

The Prevalence of Violence Against Women Accused of Witchcraft in Certain Parts of Northern Ghana

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the implications of violence directed towards women accused of witchcraft in Ghana, a phenomenon that has garnered considerable attention within policy, public, and academic spheres. The practice elicits divergent perspectives within the nation. While a segment of the Ghanaian population advocates for its criminalization, others maintain that such a course of action is unwarranted. Against the backdrop of these contentious viewpoints concerning witchcraft accusations and the subsequent mistreatment of women so accused, Ghana's Parliament enacted a bill in 2023 aimed at prohibiting and criminalizing witchcraft allegations, as well as the activities of witchfinders and witch doctors. Nonetheless, the accusations of witchcraft against women and their subsequent confinement in camps persist unabated.

Employing secondary data, this research analyzes the ramifications of the violence inflicted upon women accused of witchcraft in Ghana. To this end, the paper synthesizes a substantial body of existing and contemporary literature that investigates the experiences of women subjected to such accusations. Furthermore, the study illuminates the detrimental effects of this inhumane treatment on the dignity and overall well-being of the victims. It also underscores how this practice undermines international human rights norms and impedes Ghana's progress in human rights development. The paper emphasizes that violence against women accused of witchcraft renders them vulnerable across all strata, but particularly at the structural level. The study concludes by recommending an integrated approach to effectively combat violence against individuals accused of witchcraft.

KEYWORDS: Witchcraft, Accusations, Violence, Women, Northern Ghana

INTRODUCTION

The belief in witchcraft is prevalent throughout many regions of Africa, including Northern Ghana (Igwe, 2017). Individuals accused of witchcraft, predominantly elderly women, encounter a multitude of adversities such as violence, discrimination, and ostracization by their communities (Adinkrah, 2004). This situation has precipitated the establishment of "witch camps," which function as sanctuaries for those accused of witchcraft (Mutaru, 2019). According to the U.S. Department of State (2019), an estimated over six witch camps are dispersed across Northern Ghana, providing refuge to approximately 2,500 accused women. The genesis of such camps predates the 1800s (National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE), 2016). These camps are, in essence, isolated dwellings designed to segregate alleged witches from their accusers (Mutaru, 2019). Life within these camps is marked by hardship, characterized by a lack of potable water, electricity, healthcare services, and viable means of income generation (CHRAJ, 2010). Furthermore, these accused women face the persistent threat of stigmatization and violence should they attempt to leave the confines of the camp (Adinkrah, 2004).

It is imperative to note that the practice of confining women in witch camps frequently commences with accusations. Allegations of witchcraft stem from diverse sources, including instances of death, illness, financial difficulties, or crop failures (Mutaru, 2019). Accusers may include relatives, neighbors, priests, or traditional healers who purport to possess mystical abilities to identify witches (Igwe, 2017). Typically, accused women are subjected to abusive exorcism rituals prior to their banishment to the camps (Adinkrah, 2021). Although illegal, witch camps persist primarily due to the Ghanaian government's failure to adequately provide protection and rehabilitation for the accused women (Mutaru, 2019). Despite the passage of a privately sponsored bill by the Parliament of Ghana to prohibit and criminalize witchcraft accusations and the activities of witch doctors and witchfinders (Joy Online, 2023 July 27; Modern Ghana, 2023 July 28; Yire, 2023), the President has yet to provide assent. Numerous appeals have been directed at the

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president to assent the bill in order to address the multifaceted issues surrounding witchcraft accusations and to fortify efforts against injustices faced by individuals accused of witchcraft within the country; however, the bill remains unsigned (Ankrah, 2024; Emmanuel, 2024; GhanaWeb, 2024 July 26). Consequently, many individuals within local communities in Ghana continue to subject persons accused of witchcraft to unjust treatment and may feel emboldened to perpetrate further such acts.

In certain parts of Northern Ghana, women accused of witchcraft endure profound discrimination, oppression, and physical violence. They are forcibly removed from their homes and compelled to reside in segregated communities of alleged witches, known as "witch camps." The 1992 Constitution stipulates that all Ghanaians are entitled to rights and freedoms, including, but not limited to, equality before the law, freedom from torture, cruel, and inhuman treatment, human dignity, education, health, and the right to participate in the cultural life of the community. These rights and freedoms are also safeguarded by international human rights frameworks, to which Ghana is a signatory, such as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the Banjul Charter. These international human rights instruments oblige state parties to implement measures to ensure the realization, promotion, and protection of the rights contained therein.

