

CONFERENCE REPORT

NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON WITCHCRAFT ACCUSATIONS IN GHANA 10TH December, 2014, Accra International Conference Centre

Theme: Protecting the Vulnerable: Witchcraft Accusations and Human Rights Abuses in Ghana.

Organisers: Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection.

Supporters: ActionAid Ghana, IBIS Ghana, Ministry of Chieftaincy and Traditional Affairs.

Introduction and Background: Witchcraft accusations and other human rights violations occur daily in many communities in Ghana. Usually victims of these allegations are given harsh and inhumane treatment, which include physical assault, banishment, social ridicule, isolation, lurching and death. Victims of witchcraft accusations are poor and vulnerable old women who lack the necessary social security and legal awareness to demand and insist on their right to liberty and dignity.

In the Northern region, people suspected to be witches seek refuge in witch camps to escape family and community anger. Over the years, ActionAid Ghana, local partners and some public institutions have campaigned about the systemic human rights abuses at the camps, where residents live in terrible circumstances. While the campaign for the reintegration of the alleged witches has been well received by the public, particularly traditional authorities and government, there has never been a national forum to discuss the plight of victims of witchcraft accusations.

The conference of witchcraft accusations and human rights abuses was the first national response to the human rights violations arising from witchcraft accusations in Ghana and the other forms of abuses at prayer camps and other isolation centres.

Moderator: Dr Gifty Anti

- At 10:30 am, the moderator officially welcomed guests to the conference
- She thanked GTV for covering the conference live
- Emphasised that the conference was the first ever in Ghana
- Highlighted the urgency of the problem of witchcraft accusations in 21st Century
- The moderator also stressed the gender dimension of witchcraft accusation: Women who are bold, beautiful and assertive are usually branded witches
- She also noted that in an internet age where social media is so intrusive, accusations of witchcraft could reach a wider audience
- She commended the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, ActionAid Ghana, and other partners for the initiative.

Opening Prayer: Rev Christian Tsekpoi of the Church of Pentecost, Accra, opened the

meeting with a resounding prayer.

Welcome and Opening Remarks: Hon. Nana Oye Lithur, Minister for Gender, Children and Social Protection, welcomed participants to the conference.

The Hon Minister wished the forum a happy Human Rights Day and provided an overview of the Ministry's mandate and vision, which is to empower the aged, excluded, persons with disability and the vulnerable for social justice. She emphasised the importance of human rights and sustainable development and noted the progress of Ghana as a nation moving towards universal human rights. She, however, acknowledged that is still more work to be done.

Highlights of Minister's Speech

- Witchcraft accusation is a deep concern and a dent on our human rights record
- The most vulnerable of our community are targeted—women, children, aged, disabled, poor—and are forced to endure serious human rights abuses.
- Those accused face multiple threats to their physical, psychological and economic wellbeing, including banishment, physical assault, public ridicule, social isolation, abuse and trauma, imprisonment and death.
- Ghana is the only country in the world where there are witch camps
- Belief in witchcraft is deeply entrenched. Although no comprehensive study has been conducted, it is estimated that over 90% of Ghanaians believe in witches and in witchcraft.

Violence and human rights abuses

- Violence against witches and other human rights abuses are usually not reported
- Victims lack power and adequate knowledge to exercise their rights
- Lack of understanding of mental health problems
- Fear of reprisals from the community or family following accusations
- Usually these abuses occur within family settings and in closed communities
- Gender-based crimes are part of the culture of impunity in Ghana
- Lauded ActionAid and partners for interventions at the witch camps
- There are six witch camps located in five districts of the Northern Region. These are Kukuo, Gnani-Tindang, Gambaga, Bonyasi, Tindan-zhie (Kpatinga) and Nabuli camp.
- The districts where camps are located: Nanumba South, Yendi, East Mamprusi, Central Gonja and Gushegu, all in the Northern Region.
- Population of the camps: Field Monitoring as at May 2012 reported the total number as 541 witches, and 503 children and grandchildren.

Interventions and collaboration

- She noted complexity of the problem and underscored the need to work together

to develop a national consensus on the underlying issues surrounding, to develop a collective national response to witchcraft accusations in Ghana.

