the need to harm, abuse or exploit another. The process used to inflict this abuse is often done through the rituals linked to the belief itself, such as exorcisms.*

SARA may form part of other forms of abuse, including:

- domestic abuse
- forced marriage
- violence against women
- coercive and controlling behaviour
- child abuse
- human trafficking and modern slavery (HTMS)

SARA & HTMS

SARA is used by traffickers to exploit individuals, using their beliefs and traditions against them, to hold them in a situation of exploitation through coercion and control via the creation of fear and the promise of violence. Such abuse violates the human dignity of the individual and creates an overarching sense of powerlessness.

One high profile case was that of a London based nurse who was jailed in 2018 for trafficking Nigerian women to Germany, where they were sexually exploited and made to work as prostitutes. The nurse forced the women to swear oaths as part of a 'juju' ceremony, in which they were forced to drink blood, amongst other things, and threatened with serious harm to them or their families if they broke the oath.

'Juju' is a spiritual belief system in West Africa, which traffickers have exploited and distorted to instil psychological fear in individuals to subjugate and exploit them. Through such rituals, traffickers obtain an oath from their victim thereby creating a sense of debt bondage and secrecy, which prevents individuals seeking help and reporting their traffickers.

REFERENCES:

**Definition provided by Jordan Alexander, Prism Training*

In 2018, recognising the impact of juju rituals on trafficking victims, the traditional leader in Edo State, Nigeria, revoked all curses placed on trafficking victims and banned juju priests from partaking in any future such rituals.

Spot The Signs

There are many different terms around the world which may be employed in spiritual and ritual abuse, depending on the region. In addition to juju, others include:

- dakini,
- black magic,
- evil eye,
- djinn,
- kindoki and more.

Some signs to look out for include taking note of any injuries - such as restraint marks, burn markings, cuts and incisions, or the use of charms and amulets.

Most resources relating to spiritual and ritual abuse refer to the abuse of children and there are safeguarding procedures in place for children, including awareness amongst statutory authorities, whereas it is often overlooked with regards to adults.

If you encounter someone you think is being spiritually or ritually abused and you engage with them, it is important to keep in mind that it involves their faith or belief, which may form an important part of their identity. As such, care should be taken to show respect and kindness when engaging with such beliefs - engage without judgement. It is advised to avoid actively trying to change someone's belief, but rather to use their faith in a positive way and provide them with other options to consider.

Be culturally aware, do not judge, and seek to provide a safe space for them to speak, if they wish.

If you are concerned about someone, seek help:

You are never wasting anyone's time if you raise concerns about possible harm.

If it is an emergency, call **999**

If you wish to report a crime anonymously, you may call **Crimestoppers: 0800 555 111**

You can also report any concerns to the **UK modern slavery and exploitation helpline**, a free 24-hour helpline where you will be able to discuss your concerns, receive advice and support.

You may call the helpline on: **08000 121 700** or you may visit the website and report your concerns online at **<https://www.modernslaveryhelpline.org/>**