However, a significant number of women in some Ghanaian communities continue to be subjected to inhumane and violent treatment that undermines and erodes these human rights norms, owing to witchcraft accusations and subsequent confinement in 'witch camps.' They endure grievous abuse and are deprived of lives of dignity and fulfillment. According to the National Commission for Civic Education (2010), the women residing in these camps are utterly impoverished. They inhabit dilapidated structures constructed from mud, sticks, and straw. The majority of these women possess negligible financial resources. Their living conditions are not only appalling but also compounded by the emotional and physical violence they endure. They are ostracized and regarded as societal outcasts. Azongo et al. (2020) detail the women's subjection to "torturous acts of banishment, confinement, starvation, beatings, and enslavement." This oppression and violence are rooted in deeply entrenched beliefs and superstitions surrounding witchcraft and the perceived danger posed by these women.

Previous scholarly endeavors have offered significant insights into witchcraft exorcism within Pentecostal Churches in Ghana (Onyinah, 2020). Others have investigated Ghanaian beliefs in and practices related to witchcraft activities and their consequent implications (Agyepong, 2020ab, 2021). While these studies have provided an understanding of witchcraft beliefs, practices, and consequences, the human rights dimensions and social injustices experienced by individuals accused of witchcraft within Ghanaian societies have not been adequately explored. Research that has drawn attention to the human rights-related effects of witchcraft accusations has primarily focused on the exorcism activities of Pentecostal pastors, which lead to symbolic violence and abuse (Tweneboah, 2015; Golo & Benyah, 2024). Consequently, many Ghanaians may not fully appreciate how their accusations of witchcraft and their treatment of such individuals in 'witch camps' impinge upon their dignity and human liberties and freedoms. This deficiency in understanding can further tarnish Ghana's human rights image on the global stage and impede the country's human rights development agenda. Similarly, a lack of comprehension regarding the human rights implications of witchcraft accusations and treatment in Ghana could hinder the development of the necessary policy and legal frameworks to address these issues. Moreover, although Owusu (2021) highlighted some human rights concerns pertaining to witchcraft-motivated mistreatment in Ghana, his research was based on secondary data derived from three Ghanaian media outlets, and his analysis was not informed by empirical data. Therefore, there is limited empirical research that has examined the human rights dimensions of witchcraft accusations and treatment in Ghana's witch camps. Recognizing the paucity of empirical insights into the human rights and social justice implications of witchcraft accusations and their potential impact on policy development, this study investigates the human rights abuses experienced by women in Ghana's witch camps and their implications for the attainment of social justice. The study sought to address the following research questions: (1) What forms of structural violence and human rights abuses are experienced by women living in Ghana's witch camps? (2) What sociocultural beliefs underpin community perceptions and treatment of women accused of witchcraft in Northern Ghana? (3) How do the living conditions of Ghana's witch camps compare with those of the surrounding communities? (4) What consequences do women accused of witchcraft and confined in witch camps suffer?

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Theory of Social Justice

Social justice is conceptualized as the creation of a fair and equitable society wherein all individuals can participate and thrive on an equal footing. As articulated by the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, social justice pertains to "the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation" (Miller, 2023). Key tenets that are consistently emphasized across various theories of social justice include:

- Fair distribution of resources, rights, and access to services and opportunities (Miller, 2001).
- Ensuring equality, human rights, and dignity for all individuals, irrespective of their identities or backgrounds (Nussbaum, 2000).
- Facilitating participatory parity within social and political institutions (Fraser, 2008).
- Adopting a capabilities approach that focuses on the freedoms necessary for achieving well-being (Sen, 2008).

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The theory of social justice can be applied to the examination of structural violence perpetrated against women accused of witchcraft in Northern Ghana's witch camps.

Access to Civil Liberties

Women relegated to Ghana's witch camps are severely deprived of their civil liberties. As documented by Adinkrah (2021), alleged witches possess "no personal autonomy" because "decisions about their personal welfare are made on their behalf by camp officials" who presume their inability to "exercise sound judgment." Their rights to freedom of movement, association, dignity, and autonomy are contravened, which directly conflicts with the principles of social justice. These violations represent significant infringements of fundamental civil liberties that are central to the tenets of social justice.

Human Rights

The systemic oppression within witch camps constitutes major human rights violations. Akoensi (2018) summarizes the plight of these women, stating they face "degrading treatment," including "torture," through being "denied food for days... forced to drink dirty water and.... beaten frequently." International human rights laws enshrine the universal right of all individuals to be free from torture, cruelty, and inhumane or degrading treatment. Therefore, the abuse endured by alleged witches is in direct contravention of core social justice concepts that uphold human rights protections.

Equal Participation

Women residing in witch camps are systematically prevented from achieving equal participation in societal structures. As illuminated by Yakubu (2022), these women are relegated to the status of "social outcasts... regarded dangerous and treated with contempt." Women within these camps are unjustly branded as witches, a designation lacking any legal foundation. Their banishment from their villages is unlawful, compelling them to live separated from their families and precluding any involvement in the communal life of their own communities. Furthermore, they face the threat of lynching, which often leads to self-imposed exile. This exile effectively segregates them from social and civic engagement within their respective communities. Compounding these issues, they endure severe economic deprivation within the camps (Adinkrah, 2021), a situation that directly conflicts with the fundamental principles of social justice, which advocate for equal rights and opportunities for all individuals.

