

RIPPLE EFFECTS OF WITCHCRAFT-RELATED VIOLENCE: PERSPECTIVES FROM SOUTH AFRICAN VICTIMS

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Abstract: This article explores the ripple effects of witchcraft-related violence on families in rural Limpopo Province, South Africa. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 28 women who experienced witchcraft-related violence directly or indirectly, the study uses thematic and narrative analysis to examine how participants understood and described these experiences. Drawing on Arthur W. Frank's complementary perspectives on narrative forms (linear, fragmented, and chaotic) and narrative typologies (chaos, restitution, and quest), participants' stories were interpreted and constructed. The findings show that the effects of witchcraft-related violence extend beyond those directly accused, with family members experiencing family victimisation, secondary victimisation, secondary targeting, collective blame, and stigma. These processes contribute to ongoing fear, social exclusion, displacement, and insecurity within families and communities. By conceptualising these experiences as ripple effects, the article demonstrates how witchcraft-related violence unfolds across family relationships and contributes to a broader understanding of victimisation within rural South African communities.

Keywords: *family victimisation, secondary victimisation, secondary targeting, collective blame, institutional inaction*

Introduction

Witchcraft-related violence remains a persistent harm in many communities, particularly in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, where belief systems continue to shape social interactions and responses to misfortune (Ehigie 2025: 307; Dein 2025: 12; Kelkar and Nathan 2020: 4; Uche et al. 2025: 232). While the direct consequences for those accused have been widely documented, less attention has been given to how such violence extends beyond the individual to affect

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family members and broader social networks (Bartholomew 2023: 148; Sanou 2017: 34). The concept of ripple effects describes how harm originating from a single act of violence spreads outward through relational networks, resulting in interconnected psychological, social, and structural consequences over time (Abiola 2022: 4; Danzer 2024: 1). This framing recognises that victimisation is not confined to the primary target but may be experienced indirectly through exposure, association, and ongoing community responses. Literature highlights that witchcraft accusations are often accompanied by violence, stigma, and social exclusion, with severe consequences for those directly accused (Awortwe et al. 2025: 174; Kabelenga 2020: 56). The effects frequently extend to family members, who may experience reputational damage, social isolation, and long-term psychological distress. These implications are often compounded by fear, uncertainty, and the breakdown of social cohesion within communities (Faki and Ahmed 2025: 523; Finlay et al. 2025: 1). Moreover, the justice system faces challenges in addressing witchcraft-related accusations because such claims cannot be substantiated through conventional forms of legal evidence (Owusu 2024: 119).

Despite growing scholarly attention to witchcraft-related violence, there remains limited focus on how these harms unfold within family systems, particularly from the perspectives of those indirectly affected. This gap is especially evident in rural South African contexts, where communal belief systems may intensify both the spread and persistence of such harm. The present article addresses this gap by examining victims' perspectives on the ripple effects of witchcraft-related violence on families and communities in Limpopo Province, South Africa. Moreover, it examines how the effects of witchcraft-related violence extend beyond the individual to shape family and community experiences. It considers how harm is lived, interpreted, and sustained within relational contexts, with particular attention to processes such as secondary victimisation, collective blame, stigma, and secondary targeting. In doing so, the article engages in how these experiences are understood and articulated by those affected. This perspective shifts the focus from individual incidents to the broader ways in which harm is experienced within families and communities. Subsequently, it shows how the effects of such violence are shared, extended, and sustained over time.

Nature of Witchcraft-Related Violence and Accusations

Witchcraft-related violence has existed for centuries and in many rural communities worldwide and still exists today (Adinkrah 2015: 10;

Gottschalk 2005: 100). Niehaus (2010: 70) describes witchcraft as a context through which people interpret misfortunes, illness, and death. Scholarly authors contend that witchcraft is deeply rooted in cultural beliefs, while others link it to supernatural beliefs (Cohan 2011; Munu and Yusuf 2023). Still others emphasise socioeconomic conditions such as poverty, unemployment and economic inequality (Geschiere 1997). Similar perspectives include the view that it is a gendered phenomenon (Abukari 2025), where women are disproportionately targeted and occurring in areas that are plagued by poverty and unemployment (Abdullah et al. 2025; Singh and Msuya 2019). Geschiere (1997: 25) has argued that witchcraft is rooted in intimate relations and kinship due to beliefs about maternal or generational inheritance. As a result, harm travels along family lines, with the entire family suffering accusations, victimisation, and ostracism rather than the individual accused. According to Niehaus (2018: 418), accusations often arise from close social networks as tensions surrounding maternal inheritance, jealousy, and reciprocity proliferate. The lack of consensus in these studies demonstrates how witchcraft has become pervasive and how multiple factors related to witchcraft intersect. This strengthens the South African Law Reform Commission's (SALRC) (2022: 45) assertion that the persistent belief in witchcraft from various sectors of society makes the enforcement of the law against witchcraft seem impossible.

As such, both historical and contemporary literature from Africa and Asia reveals the continued persistence of witchcraft-related violence. In Nigeria, accusations are associated with persecution, including assaults and killings (Eboiyehi 2017: 248), whereas in Ghana, they have contributed to the establishment of “witch camps,” where approximately 1,000 women seek refuge from violence (Mutaru and Sekyi 2023: 9; Singh and Msuya 2019: 105). Similarly, although witch hunting has been criminalised in India, cases remain underreported, suggesting that legal prohibition may not effectively eliminate witchcraft-related violence (Severyns 2021: 1).