- Underscored Government's commitment to solve the problem: Interventions include LEAP, Vocational training institute at Gambaga by H.E. Lordina Mahama, adoption of a roadmap for the reintegration of all the alleged witches.
- Ghana's constitution endorses the human rights of all persons; we have a legal framework that criminalises such accusations.
- Announced that the Bonyasi camp will be formally closed on 15 December 2014, where 50 more alleged witches will be reintegrated into their communities.
- Called for closer collaboration between NGOs and Government
- Finally, she assured participants that the conference will come out with an action plan to address the problem of witchcraft accusations.

Development Partner Statement: Sumaila Abdul-Rahman, Country Director, ActionAid Ghana

Highlights of Speech

- Witchcraft accusation affects the most vulnerable people of the population.
- He lauded the effective collaboration between the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, ActionAid Ghana, the Ministry of Chieftaincy and Traditional Affairs and other partners.
- He provided overview of international conventions and national laws in Ghana that guarantee the rights of women and children
- Despite these legal provisions, women and children continue to suffer dehumanising acts of violence and discrimination.
- In the Northern region, this type of abuse manifests itself in the form of witch camps and witchcraft allegations.
- Noted that the conference was strategic in whipping stakeholder participation and other partnerships for the effective enforcement of legal provisions that seek to protect vulnerable sections of the population.

ActionAid's Campaign on Alleged Witches

- "ActionAid Ghana was one of the first NGOs to work in the area of witch camps, and in 2012 released a comprehensive report on the camps, complete with the profiles and statistics of all the inmates and their dependants."
- He thanked partner organisations, traditional authorities and government for their support in the reintegration process.
- Accusations of witchcraft cannot be proven: Some women have been accused of witchcraft because their accusers had bad dreams and felt insecure.
- They are "accused and mistreated to pacify family and community anger".
- On ActionAid's last visit to the camps, 681 residents were in the six camps

- Having witch camps is a national embarrassment: Tourists and international media visit Ghana to see the witch camps.
- “The alleged witches live as though they are paying a punitive price for mere existence.”
- ActionAid's interest in witchcraft accusations arises from their human rights mandate, which seeks to promote and protect the rights of women and children, while empowering poor and vulnerable people in marginalised communities to exercise their rights towards their own development.

Development Partner Statement: IBIS Ghana: Eunice Agbenyadzi, National Policy Facilitator

Key points from speech

- She reiterated IBIS’s commitment to collaborate with stakeholders to advance resolutions and action plans from the conference.
- She highlighted gender discrimination in human rights: “why we haven’t called the camps wizard camps but witch camps.” It is a reflection of gender inequality
- Gender equality is necessary for sustainable development
- Noted that everyone has power and responsibility to make change happen: “failure to act is failure of responsibility.”
- She called for the need to intensify sensitisation in home communities, to prevent re-accusations when they are reintegrated into their communities.

Keynote Speaker: Prof. Kenneth Agyemang Attafuah, Ph.D, Barrister-at-Law and Solicitor of the Supreme Court of Ghana.

Topic: *Holistic Overview of Witchcraft Accusations in Ghana:*

Legal Provisions and General Understanding

- The speaker appreciated the timeliness and urgency of the conference
- Lauded the objective of the conference, which has provided a forum to confront one of the “most perplexing issues troubling human societies” today.
- He revealed the irony of the conference: In October 1998, a similar conference was held in Tamale. He questioned why “after 16 years, we are still grappling with the same human rights issues.”
- He explained that he did not intend “to make startling revelations” while affirming that his speech was to provide a holistic overview of the belief and practice of witchcraft from a human rights perspective.
- There are specific provisions in the Ghanaian constitution that protect the dignity of all persons: Article 15, subsections 1 and 2
- Despite a strong legal and institutional regime, people (especially women and girls) continue suffer “colossal indignities.”

- “Women bear the disproportionate brunt of witchcraft accusations”
- Provided global historical perspective on witchcraft accusations, and noted that it has always been disproportionately linked to women.