The systemic oppression of women within Ghana's witch camps significantly curtails their access to civil liberties, violates their inherent human rights, and renders their equal participation in society impossible. Such mistreatment stands in stark opposition to the established tenets of social justice.

Social Injustice and Structural Violence

The prevalence of social injustice and structural violence directed at women within Ghana's witch camps is a multifaceted issue, deeply rooted in entrenched sociocultural beliefs, significant economic disadvantages, and a pervasive absence of legal protections. Beliefs concerning witchcraft are widespread across Ghana, with a substantial proportion of the Northern population, estimated at 94%, holding the conviction that witches exist (Adinkrah, 2011). Typically, elderly women are the primary targets of witchcraft accusations, which are believed to be the causal agent behind poverty, hardship, conflict, illness, and various other adversities (Drucker-Brown, 1993). Consequently, these women are confined to what are termed "witch camps," which function as detention centers for individuals accused of practicing witchcraft.

These camps are characterized by severe overcrowding, inadequate sanitation, and a critical lack of food and healthcare provisions (CHRAJ, 2010; Adinkrah, 2011). The conditions within these facilities constitute a form of physical and structural violence against the women held there. They are subjected to stigmatization, dehumanization, abandonment by their families, physical assaults, and in some instances, death (Adinkrah, 2011). Their poverty and their status as aged widows or women lacking male family support contribute to their increased vulnerability to accusations (Adam, 2023). The majority possess limited legal recourse or financial means to mount a defense, and few ever succeed in returning to their home villages, even if subsequently proven innocent (NCCE, 2010).

Until 2023, the Ghanaian government had not enacted legislation outlawing accusations of witchcraft (Joy Online, 2023 July 27). The belated passage of this law, however, reflects Ghana's ingrained patriarchal biases and the insufficient provision of social services or protections for vulnerable demographics, such as impoverished and elderly women.

METHODOLOGY

This study undertakes an examination of the violence and human rights abuses experienced by individuals accused of witchcraft in Northern Ghana's witch camps, based exclusively on published reports accessed through policy briefs, press reports, and academic databases. Given the inherent difficulties in gathering primary data from these sensitive regions, a documentary research approach was employed. This methodology serves to mitigate limitations concerning the scope of data available for analysis, while concurrently leveraging existing secondary information sources to test the research propositions (Ahmed, 2010). By integrating data from multiple sources, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the systemic injustices faced by accused women and to identify existing gaps in policy and enforcement mechanisms.

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The research adopts a qualitative, non-empirical documentary analysis design, prioritizing a systematic review and critical interpretation of relevant literature. This approach is deemed appropriate due to the research focusing on historical, sociocultural, and legal factors that are extensively documented but necessitate synthesis. Furthermore, primary data collection within witch camps is hindered by both ethical considerations and accessibility constraints. Finally, policy documents and media reports offer invaluable real-world insights into the legal and social responses to these issues.

The data collection process commenced with the identification of relevant literature. This involved searching academic databases (including JSTOR, Research Gate, Academia, and Francis & Taylor, among others) for articles and books using search terms such as "witch camps Northern Ghana," "witchcraft accusations," "human rights abuses," and "gender violence Ghana." Policy documents and legal frameworks from the Government of Ghana and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were also reviewed for data extraction. Additionally, media articles from various news portals that provided contemporary accounts and reflected public discourse on women accused of witchcraft were considered. The study established the following inclusion criteria:

1. Sources published between 2000 and 2024 to ensure current relevance.
2. A specific focus on Northern Ghana, where witch camps are predominantly situated in clusters.
3. Accounts that address the legal, social, or health dimensions of witchcraft accusations.

The exclusion criteria were applied as follows:

1. Opinion pieces or viewpoints lacking empirical or policy references.
2. Studies on witchcraft in other nations or regions without direct relevance to the Ghanaian context.

The study employed thematic analysis, involving the identification of recurring themes through coding. Findings from policy and legal frameworks, as well as academic and media sources, were then compared through pattern mapping to discern consistencies and inconsistencies (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Critical sociological discourse analysis was utilized to scrutinize how policy language, such as the term "harmful traditions," frames state responsibility (Ruiz, 2009). The study also incorporated policy gap analysis by comparing Ghana's capacity to adhere to international human rights norms, including the Banjul Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

DISCUSSION

Cultural Beliefs about Witchcraft in Northern Ghana

Cultural beliefs pertaining to witchcraft are deeply entrenched in Northern Ghana, with an estimate from 2011 indicating that over 90% of the Northern population believes in the existence of witches (Adinkrah, 2011). This belief system is partly influenced by traditional folk religions and the integration of witchcraft concepts from neighboring countries, such as Burkina Faso, into local belief structures.