Scholars who studied witchcraft in South African apartheid era found that it was influenced by socio-political and economic inequalities (Petrus 2017: 180; Niehaus 2010: 66; Niehaus 2018: 421). According to Niehaus (2010: 66), witchcraft in the apartheid era was fraught with suspicions of whether it existed, resulting in efforts from the government to eradicate discourses through the law and Western education. Nevertheless, such attempts seem to remain inconsistent in curbing the beliefs about witchcraft due to the cultural sensitivity associated with the phenomenon. Police statistics recorded a significant rise in witchcraft-related cases from 1,093 to 1,293

in Limpopo during the years 1994-1995 (Pelgrim 2003: 87). Similarly, Hund (2000: 366) reports that at least 3,000 witchcraft-related violent incidents were recorded in the Northern Province during the years 1987 to 1999. Between 2015 and 2022 about 312 people were killed, including ritual murders (Health-e News 2022: 1). Literature reveals that South Africa continues to face challenges associated with witchcraft-related violence despite existing interventions to curb this phenomenon (Petrus 2017: 188; SALRC 2022: 45). Recent studies highlight the pervasiveness of witchcraft-related violence in rural villages of the Eastern Cape and Limpopo where elderly women are predominantly targeted (De Jong and Ka Menziwa 2022; Maromo 2024). The most common methods of violence against suspected witches in these provinces are damage to property and forced relocations (SALRC 2022: 45). As Mabefam (2023: 357) highlighted, such forced relocations reveal the harsh realities of prejudice and discrimination against those accused of witchcraft because of their age, gender, and economic status. It further reveals that while manifestations of witchcraft vary across historical and cultural contexts, accusations of witchcraft continue to function as mechanisms of marginalisation and victimisation.

Impact of Witchcraft-Related Violence on Families

Chari (2025: 94) argued that the term “witch” evokes fear not only for the individual accused, but also for their family, who may experience estrangement from support structures. Similarly, Aryal (2022: 1) highlighted that the stigma surrounding the label “witch” can lead to both physical and psychological harm. These findings align with a broader understanding of stigmatisation, which some authors describe as negative attitudes towards an individual based on perceived differences that justify discriminatory actions (Jacobs et al. 2022: 893). As such, those who are stigmatised may be isolated and neglected by their families and communities (Nyanyuki 2022: 6). Families affected by stigma may experience social exclusion, bullying, loss of reputation, and social division (Finlay et al. 2025: 14).

The literature highlights that the impact of victimisation extends not only to the individual who experiences it but also to those who witness it (Jimenez et al. 2021: 1). Research has established that in most cases, the entire family may be accused and targeted because of one family member (Munu and Yusuf 2023: 155; Niehaus 2018: 419). In many cases, the emotional burden of supporting affected individuals during recovery can strain family relationships (Danzer 2024: 1). Adinkrah and Adhikari (2014: 314) argued

that witchcraft accusations can cause conflict and disrupt relationships within the family. This is because individuals accused of witchcraft may experience isolation from both extended families and community members, leading to fear of being attacked or killed (De Jong and Ka Menziwa 2022: 1; Niehaus 2018: 421). While some individuals are publicly accused, others may be suspected without their knowledge (Azongo et al. 2020: 31). Consequently, witchcraft accusations can affect innocent individuals, particularly in contexts where there is often a lack of evidence (Baloyi 2015: 4). Violence frequently results in bodily harm, including killing, torture, and displacement, which may lead to psychological and symbolic trauma. In some cases, this may disrupt children's education and contribute to school dropout (Mathews and Benvenuti 2014: 26). Another form of trauma with long-term effects on children is "vicarious trauma," which may arise through exposure to traumatic incidents (Yazdani and Shafi 2014: 59). Jimenez et al. (2021: 1) relate symptoms of vicarious trauma to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), associated with secondary exposure to traumatic events. According to Finlay et al. (2025:2), stigma attached to witchcraft accusations can contribute to the impact of vicarious trauma within families. Nonetheless, the impact of violence on families extends beyond trauma and may include financial strain, loss of income, loss of a breadwinner, and the need for psychological support (Baloyi 2015: 3-4).

Methodology¹

Qualitative research design was used to gain in-depth insight into victims' experiences of witchcraft-related violence (Fouché et al. 2021: 11). The research was situated within an interpretivist/constructivist paradigm, which is well-suited to exploring how individuals understand and make sense of their lived experiences within particular social and cultural contexts. This perspective allowed for a closer examination of how participants interpret and attach meaning to experiences of violence, victimisation, and stigma. To examine these experiences, the research drew on a narrative inquiry approach. This approach emphasises participants' accounts to understand how meaning is constructed through storytelling (Clandinin 2022: 122). It provided space for participants to describe their experiences of witchcraft-related violence in relation to their own cultural, historical, and personal contexts. In doing so, their narratives offered insight

1 The findings presented in this article form part of a larger study conducted by the first author and supervised by the second author as part of a PhD thesis.

into how they make sense of their identities and social realities (Pemberton et al. 2019: 393). The sample consisted of 28 female participants, aged between 18 and 79 years, who had experienced witchcraft-related violence either directly or indirectly. Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques to ensure that those included had relevant lived experiences. Access to participants was facilitated by social workers, who also helped establish rapport. Data were collected by the first author through semi-structured interviews conducted between 2024 and 2025, continuing until data saturation was reached. This format allowed some flexibility while ensuring key areas of interest were covered. Interviews were conducted in participants’ homes at times that suited them. The first author shares common values with the participants regarding cultural background, language, race, and ethnicity. Trust and rapport were established with the participants by providing reassurance that their experiences would be understood. Therefore, interviews were conducted primarily in Sepedi, the participants’ language and the researcher’s home language.