History and Global Perspective

- At the end of the 17th Century, some 13 accused witches and 7 wizards were tried and executed in the USA
- Around 1484, the Catholic Church issued a statement providing guidelines on how to deal with witchcraft and “women’s instable carnal lust that made them instruments of Satan.
- In Europe, women, particularly widows and widows and spinsters were deemed to have deviated from the religious ethos of the times.
- Witchcraft accusations are used as measures of social control – and are used as tools by religious and traditional leaders to exercise control over subjects.
- Belief in witchcraft is “deeply rooted in traditional cosmology,” motivated by fear, jealousy, envy and anxiety.

Effects of Accusations

- Witchcraft accusations still persist in many countries, endangering the human of human rights many vulnerable people.
- Accusations tear families apart and cause social disharmony and insecurity.
- Typically, witchcraft accusations “lack evidential foundation”; cruel mistreatment of victims of accusations “reflects man’s inhumanity to women, the elderly.”
- In Ghana, women are also mostly targeted for witchcraft accusations
- Non enforcement of legal provisions for justice creates a “culture of indemnity.”
- For a long time, the belief in witchcraft has been part of Ghanaian society; it cuts across Christian and traditional beliefs, making it difficult to find solutions address the problem.

Personal Experience with Accusations

- He shared his personal experience and encounter with cases involving witchcraft accusations when as Commissioner of Human Rights in Vancouver, Canada, he had to work on a case brought against the political party by a member of a group linked to witchcraft. The party has denounced the group’s support because of their perceived association with witchcraft.
- He also shared his mum’s story of witchcraft accusation when she was not able to have her own children. When she later had sets of twins, she was still accused of spiritually snatching the eggs of other women, thereby denying them of their biological children. She survived and lived to be 99 years because of her strong family and social support.
- As the son of a supposed witch, he was not spared the accusations because of his height, which was deemed unusual.

Culture and Traditional Beliefs

- Ghanaian culture is built on social and cultural taboos (archaic customs) used to control women's behaviour, which makes women easy targets for witchcraft accusations.
- When a great, benevolent person dies, somebody must have caused it.
- Victims of witchcraft accusations are usually women, the poor, old, short, ugly, and very beautiful people. Other victims are widows, barren women, physically and mentally deformed people etc.
- Underlying these accusations is our appreciation of 'Difference'. If you are different or look different, you are usually targeted as possessing bad spirits.

Way Forward: Liberalism and Social Reform

- The speaker advocated for a liberal approach to the practice of our beliefs and change in attitudes and social behaviour. In other jurisdictions, witchcraft accusations stopped because advocates embarked on a social change campaign. In those societies, it is now ridiculous to accuse people of witchcraft.
- Ghanaians should stand up against archaic beliefs; liberalism must triumph over traditional thought patterns that continue to disempower women.
- There should be serious advocacy for support for victims of witchcraft accusations.
- Unfounded accusations must be made actionable, as such accusations lower the accused in the eyes of society.
- The state should exercise responsibility to guarantee the safety of all persons.
- Better funding for public campaigns against witchcraft accusations
- Stronger partnership between civil society and human rights agencies such as CHRAJ and NCCE to increase campaign energy.
- FIDA, gender advocates, human rights and justice movements should be encouraged to engineer pro bono suits for people accused of witchcraft.

Statement from President of Alleged Witches Network: Tachira Muntari

Highlights of Address interpreted by a Translator

- She thanked conference organisers for finding it necessary to invite her
- Witch camps serve as refuge for accused witches. Without the camps, a lot of alleged witches would have died from community mob action and mistreatment
- The camps were therefore created as "refugee camps for accused witches."
- She was grateful to organisers for the national response to the problem.
- She narrated her personal ordeal when she was chased out of her community. The education of her children was truncated, as children in camps do not have good access to educational facilities in those deprived communities.
- She is a widow and there are many like her living in poor conditions.