Within the cultural framework of Northern Ghana, witchcraft is conceptualized as an inherent supernatural power possessed secretly by certain individuals, predominantly women (Drucker-Brown, 1993). Witches are believed to operate nocturnally, employing their magical abilities to inflict misfortune, illness, accidents, financial ruin, or death upon their perceived victims (Adinkrah, 2011). Their purported motivations are often attributed to spite, jealousy, revenge, or inherent malevolence.

A significant contributing factor to these beliefs is the region's patriarchal social structure and the pervasive gender inequalities it perpetuates. Elderly women who are widowed or lack male protection are particularly susceptible to accusations and subsequent abuse (Adinkrah, 2011). Widow abuse, often linked to the appropriation of inheritance, is a common occurrence. Accusations also serve as a mechanism for community control over women who deviate from societal expectations, being perceived as unfeminine, aggressive, abrasive, or neglectful of their domestic responsibilities (Drucker-Brown, 1993).

Common characteristics associated with alleged witches include advanced age, widowhood, the presence of birth defects or abnormalities, perceived unfeminine physical features, and antisocial behavior. Women who are accused typically originate from marginalized segments of society and often lack robust family support networks. Consequently, witchcraft accusations emerge as an attempt to provide supernatural explanations for events that are otherwise difficult to comprehend within families or villages (NCCE, 2010). The accused women then become scapegoats for communal hardships and are subjected to violent retribution or banishment to live indefinitely in "witch camps." These supernatural beliefs persist, in part, because witchcraft offers simplistic explanations for complex problems confronting communities (Drucker-Brown, 1993). The lack of access to healthcare and modern education in this region also contributes to the endurance of witchcraft beliefs.

Anthropologists suggest that beliefs in witchcraft have persisted partly because notions of mystical harm align with long-standing cultural concepts of justice and accountability for interpersonal wrongdoing within communities (Ruel, 1992). Accusations that elicit confessions through coercive violence or result in banishment mirror historical community practices, which are now applied to alleged supernatural transgressions.

Some scholars posit that contemporary witchcraft beliefs represent a continuation of traditional cultural understandings of gender and power dynamics, given that elders and marginalized women are predominantly targeted (Duodu, 2021). Ultimately, rural poverty, rigid gender inequalities, and a lack of infrastructure reinforce the persistence of witchcraft beliefs in Northern Ghana.

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Socioeconomic Drivers of Witchcraft Accusations in Northern Ghana

The phenomenon of women being accused of witchcraft and subsequently expelled to so-called "witch camps" in Northern Ghana is a consequence of the intricate interplay between social, cultural, economic, and political factors that disproportionately affect and marginalize elderly women in the region.

A principal driver of these accusations is economic dispossession and the absence of property rights for widows (Duodu, 2021). Customary law frequently prohibits wives from inheriting land or wealth following their husband's demise. This leaves impoverished widows vulnerable to property disputes, wherein relatives may resort to witchcraft accusations as a means to legitimize the seizure of assets and their subsequent expulsion (Adinkrah, 2011). Research indicates that as many as 25% of those accused explicitly cite property dispossession as the precipitating factor (Drucker-Brown, 1993).

Concurrently, widespread poverty and the lack of financial support networks place aging and widowed women who are struggling to support dependents at an elevated risk of accusation (Songtaba, 2022). Subsistence living conditions imply that any illness, death, or hardship experienced by economically strained households necessitates a spiritual explanation, with women often serving as convenient scapegoats.

Moreover, developmental pressures such as land scarcity, soil infertility, and climate change, which contribute to Northern Ghana's endemic rural poverty, undermine traditional livelihoods (Drucker-Brown, 1993). This environment fosters collective anxiety that can be readily exploited by allegations that attribute supernatural causation to misfortune.

Culturally ingrained sexism also intertwines with economic vulnerability. Elderly women who are perceived as abrasive, obstinate, neglectful of their duties, lacking familial connections, or who defy gendered codes of deference become targets (Duodu, 2021). Accusers portray them as witches responsible for community misfortunes, thereby providing a post-hoc justification for their public shaming, assault, and exile to the camps.

An Examination of the Conditions within Witch Camps in Northern Ghana

Witch camps, located in the northern regions of Ghana, are settlements established to house women who have been accused of witchcraft and subsequently ostracized from their communities. While precise figures are subject to fluctuation, estimates indicate that approximately 2,500 women accused of witchcraft reside in these camps across the region (U.S. Department of State, 2019). The living conditions within these camps are frequently characterized by severe deprivations, with residents experiencing inadequate provision of food, healthcare, shelter, and security (Adinkrah, 2021).

Women become residents of witch camps following accusations of witchcraft, often initiated by local religious leaders or family members. The motivations behind these accusations are diverse, encompassing factors such as jealousy, animosity, envy (National Commission for Civic Education [NCCE], 2010), suspicions of causing illness or death, personal vendettas, or envy (Adinkrah, 2015). Upon accusation, these women are subjected to violence, abuse, and exile from their homes, compelling them to seek refuge in witch camps. However, life within the camps is not free from further abuses. Many accused witches are deprived of basic necessities and endure overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, exploitation, and even death threats from local populations who perceive the camps as "colonies of dangerous witches" (Owusu, 2020).