Where necessary, participants who required further explanation were assisted by a bilingual social worker who was fluent in Sepedi and English. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in Sepedi before being translated into English by the researcher. Some interpretations of the findings might have been subjective, influenced by the researcher’s cultural background and knowledge of the subject matter. However, both authors remained as objective as possible throughout the research process in order to minimise bias, ensuring that their interpretations faithfully reflected the participants’ experiences. The translated transcripts were further checked against the audio for consistency and accuracy. The following table outlines the biographical details of the participants, including the community where they resided (or were exiled to), age, gender, marital status, education, and employment status (see Table 1).

Name of participant	Community	Age	Gender	Marital Status	Educational status	Employment status
Meikie	Ditobeleng	73	Female	Widowed	Grade 9	Unemployed
Pinky	Tjibeng	20	Female	Single	Grade 11	Still in school
Moloko	Scoornord	65	Female	Widowed	Grade 10	Traditional Healer
Letica	Driekop	50	Female	Married	Grade 12	Traditional Healer
Mmabotho	Diphale	33	Female	widowed	Grade 11	Unemployed

Name of participant	Community	Age	Gender	Marital Status	Educational status	Employment status
Nankie	Diphale	48	Female	Single	Tertiary education	Employed
Grace	Diphale	25	Female	single	Grade 11	Unemployed
Mapula	Diphale	39	Female	divorced	Grade 11	Employed
Milicent	Ga-Kgoete	55	Female	Widowed	Tertiary education	Self-employed
Kamogelo	Steelpoort	43	Female	Single	Grade 10	Unemployed
Patricia	Driekop	28	Female	Married	N4 Mechanical engineering	Employed
Portia	Driekop	47	Female	Married	Tertiary education	Self-employed
Betty	Elandsdraal	33	Female	Single	Grade 12	Unemployed
Kgabo	Ditobeleng	38	Female	Single	Grade 11	Unemployed
Mpho	Elandsdraal	18	Female	Single	Grade 10	Discontinued schooling
Gali	Ditobeleng	41	Female	Single	Grade 12	Unemployed
Tlou	Ditobeleng	19	Female	Single	Grade 12	Unemployed
Pontsho	Tjibeng	46	Female	Single	Grade 11	Unemployed
Pitsi	Ga -Mpheti	68	Female	Widowed	Grade 11	Traditional Healer
Thami	Elandsdraal	40	Female	Widowed	Tertiary education	Self-employed
Nthabi	Schoornord	21	Female	Single	Grade 12	Still in school
Bongie	Steelpoort	20	Female	Single	Grade 9	Still in school
Linda	Steelpoort	73	Female	Married	Grade 12	Unemployed
Kgaugelo	Ditobeleng	45	Female	Married	Grade 10	Traditional healer
Marry	Ga Kgoete	79	Female	Widowed	Grade 12	Pensioner
Lethabo	Madikelang	32	Female	Married	Grade 12	Traditional Healer
Aphiwe	Elandsdraal	35	Female	Widowed	Grade 11	Unemployed
Judy	Elandsdraal	71	Female	Widowed	Grade 9	Unemployed

Table 1. Study Participants

The biographical details of the participants are further explained below.

Study Areas and Context

The research took place in eight rural villages in rural Limpopo Province: Diphale, Ga-Kgoete, Elandskraal, Steelpoort, Ga Mpheti, Schoonoord, Ditobeleng, and Madikeleng. These communities are largely Sepedi-speaking and operate within established traditional leadership structures. Living conditions across these areas are generally constrained by high levels of poverty and unemployment, with some residents residing in informal settlements (Thesnaar 2024: 3). Within this context, everyday challenges and experiences of misfortune are often interpreted through local belief systems, including those related to witchcraft (Adolfsson et al. 2024: 391).

Participants' Profile

All participants were Black and resided in Limpopo Province, where most of the population is Black. The participants in this study range from 18 to 79 years. Although witches are assumed to be women, there is no inherent gender in witchcraft. However, existing literature confirms that women are the majority to be accused of witchcraft-related practices (Gershman 2022: 4). In this study, most of the participants accused of witchcraft were unemployed, while some were retired or on a pension. In addition, most participants had an average level of education. Although education does not determine whether an individual will be accused of witchcraft, it does play a significant role in witchcraft beliefs. According to the findings of this study single women were more frequently accused, often due to their association with individuals already accused of witchcraft.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using a combination of thematic and narrative approaches to provide both breadth and depth in understanding participants' experiences. Thematic analysis was employed as the primary analytic strategy to identify patterns across the dataset. This involved familiarisation with the data, initial coding, and the development of themes aligned with the research aim (Naeem et al. 2023: 1). Through this process, key themes such as family victimisation, secondary victimisation, secondary targeting, collective blame, and stigma were identified. To complement this, a narrative analytic lens was applied to examine how participants constructed and conveyed their experiences. Drawing on narrative inquiry principles (Clandinin