Healthcare represents a significant concern, as most camps lack both medical personnel and facilities. A substantial proportion of the accused women are elderly and therefore more vulnerable to diseases, yet they are denied access to essential medications, adequate nutrition, or vaccinations (Adinkrah, 2021). Persistent shortages of food, water, and shelter also plague the camps. One study investigating the prevailing conditions reported that accused women lacked "access to safe water, food, and well-ventilated shelter" (Igwe, 2017). Such deprivations of fundamental needs have a profound and detrimental impact on the physical and psychological well-being of the residents.

In recent years, a number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and women's rights groups have initiated programs aimed at improving conditions within the camps, including the construction of basic health clinics and shelters (Owusu, 2020). Educational campaigns have also been launched with the objective of facilitating the reintegration of alleged witches into mainstream society. Nevertheless, progress remains slow, underfunded, and limited to a small number of camps thus far (Adinkrah, 2021). Substantial advancements in public awareness, resource allocation, cultural transformation, and political will are still critically necessary to ensure accused women receive enhanced security, care, community support, and access to justice.

The Violence Perpetrated Against Women Accused of Witchcraft

Physical Violence and Abuse

Women banished to Ghana's witch camps are subjected to alarming rates of physical violence, abuse, and oppression. Residents of these camps routinely endure some form of physical assault, public harassment, or bodily violation subsequent to accusations of witchcraft. The most prevalent acts include beatings, stoning, whipping, destruction of property, and forced exile, all serving as punitive measures against the accused (Adinkrah, 2021).

Frequently, family members themselves perpetrate severe physical abuse against the accused women prior to their banishment. Accounts from women describe being "brutally tortured, injured, bound in chains, and starved" by individuals who presumed them to be witches (NCCE, 2010). Husbands, sons, brothers, and in-laws are identified as the most frequent perpetrators of such

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aggressions. These women often arrive at the witch camps seeking refuge already bearing scars, wounds, malnourishment, or disabilities (NCCE, 2010).

Furthermore, persecution continues within the confines of the camps. Residents face the threat of attacks from hostile community members residing in the vicinity of the camps. Numerous incidents are reported of camp women being assaulted, pelted with stones, or subjected to rape when they venture outside the camps to gather firewood or fetch water (Adinkrah, 2021). Physical threats also emanate from fellow accused witches within the camps, often stemming from tensions arising over the scarcity of resources.

Deprivation of Food, Water, and Healthcare

Women accused of witchcraft in northern Ghana encounter immense suffering within the witch camps to which they are banished. These camps are characterized by a severe lack of fundamental necessities such as food, potable water, and healthcare services (Owusu, 2020). An estimated 2,500 women currently reside in six witch camps located in Northern Ghana (U.S. Department of State, 2019). Following accusations of witchcraft, frequently leveled by their own family members, these women are compelled to abandon their homes and villages. They subsequently find themselves in makeshift camps where their basic needs are consistently unmet.

Food insecurity represents a substantial problem. The women possess limited opportunities for agricultural engagement or income generation to procure food. Research has indicated that accused women in witch camps experience insufficient food intake and persistent hunger. The absence of a balanced diet leads to malnutrition, particularly affecting pregnant and lactating women. Reports suggest they occasionally endure nights on empty stomachs, with no certainty as to when their next meal will be (Badu-Agyei, 2022; Baba, 2013).

Access to clean water is also extremely restricted, thereby escalating the risk of waterborne diseases. The camps are equipped with inadequate sanitation facilities, and toilets frequently overflow into open trenches from which women collect water for cooking and drinking (ActionAid, 2012). Diarrheal diseases are prevalent due to the unsanitary conditions and the lack of clean water.

Healthcare provisions are virtually nonexistent within the camps. No medical facilities are situated inside the witch camps. Transportation challenges and financial constraints often impede the women's ability to access healthcare centers located miles away from these remote settlements. Women lack access to reproductive healthcare services and the necessary resources for safe childbirth. Moreover, the cumulative effects of physical abuse, psychological trauma, depression, and social isolation impose significant mental health burdens that remain untreated (ActionAid, 2012; NCCE, 2010).

The perpetuation of these inhumane living conditions will continue in the absence of interventions aimed at improving food security, water quality, sanitation systems, and healthcare access. The Ghanaian government and international aid organizations must recognize this situation as an urgent human rights crisis affecting innocent women. Action plans, supported by adequate funding, are critically required to alleviate the suffering experienced within the witch camps.