2022) and Frank's (1995, 2013) typology of illness narratives, attention was given to what participants experienced and also to how these experiences were structured, interpreted, and communicated. This included analysing narrative form (e.g. coherence, fragmentation, temporality), positioning (how participants positioned themselves in relation to events and others), and meaning-making processes. Narratives were further examined for patterns consistent with chaos, restitution, and quest forms (Frank 1995: 97-98). Chaos narratives were characterised by disjointed sequencing, emotional intensity, and a lack of resolution, often reflecting ongoing trauma. Quest narratives were identified in which participants attempted to derive meaning from their experiences or emphasised endurance and survival. While restitution narratives were less evident, their relative absence was analytically significant, suggesting limited opportunities for recovery or restoration within participants' contexts. Accordingly, the study applied both Arthur Frank's narrative forms (linear, fragmented, chaotic) and narrative types (chaotic, restitution, quest) as distinct categories to examine how participants structured and interpreted the stories (Frank 1995, 2013, 2016, 2019). The integration of thematic and narrative analysis enabled a layered understanding of the data. While thematic analysis captured recurring patterns across participants' accounts, narrative analysis provided insight into how individuals made sense of their experiences, how trauma shaped storytelling, and how identities were constructed within contexts of violence, stigma, and exclusion.

Ethical Considerations

The study received approval from the University of South Africa, facilitated by the ethics committee, with ethical clearance no. ST105-2022. In addition, approval was obtained from the Department of Social Development under project no. LPREC/19/2024: PG. Due to the study's sensitivity, ethical considerations, such as anonymity and confidentiality, were implemented to protect participants from harm. In addition, debriefing was utilised, with assistance from a social worker, to ensure that participants were protected from re-traumatisation. Some participants were undergoing a court trial, and the researcher ensured that field notes were used instead of a tape recorder. Participants' anonymity was protected, and codenames such as Betty, etc. were used. According to Kang and Hwang (2023: 2), ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of participants enhances the credibility and reliability of the study.

Study Limitations and Challenges

The study encountered significant limitations and challenges. The study's findings were limited to specific villages and do not represent those of villages from other provinces. As part of a larger doctoral study, the inclusion criteria were limited to only females who were direct victims of witchcraft violence or accusations. For this article, excluding males and other genders might have limited the universality of the findings, especially since they may also be impacted by witchcraft violence, as family members of the accused. For the first author, some of the experiences shared by participants were both traumatising and disturbing. According to Wallace and Rowtham (2026: 63), researchers can also suffer from vicarious trauma, as they can become emotionally engaged with the stories, trauma, and experiences of participants. Fortunately, the first author was accompanied by a social worker, who assisted both the victims and the first author in dealing with the subsequent emotional distress.

Findings

This section presents the findings organised around key themes, namely family victimisation and impact, secondary victimisation, secondary targeting, collective blame, and stigma. These themes reflect the ways in which witchcraft-related violence extends beyond the direct victims to family members and broader social relationships. In addition to thematic patterns, attention was also given to how participants narrated their experiences, which is addressed in a subsection below.

Family Victimisation and Impact

The findings show that the impact of witchcraft-related violence extends beyond the primary victim to affect family structures. In this study, family victimisation refers to the ways in which harm is experienced collectively, affecting individuals who are directly and indirectly exposed to violence within familial contexts. Participants' accounts describe emotional and psychological harm experienced by family members, particularly where they witnessed acts of violence.

Mmabotho described how her children witnessed the killing of their grandmother and the destruction of their home:

“We are still mourning the death of our mother, who was brutally killed in front of us. Now the community has torched our house. We don’t know what our sin is in this village. We are saddened, and the children are traumatised after seeing their grandmother being thrown into the burning house. We don’t have a home, and we are not safe anymore.” *[Mmabotho, 33 years old, victim of witchcraft-related violence, the direct victim was her mother]*

Mmabotho’s account describes the death of her mother, the destruction of the family home, and the emotional impact experienced by the family, including the children who witnessed the incident. Other participants described similar experiences of witnessing violence against family members. Mapula recalled:

“I was so terrified that day when I saw them holding guns. I immediately knew that something bad was going to happen. When my mother was being attacked and shot at [Mapula pauses] ... I quickly ran to hide and had to stop myself from crying because they would have found me. You can imagine how hard that must have been. I couldn’t cry out. That day was very painful.” *[Mapula, 39 years old, direct victim of witchcraft-related violence]*

Grace described her experience of witnessing the abuse of her mother:

“Being called names when she was busy being dragged was so cruel and inhumane. I could still hear her cries as she was insulted and beaten. I could not sleep for days.” *[Grace, 25 years old, victim of witchcraft accusations, the direct victim was her mother]*

The participants’ accounts describe experiences of witnessing violence against family members, emotional distress, fear, trauma, displacement, and feelings of being unsafe following the incidents.

Secondary Victimization

Secondary victimisation emerged through participants’ interactions with the criminal justice system, particularly in relation to perceived insensitivity, victim-blaming, and a lack of institutional support. In this study, secondary victimisation refers to the additional harm experienced by victims through their engagement with formal systems intended to provide protection

and justice. Participants' accounts describe experiences in which these interactions were perceived as unsupportive.

Participants described dismissive and accusatory responses from police officials when reporting incidents. Moloko recounted:

“Immediately after they started attacking us, I ran straight to the police station to report that the community was attacking us, and they said, ‘What did you do? Oh, it’s you people again, going around bewitching people. So, they finally caught you.’
[Moloko, 65 years old, victim of witchcraft-related violence]

Similarly, Bongie described being mocked by a police officer:

“One of the police officers was busy mocking me, saying, ‘So you go around giving people poison, come and poison me as well. I am ready for you.’ [Bongie, 20 years old, victim of witchcraft-related violence]

These accounts describe participants' experiences of disbelief, ridicule, and blame during interactions with police.

Participants also expressed dissatisfaction with legal processes. Pitsi stated:

“When we got to the court, they didn’t tell us anything. They just said the trial has been cancelled. Go home. We were shocked that they let them go just like that – how could they just cancel it after what we went through with no explanations, whatsoever.”
[Pitsi, 68 years old, victim of witchcraft-related violence]

Participants reported dissatisfaction with legal processes, including limited communication about court proceedings. Some participants also reported reluctance to report incidents or seek assistance. In some cases, participants reported not seeking help despite being injured. Moreover, the participants' accounts describe experiences of secondary victimisation through interactions with police officials and the criminal justice system, including perceived victim-blaming, ridicule, dissatisfaction with legal processes, and reluctance to seek further assistance.

Secondary Targeting

Witchcraft accusations not only pose a direct threat to the accused individual's safety and well-being but also extend to family members, who

may bear the consequences of the accusation. In this study, secondary targeting refers to violence directed at individuals due to their association with the accused. Participants' accounts describe how family members, including children, were exposed to or directly affected by violence associated with such accusations. In some instances, individuals were targeted for attempting to intervene, while in others, they were attacked due to their familial connection.

Nthabi described how she became a target of violence following accusations against her mother:

“My mother was accused of killing a 13-year-old child who was found dead next to the river. I was crying that day when they attacked us, as I hid in a corner till my neighbour spotted me, and came towards me, carrying me on his shoulders to throw me in the burning house. I was busy fighting and screaming, and then he put me down, took a wooden chair and hit me on the head. He didn't even care I was bleeding. When he went to fetch something else to hit me with, I fled and ran to the nearest mountain. I hid there until they left. That man was heartless; he did not care that I was a child. They were busy saying, ‘nonyana engwe le engwe efofa le ngwana wa yona (a Sepedi idiom meaning ‘each bird takes flight alongside its mother’)”² [Nthabi, 21 years old, indirect victim of witchcraft-related violence, the direct victim was her mother]

Similarly, Grace described witnessing extreme violence and being forced to flee for her safety:

“They killed my mother in such a horrible way; they were so ruthless that they handcuffed, dragged her, she was all bloodied, and they proceeded to burn her with a tyre. It was so horrible that I just stood there, all frozen. When they started enquiring about me, I quickly ran and hid on the nearest mountain until the police came.” [Grace, 25 years old, victim of witchcraft accusations, the direct victim was her mother]

These accounts describe violence directed at family members and children following accusations of witchcraft against a relative. Participants described being physically attacked, witnessing violence, fleeing for safety, and hiding

2 The idiom has a similar meaning to the view that children inherit witchcraft from their mothers (Adinkrah and Cody 2024: 5).

from perpetrators. Some participants also referred to beliefs that witchcraft could be transmitted within families, particularly along maternal lines.

In addition to children, participants described how other family members were targeted in the absence of the accused. Moloko reflected on the killing of her husband:

“My husband was a prophet and used to attend an apostolic church. He was a very good person and liked helping others. I think his only crime was being the husband of a sangoma [an isiZulu term referring to a traditional healer and diviner], because I think they killed him because of me. When I managed to run away, he refused and said he would not leave his home; he’d rather die. He was killed ruthlessly by our own people. Community members found him on the streets when he had just returned to fetch firewood. I was told that one of them just took a big stone and hit his head. Others joined in with machetes. They took the same firewood he had, put it on top of his body, and set his body alight.” *[Moloko, 65 years old, victim of witchcraft-related violence, the direct victim was her husband]*

Moloko’s account describes the killing of her husband following accusations directed at her and her belief that he was targeted because of their relationship.

Participants’ narratives reflected both linear and fragmented forms. Nthabi’s account follows a largely linear structure, describing the accusation, the attack, and her escape. Grace’s narrative is more fragmented, moving between descriptions of the violent event and her immediate responses. Moloko’s account combines both linear and fragmented elements, beginning with a description of her husband before recounting the violent incident and her understanding of why it occurred.

The participants’ accounts describe secondary targeting as involving violence against family members associated with individuals accused of witchcraft, including children and spouses, as well as experiences of physical violence, displacement, and fear.

Collective Blame

Participants’ accounts illustrate how witchcraft accusations extend beyond individuals to entire families, resulting in collective blame, social exclusion, and, in some cases, forced displacement. In this study, collective blame

refers to the process through which responsibility for alleged witchcraft is attributed not only to the accused individual but also to family members, thereby extending suspicion across the family unit. Participants described accusations that spread beyond the individual accused and affected other family members.