Confiscation of Property and Severing of Familial Ties

Women exiled to witch camps in northern Ghana endure profound social isolation and economic destitution due to the confiscation of their property and the dissolution of their support networks. Following accusations of witchcraft, often made by relatives or neighbors, these women are forcibly expelled from their homes and villages (Wumbala, 2018; Truxler, 2006). In this process, they forfeit their claims to farmland, livestock, shelter, and personal possessions.

Banishment to remote witch camps results in the severance of crucial familial and community relationships. An ethnographic study revealed that 63% of residents in the Gnani witch camp had lost all contact with their families, including husbands who had divorced them (Mabefam, 2023). Isolated from their kinship networks, these women are deprived of advocates to defend their rights or resources to meet their fundamental needs. This isolation also facilitates further abuse; as human rights activist Lamnatu Adam observes: "She loses the family support and she also loses that confidence in herself because once you are in the camp your status changes. You are ashamed of the situation and that causes you to lose self-respect and to be traumatised" (ActionAid, 2012). The act of exiling alleged witches to camps stripped of their assets and support systems condemns these women to cycles of poverty and suffering. In some instances, immediate family members are themselves the accusers (NCCE, 2010). The loss of property claims destabilizes the future for women who relied heavily on selling agricultural produce at local markets to sustain their families. The persistent social stigma also discourages relatives from re-establishing contact.

The ostracization of Ghanaian women accused of witchcraft enables egregious human rights violations. The confiscation of their possessions and their isolation from kinship safety nets magnify the dangers faced by these vulnerable women. Empowering these women necessitates securing basic resources and rebuilding the family and community connections that are critical for support. Although progress is gradual, advocacy groups are actively working to reunite exiled women with relatives who are willing to accept their return to villages (ActionAid, 2012). The restoration of what has been lost remains challenging, but reconciliation is achievable with the spread of awareness.

Social Isolation and Stigmatization

Women condemned to Ghana's witch camps confront extreme social isolation and stigmatization. Following accusations of witchcraft, community members compel these women to flee into exile in remote camps (Azongo et al., 2020). Cast out from their villages, the women are cut off from vital social support systems and are perceived as dangerous outcasts.

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The banishment physically isolates the alleged witches from their familiar social circles. An ethnographic study conducted at the Gnani camp indicated that 63% of residents lost all contact with family members after being accused of witchcraft (Mabefam, 2023). Sons, daughters, husbands, and lifelong friends are abruptly instructed to shun the accused women. This leaves them utterly isolated, without advocates, sources of income, or defenders of their rights.

In addition, the women endure severe stigmatization within the broader communities from which they were expelled. Suspected witches are regarded as threats who intentionally harm their neighbors through spells and magic (Azongo et al., 2020). As outcasts, they are considered less than human. The common instances of violence directed against alleged witches reflect societal perceptions of them as subhuman and perilous. The social isolation and stigma continue to affect women even after their return home; they face discrimination. "People don't want to even buy from them when they sell things at the market" (ActionAid, 2012). Overcoming deeply ingrained superstitions about witches who bring misfortune upon villages proves difficult. Consequently, women often choose to remain in the camps to avoid ongoing persecution.

Violation of Dignity and Human Rights

Violations of human dignity and rights are exemplified by the inhumane treatment of women relegated to Ghana's witch camps. Following often arbitrary accusations of witchcraft, these women experience violent expulsion, dehumanizing conditions within the camps, and profound social isolation (ActionAid, 2022). Their fundamental rights to adequate sustenance, shelter, healthcare, justice, and even life itself are systematically infringed upon.

Brutal assaults frequently accompany these accusations. Mobs often perpetrate violent attacks before forcing the women into exile. Asana, who was 27 years old at the time of her accusation, recounted: "When I first came here my whole body was in pain because my ex-husband hit me and then they tried to burn me with melted plastic. My ex-husband knew I was pregnant. One day, when I was five months pregnant, while I was in the fields with other women he came after me and he beat me with no mercy. While I was on the ground he took out a knife. The other women were begging him to stop. After he beat me hard he stopped. He did not kill me at the end. I was taken to a shrine. There, he melted plastic and poured it on my body. When I came here my whole body was in terrible pain" (ActionAid, 2012). The abandonment of these women in remote camps, devoid of essential necessities, effectively constitutes a slow death sentence.

Life within these camps fundamentally contradicts the principles of human dignity. Pervasive hunger inflicts suffering upon undernourished bodies, while preventable illnesses proliferate due to unsanitary conditions (Adinkra, 2021; Adam, 2023). The persistent threat of further abuse upon return deters the pursuit of justice, thereby perpetuating human rights infringements. The subjection of Ghanaian women to extreme brutality, the deprivation of essential survival resources, and the denial of access to judicial recourse represent severe violations of multiple human rights. Consequently, international aid, complemented by grassroots interventions focused on protecting vulnerable populations, is urgently required.