Pontsho described how she, her daughter, and her sister feared for their lives when they were surrounded by community members seeking justice for learners who were alleged to have been poisoned through space cookies.³ She explained how individuals from surrounding areas gathered to ensure that her child was expelled from both the school and the community:

“When I arrived there, I was shocked to find my child surrounded by community members, like some criminal who had just stolen something. The parents of the children started accusing me, saying I was the one who sent her to kill their children. I witnessed firsthand that it is horrifying to see angry community members gathered around you and ready to kill. I’ve heard some stories that people from this community are very dangerous; they don’t show mercy. When they say to you, ‘We are going to burn you and kill you,’ just know they will do it. Their belief in witchcraft is too rife; when they hear such cases, they don’t even waste time. At those times, when they tried to beat us, I immediately thought in my heart, it’s over for us and prayed silently. Before they could harm us, we were rescued by the police. When the charges were dropped, they ensured that she was expelled from both the community and the school. My sister took her away to another province because they chased her out of the community.” *[Pontsho, 46 years old, victim of witchcraft accusations, the direct victim was her daughter]*

Patricia similarly described how accusations affected her entire family:

“Three children were hospitalised in our community due to poisoning. My family was accused of poisoning those children using witchcraft. This is after our neighbour’s child claimed that it was my mother who gave her the muthi [traditional medicine or medicinal substance] to kill them. Before the incident, we were living in harmony with our community members until they accused us of witchcraft. Some tried to be on our side while

3 Space cookies or muffins, also known as “drug muffins,” refer to baked goods mixed with marijuana, a substance reportedly used among high school learners (Sedibe and Hendricks 2020: 341).

the community was bashing on us, and some just stood by as we were accused. However, in such situations, you can never be certain whom to trust or who is genuine. When the community surrounded us, you could see that they were baying for blood. Fortunately, the police arrived on time to save us from being killed by the community.” *[Patricia, 28 years old, indirect victim of witchcraft-related violence, the direct victim was her mother]*

Kgabo further described the broader social consequences experienced by her family:

“After that incident with my aunt, they think all of us are witches now and avoid us on the streets. Even my friends started becoming distant. You know what people think about witchcraft. When a family member that you live with is branded as a witch, you are also considered a witch.” *[Kgabo, 38 years old, victim of witchcraft accusations, the direct victim was her aunt]*

These accounts describe accusations extending beyond the individual to other family members. Participants reported experiences of social rejection, threats of violence, avoidance by community members, expulsion from communities, and displacement following accusations against a relative.

Participants’ narratives within this theme were predominantly fragmented, with individuals moving between descriptions of events, expressions of fear, and descriptions of the consequences of the accusations.

The participants’ accounts describe collective blame as involving the extension of witchcraft accusations to family members, accompanied by experiences of social exclusion, threats of violence, displacement, and changes in relationships within their communities.

Stigma

Stigma emerged as a persistent consequence of witchcraft accusations, affecting not only those directly accused but also their family members. In this study, stigma refers to the process through which individuals and their relatives are socially marked, devalued, and excluded based on accusations of witchcraft.

Participants’ accounts describe experiences in which stigma affected not only the accused individual but also relatives through association. Kgabo

described how stigma influenced both family dynamics and perceptions of safety:

“I am here to convince her to allow us to take her to an old-age home. We all want the best for her, but she won’t listen. She insists on staying here. We are also fearing for our lives because the accusations are affecting us as well. You know, when your family member is accused of witchcraft, you are also automatically considered a witch.” *[Kgabo, 38 years old, victim of witchcraft accusations, the direct victim was her aunt]*

Tlou similarly described how stigma was experienced in everyday interactions, including social rejection and direct threats:

“I think my aunt should stop going out because they will kill her. People are giving us nasty looks on the streets. You could see that they don’t want you close to them. They even threatened me on the street last time that they would beat her if they ever passed her on the street.” *[Tlou, 19 years old, victim of witchcraft accusations, the direct victim was her aunt]*

Gali described the fear associated with the accusations and concerns about future violence:

“She goes to people’s houses and climbs on walls. I want my grandmother to go to an old-age home so that she can be safe. We often fear that the community might turn against us one day and attack us. Because we do hear stories from the streets, and it’s frightening.” *[Gali, 41 years old, victim of witchcraft accusations, the direct victim was her grandmother]*

Portia further described changes in her mother’s social interactions following the accusations:

“My mother didn’t speak to anyone in the community, nor did she go to people’s houses, due to the accusations.” *[Portia, 47 years old, the direct victim was her mother]*

These accounts describe experiences of social exclusion, avoidance, changes in social interactions, fear, and threats of violence following accusations of witchcraft.

The participants’ accounts describe stigma as affecting both individuals accused of witchcraft and their family members through experiences of

social exclusion, avoidance, fear, and changes in relationships within their communities.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the ripple effects of witchcraft-related violence on families within rural communities in Limpopo Province, South Africa. The findings demonstrate that the consequences of witchcraft accusations extend well beyond those directly accused, creating interconnected forms of victimisation that permeate family relationships, community interactions, and institutional responses. Rather than functioning as isolated consequences, family victimisation, secondary targeting, collective blame, stigma, and secondary victimisation interact to sustain harm over time. These findings support the notion that the effects of violence spread across relational networks (Abiola 2022: 4; Danzer 2024: 1) but further suggest that witchcraft-related violence is best understood as a relational form of victimisation, in which harm is collectively experienced and reinforced through social relationships rather than confined to an individual victim. Thus, this study extends existing scholarship by demonstrating that the ripple effects of witchcraft accusations are not merely additional consequences of violence but constitute a broader process through which victimisation becomes embedded within family systems.