Efforts to Assist Women Accused of Witchcraft and Associated Challenges

Work of NGOs and Activists to Improve Conditions

The work undertaken by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and activists to improve conditions, while slow, involves various advocacy groups dedicated to supporting women enduring the harsh realities of Ghana's witch camps. Their initiatives encompass the provision of basic necessities alongside long-term strategies aimed at transforming the deeply ingrained beliefs that perpetuate injustice. Organizations such as ActionAid International, Grameen, and Songtaba provide essential supplies, including food packages and hygiene items, alongside vocational training programs and microcredit facilities to enable women in the camps to establish sustainable livelihoods (ActionAid, 2022; Songtaba, 2022; CHRAJ, 2010). A significant focus is also placed on community reintegration, with efforts directed towards altering societal perceptions that validate witchcraft accusations as legitimate grounds for exile. While success varies, these initiatives aim to reunite estranged families (OHCHR, 2022). Furthermore, Ghanaian civil society organizations actively lobby for government policies that afford protection to vulnerable groups against physical assault and unsubstantiated accusations. Organizations like ActionAid Ghana, TIDA, and Tuyuntaba Development Association regularly conduct monitoring activities and campaigns against the discrimination faced by suspected witches and wizards (CHRAJ, 2010).

On an international level, Ghana's Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) monitors the conditions within the camps and advocates for decisive action to address this human rights crisis (CHRAJ, 2010). Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch amplify awareness of these abuses through their public campaigns. The UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights has visited these camps and provided recommendations to the Ghanaian government regarding their responsibilities (Given, 2022).

Evidence gathered by the Global Fund Community Foundation (GFCF, 2022) demonstrates the efficacy of collaborations with organizations deeply embedded within local communities in eliciting meaningful responses. These partnerships benefit from elevated levels of community trust, which facilitates the introduction and advancement of innovative concepts and ideas, particularly those capable of prompting attitudinal shifts. Since 2017, the STAR Ghana Foundation has collaborated with the local organization Songtaba to safeguard against gender-based violence. For the past decade, Songtaba has been dedicated to empowering and supporting women and children in Ghana's Northern Region. This collaborative effort has recently achieved a significant milestone

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with the establishment of four district by-laws creating tribunals to adjudicate conflicts and violence associated with witchcraft accusations (GFCF, 2022). The convergence of efforts among NGOs, civil society groups, international bodies, and grassroots activists holds the potential to gradually reshape beliefs and policies, thereby mitigating the injustice faced by thousands of women. Sustained advocacy and aid are indispensable until societal progress renders the existence of these camps obsolete.

Obstacles Encountered in Altering Beliefs Pertaining to Witchcraft

The transformation of the inhumane conditions endured by Ghanaian women in ‘witch camps’ necessitates a fundamental shift in the societal beliefs and structural impediments that underpin such injustice. However, deeply entrenched superstitions, a deficiency in political will, and inadequate funding present significant barriers to progress. The prevalent folk beliefs across Northern Ghana are the foundation upon which accusations of witchcraft and subsequent exile to dilapidated camps are predicated. Belief in witchcraft is widespread in rural northern Ghana, with origins predating both colonialism and Christianity (Igwe, 2017). Accusations and banishments occur outside Ghana’s formal legal framework, relying instead on traditional cultural beliefs (Adinkrah, 2004). Christian missionaries have largely been unsuccessful in supplanting these beliefs, with accused witches often continuing to practice Christianity alongside traditional spiritual practices (Asamoah-Gyedu, 2015). These beliefs persist and are perpetuated intergenerationally, notwithstanding the efforts of advocacy groups and governmental prohibitions against accusing individuals of witchcraft (CHRAJ, 2012).

Moreover, women accused of witchcraft are subjected to immense stigma and are forcibly exiled from their communities, leading to separation from friends and family. They are segregated within witch camps, possessing minimal resources or economic opportunities and relying entirely on charitable donations (ActionAid, 2022). The social isolation and stigma persist even for those who manage to return to their homes, thereby complicating efforts at community reintegration (OHCHR, 2022). This stigma hinders public education campaigns designed to challenge prevailing assumptions, as accused women remain marginalized (Adinkrah, 2004).

Furthermore, women accused of witchcraft often originate from socio-economic backgrounds characterized by poverty and limited opportunities, even prior to their banishment (Adinkrah, 2004). The severance of community ties exacerbates existing economic struggles, as women in the camps lack access to farmland or alternative income-generating avenues (Sossou et al., 2012). Their dependence on donations renders them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse (The Savana Institute, 2021). The confluence of poverty and social isolation constitutes a major impediment to leaving the camps, even for women who desire to return to their communities (Adinkrah, 2004).

A notable absence of political impetus has resulted in limited progress in addressing the issues confronting these camps. The lack of legal mechanisms or resources to facilitate the closure of the camps underscores the imperative for a more proactive governmental approach to ensure the well-being and safety of women residing in these areas. Even as of 2023, no legislation explicitly prohibited the unsubstantiated accusation of women as witches. Activists contend, however, that without addressing these underlying societal issues, the government’s declarations of respect for women’s rights constitute mere rhetoric. Moreover, activists emphasize the critical role of active governance in ensuring that camp facilities are improved and that resources are allocated effectively to meet the needs of the women living in these camps.

Finally, persistent budget constraints impede the capacity-building initiatives for local NGOs and women’s welfare programs. Ghanaian organizations depend heavily on intermittent project support from European church organizations, rather than on stable, long-term funding streams (Amoah, 2019). The need for increased donor engagement is evident to enable these organizations to recruit additional social workers and expand their reach. However, global charitable giving to small grassroots groups often lacks long-term stability.

Enactment and Implementation of Legislation Concerning Witchcraft and Witch Camps in Ghana

Until 2023, Ghana lacked legislation that explicitly prohibited the unsubstantiated accusation of individuals as witches. There was no law criminalizing unsupported accusations or the condemnation of people as witches. Consequently, individuals could accuse others, particularly impoverished and elderly women, of witchcraft. These women were then subjected to physical and psychological abuse, and social ostracization, ultimately leading to their exile to witch camps, where they were treated as pariahs in their own land. Crucially, they were unable to seek legal recourse due to the absence of definitive legislation to support their claims. Perpetrators often escaped accountability, exhibiting the audacity, often bolstered by archaic traditions, to accuse others as well.

The imperative for structured legislation against witchcraft accusations and related activities gained renewed urgency following the lynching of 90-year-old Akua Denteh in broad daylight in Kafaba, Savannah Region, on July 23, 2020, after she was accused of witchcraft. This tragic incident catalyzed the introduction of a Bill in Ghana’s Parliament (Agyeman, 2023). The Bill was subsequently passed into law in July 2023. It is anticipated that this legislation will serve as a deterrent against witchcraft accusations and the associated human rights abuses, while also providing a legal framework for law enforcement agencies to prosecute offenders responsible for human rights violations arising from such accusations. While this development is a welcome step, particularly given Ghana’s signatory status to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—which upholds the respect for the freedom, equality, dignity, and rights of all individuals—the President’s failure to assent to the Bill raises concerns regarding the nation’s commitment

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to safeguarding the rights of vulnerable populations, such as women accused of witchcraft. The Declaration further stipulates that all human beings are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. These fundamental tenets of human rights are further reinforced by the Constitution of the Republic of Ghana, which explicitly prohibits all forms of practices that are dehumanizing or detrimental to the physical and mental well-being of an individual (Articles 15(2) Sections (a) and (b) and 26(2) of the 1992 Constitution).

Recommendations: Towards Justice and Reform

The study presents the following recommendations, derived from the preceding discussions:

- i. The National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE) and the Ministry of Gender and Social Protection should initiate comprehensive public awareness campaigns. These campaigns should aim to educate communities regarding the realities underpinning witchcraft accusations and to foster reconciliation with exiled women through the utilization of forums, media outreach, community dialogues, and educational materials.
- ii. The Ministry of Chieftaincy and Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Gender and Social Protection should actively contribute to the reform of traditional leadership and gender policies. This reform should endeavor to promote women's socioeconomic empowerment while simultaneously instituting legal penalties for abusive witchcraft accusations that lack evidential substantiation or consent.
- iii. The Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning and the Ministry of Gender and Social Protection should allocate sufficient governmental funding to the Department of Social Welfare. This funding is intended to enable the provision of social support services for accused women, facilitating their ability to rebuild their lives, secure adequate housing, access essential healthcare, and ensure the fulfillment of their basic needs through collaborative efforts with social welfare agencies.
- iv. The enactment of legislation designed to safeguard vulnerable groups from witchcraft-related violence and exile, accompanied by stringent penalties for accusers and mandatory reporting by village heads, should be actively promoted. This promotion should be achieved through educational and sensitization programs coordinated by the Ministry of Gender and Social Protection and the NCCE.
- v. Interfaith forums and women's advocacy groups should be mobilized to spearhead mediation efforts between accused women and their home communities. These mediations are intended to address distrust, initiate the process of reconciliation, and raise awareness to counteract misconceptions that fuel ostracization.

CONCLUSION

This study has underscored the pervasiveness of structural violence directed against women subjected to witchcraft accusations in Northern Ghana. Those accused of witchcraft experience a multifaceted array of physical violence, dehumanization, and disempowerment. It is evident that endemic physical abuses inflicted upon accused women originate from the local rationalization of violence against individuals labeled as "witches." Furthermore, the research has revealed the significant role played by entrenched cultural belief systems, prevailing gender inequalities, and a deficiency in legal protections in perpetuating harmful witchcraft narratives that legitimize banishment. The study draws attention to the economic deprivations, social ostracization, psychological trauma, and human rights violations that occur when accused women are exiled into inhumane living conditions within established witch camps.

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