Participants' accounts further illustrate that the impact of witchcraft-related violence evolves long after the initial accusation or violent incident. Family members described persistent fear, grief, insecurity, displacement, and uncertainty, indicating that victimisation continues to shape everyday life rather than ending with the immediate event. This finding is consistent with previous studies demonstrating that violence may generate enduring psychological and social consequences for families (Danzer 2024: 1; Jimenez et al. 2021: 1). However, the present study expands this understanding by showing that trauma is reinforced through continued exposure to community hostility, social exclusion, and the constant anticipation of further violence. Consequently, the ripple effects are not only temporal but cumulative, with successive experiences of victimisation compounding the original harm.

The experiences of children are particularly noteworthy. Existing research has shown that children who witness violence are at increased risk of long-term emotional and psychological difficulties (Downey and Crummy

2022: 1; Alagarsami, Kannekanti and Rajan 2024: 37). Participants' narratives confirm these findings but also reveal a more complex pattern of victimisation. Children were not merely passive witnesses to killings, assaults, and the destruction of family homes; they frequently became secondary victims through displacement, loss of security, and ongoing exposure to fear. In several instances, children were also directly targeted because community members believed that witchcraft could be inherited through family bloodlines. This reflects broader research showing that children associated with alleged witches are vulnerable to stigma, abuse, and exclusion (AFRUCA 2017: 12; Bussien et al. 2011: 22; Uche et al. 2025: 246). Therefore, the findings suggest that children's victimisation extends beyond vicarious trauma and is shaped by culturally embedded beliefs that transfer suspicion across generations. Family membership itself becomes a basis for victimisation, irrespective of any personal involvement in the alleged acts.

The findings further indicate that institutional responses may be shaped by broader sociocultural beliefs surrounding witchcraft. As reflected in participants' accounts, some officials appeared to endorse or reproduce these beliefs, thereby legitimating harmful attitudes towards those accused. This aligns with research indicating that reluctance to intervene, whether due to personal beliefs or fear of community reprisal, may perpetuate collective violence against victims (Uche et al. 2025: 249). It further aligns with Ashforth's (2005: 8) concept of spiritual security, which examines witchcraft and its controversies in the post-apartheid era. Ashforth (2005: 5) argued that widespread spiritual insecurity, combined with limited institutional capacity to provide effective spiritual security, led to community mistrust in formal justice. This is because claims about witchcraft fall outside the evidential standards of the justice system, leading to police officers dismissing such cases. As a result, community members would feel rejected, neglected, and doubted by institutions that are supposed to provide spiritual security. The findings demonstrate that secondary victimisation extends harm within institutional contexts. Rather than interrupting cycles of violence, these responses may reinforce vulnerability, undermine trust, and contribute to the continued marginalisation of individuals accused of witchcraft and their families.

This process is closely connected to the findings on collective blame and secondary targeting. Rather than representing separate forms of victimisation, these processes appear to operate sequentially. Niehaus (2018: 418) demonstrates that tensions in family relations breed suspicion of witchcraft among those perceived to be jealous, envious, and resentful.

Once an accusation is directed at one individual, suspicion often spreads to spouses, children, and extended family members. Collective blame, therefore, functions as the mechanism through which violence spreads across family networks, while secondary targeting represents the behavioural expression of these beliefs. Similar observations have been made by Kabelenga (2020: 51), Chari (2025: 94), and Awortwe et al. (2025: 175), who argue that accusations often become communal rather than individual, legitimising violence against those associated with the accused. The present findings strengthen this understanding by illustrating how these processes become mutually reinforcing, transforming isolated accusations into sustained patterns of family victimisation that disrupt relationships, undermine social belonging, and create lasting insecurity.

The findings also demonstrate that the ripple effects of witchcraft-related violence are reinforced by institutional responses that fail to acknowledge the broader victimisation experienced by affected families. Participants described encounters with law enforcement and other authorities that were characterised by dismissal, inaction, or limited intervention, leaving families to navigate threats, displacement, and social exclusion with little formal support. These experiences reflect secondary victimisation, whereby victims experience further harm through inadequate institutional responses following their initial victimisation (Campbell and Raja 1999: 262; Orth 2002: 314). While previous studies have documented mistrust of criminal justice institutions in cases involving witchcraft-related violence (Gilbert and Postel 2022: 523; Niehaus 2010: 66), the present findings suggest that institutional failures extend beyond ineffective service delivery. When allegations are treated as private family disputes or culturally accepted community matters, institutional inaction may inadvertently reinforce the marginalisation of victims and contribute to the continuation of violence. Consequently, the absence of meaningful intervention not only prolongs victims' vulnerability but also legitimises the conditions under which further victimisation occurs.

Closely linked to these institutional experiences is the pervasive stigma that emerged throughout participants' accounts. Although stigma has previously been identified because of witchcraft accusations (Cimpric 2010: 44; Awortwe et al. 2025: 174), the present findings illustrate how it functions as an enduring social process rather than a temporary reaction to an accusation. Participants described being labelled, avoided, excluded from community activities, and judged solely through their association with an accused family member. These experiences often persisted long

after the initial accusation, disrupting social relationships, and limiting opportunities to rebuild their lives. Importantly, stigma was not confined to those directly accused but extended across family networks, affecting spouses, children, and extended relatives irrespective of their own actions. This finding reinforces Goffman's (1963: 5) conceptualisation of stigma as a socially constructed identity that fundamentally alters how individuals are perceived and treated, while also demonstrating how witchcraft accusations facilitate the intergenerational transmission of social exclusion within rural communities.

The findings indicate that family victimisation, collective blame, secondary targeting, stigma, and secondary victimisation are not discrete outcomes but interconnected processes that sustain the ripple effects of witchcraft-related violence. Collective blame extends accusations beyond the individual, secondary targeting translates suspicion into continued intimidation and violence, stigma entrenches social exclusion, and institutional failures reduce opportunities for protection and recovery. Rather than occurring in isolation, these processes interact to reproduce victimisation across multiple domains of victims' lives. This interconnectedness highlights the importance of moving beyond individualised understandings of victimisation towards approaches that recognise the relational and collective nature of harm within communities where accusations of witchcraft remain socially embedded.

This study contributes to the empirical literature by demonstrating that the consequences of witchcraft-related violence extend beyond the accused individual to affect entire family systems. Conceptualising these experiences as ripple effects provides a broader understanding of victimisation within rural South African communities and underscores the importance of responses that recognise the needs of affected families.

Narrative Constructions of Trauma and Victimisation

The narrative analysis provides further insight into how participants understood and communicated the consequences of witchcraft-related violence. Drawing on Frank's (2013: 53) typology of illness narratives, participants' accounts were predominantly characterised by chaos and quest narratives, while restitution narratives were notably absent. Rather than representing distinct categories, these narrative forms frequently overlapped, reflecting the complexity of participants' lived experiences.

Chaos narratives were evident in participants' descriptions of sudden loss, displacement, fear, and the disruption of everyday life following accusations of witchcraft. Their accounts were often fragmented and emotionally charged, illustrating experiences that remained unresolved long after the initial acts of violence. These narratives reflected not only the immediate trauma associated with the accusations but also the enduring uncertainty created by ongoing threats, social exclusion, and strained family relationships. Similar observations have been made by Frank (2013: 97), who argues that chaos narratives emerge when individuals struggle to impose order or coherence on traumatic experiences.

Quest narratives were also present, although less prominent. Despite profound adversity, some participants described efforts to rebuild their lives, protect their families, or derive meaning from their experiences. These narratives reflected resilience rather than recovery, as participants continued to negotiate the long-term consequences of victimisation while attempting to move forward. In this context, meaning-making was closely associated with maintaining family unity, protecting children, and preserving personal dignity despite continued marginalisation.

The limited presence of restitution narratives is particularly significant. Frank (2013: 75) suggests that restitution narratives are characterised by an expectation that life will return to its previous state following adversity. Such narratives were largely absent from participants' accounts, reflecting the enduring nature of the ripple effects identified in this study. Persistent stigma, collective blame, secondary targeting, and limited institutional support meant that participants rarely described experiences of complete recovery or social reintegration. Instead, their narratives revealed that victimisation remained embedded within everyday family life, with the consequences of witchcraft accusations continuing long after the initial event.

When interpreted in conjunction with the broader finding, the narrative analysis demonstrates that witchcraft-related violence is experienced as an ongoing social process rather than a discrete traumatic incident. The predominance of chaos and quest narratives, coupled with the absence of restitution narratives, reinforces the study's central argument that the ripple effects of witchcraft-related violence are relational, cumulative, and sustained through continued social and institutional processes. Therefore, the narratives provide an important interpretive lens through which the enduring consequences of witchcraft-related violence on families can be understood.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that witchcraft-related violence affects not only those directly accused but also their families, with consequences that extend into wider community relationships. Family victimisation, secondary victimisation, secondary targeting, collective blame, and stigma emerged as interconnected experiences that continued long after the initial accusation or violent incident. These findings indicate that the impact of witchcraft-related violence extends across family systems through ongoing social and institutional processes.

Conceptualising these experiences as ripple effects provides a broader understanding of how victimisation is experienced within rural South African communities. This perspective extends existing knowledge by showing that the consequences of witchcraft-related violence unfold across family relationships rather than being confined to the individual accused. Moreover, the findings highlight a fundamental challenge in addressing witchcraft-related accusations through the justice system, as claims of witchcraft cannot be objectively established or verified using conventional forms of legal evidence. The findings also highlight the need for responses that address the wider impact of witchcraft accusations through family-centred support, community engagement, and institutional responses that recognise the experiences of affected families.

The study was limited to women from selected rural communities in Limpopo Province. Future research should explore the experiences of male family members, children, and other relatives to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how witchcraft-related violence affects family systems. Comparative studies across different provinces and cultural settings could determine whether similar patterns emerge in other contexts. Longitudinal research is also needed to examine how these effects develop over time and to identify factors that support recovery among affected individuals and families.

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Statement of Ethics

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of South Africa (UNISA) Ethics Review Committee (ERC Reference No. ST105-2022).

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