Situation at the camps

- Life in the camps is difficult: Alleged witches depend on camp owners for survival. The women need social support services in the camps.
- The camps are not habitable: Lack of access to water and sanitary facilities.
- She was emphatic that the conditions at the camps are so bad that “nobody should live there but they have no option but to bear with the hard life.”
- Some of the alleged witches want leave the camp and go back to their families and communities but they have no skills or trade to rely on for livelihood.
- She called for a reformed approach to the practice of our traditional and cultural beliefs in Ghana, so preserve the dignity of all persons, especially the vulnerable.

Address by Collaborating Public Institution: Minister for Chieftaincy and Traditional Affairs: Hon. Dr. Henry Seidu Daannaa

Highlights of Address

- The Hon. Minister noted the importance of the national response to a critical matter that affects vulnerable people in Ghana.
- Praised the valuable collaboration of the Ministry of Gender, Children and SP
- Welfare of the people is of foremost concern of Government
- Belief in the supernatural and society’s impatience in ascribing unusual actions to negative powers: “For lack of knowledge, my people perish.”
- He shared his personal encounter with witchcraft accusation when he was able to swim out of distress
- The need to speak up about social problems to make people stand up for their rights and convictions
- “Ghanaians should never allow other people to think for them”: we have the capacity to produce solutions to our problems

Witchcraft Accusations, Treatment and Impact: A Practitioners Perspective:

Dr Hussein Zakaria, Lecturer, Faculty of Education, University for Development Studies

Highlights of Presentation

- The camps put a dent on Ghana's human rights credibility
- History of the camps: “started as safe heavens” where accused women sought refuge to avoid public ridicule, but they soon became “safe hells” as living conditions worsened. Centuries ago, suspected witches were “seen off”–killed. The camp idea was a default innovation that came to save the situation.
- However, witch camps are not part of the traditional institutions of the people of the Northern Region.

Realities of life at witch camps

- Methods of determining witchcraft: soothsaying sometimes alleged witches are intimidated to confess to witchcraft und duress.
- Bad living conditions at the camps: poor accommodation, over-crowding, lack of water and sanitation facilities, food, clothing and other amenities.
- Over 600 accused women and their dependents live in the camps
- Difficulty in managing needs of dependents (children denied education)
- Alleged witches suffer stigmatisation by surrounding communities, thereby limiting opportunities to learn skills/ attend educational facilities and live meaningful lives as members of the community.
- Camp managers such as chiefs and fetish priest subject the women to dehumanising treatment
- A process of the reintegration of alleged witches has been ongoing. It has involved key stakeholders such as ActionAid Ghana, concerned Ministries, alleged witches, Tindana ,chiefs and opinion leaders
- A reintegration Committee has been working to return the women into their communities

Achievements of the Committee

- It has increased awareness of rights among women and community people
- Deepened partnership between Government, and traditional authorities
- 199 alleged witches reintegrated into welcoming communities
- Provision of skills training for livelihood support

Challenges of the Reintegration Committee:

- Some alleged witches feel insecure about going back home
- Those willing to go home are unable to pay for the pacification rites
- Inability of women to report violations of their rights to appropriate authorities
- Lack of support for the upkeep of the inmates of the camps
- Inadequate funding for the Committee's activities

Statement from the Religious Community: By Rev. Christian Tsepko, Representative of Apostle Dr Opoku Onyinah. Topic: Protecting the Rights of Alleged Witches at Prayer Centres

Highlights of Speech

- The address opened with an apology from Dr Opoku Onyinah, who was billed to deliver the address, but had to honour crucial engagements outside Ghana.
- He provided a definition of Prayer Centres as places where people go to fast, pray to encounter God and seek answer to problems
- They are avenues for spiritual and divinatory consultations
- History of prayer camps: Two types of camps in Ghana: residential and non-residential camps

- Those who patronise prayer camps include politicians, the sick, the evil-possessed and other members of society
- Not all cases that are sent to prayer camps are spiritual
- Prayer camps are a last resort for people suffering from complex conditions and those accused of witchcraft and other spiritual problems
- Suspected witches are sent to prayer camps to be exorcised

Treatment of Prayer camps

- Afflicted people who are sent to the camps are chained and forced to fast, and sometimes drugged as a control measure.
- Prayer camps also admit people with mental disabilities
- Prayer camps must differentiate mental illness from witchcraft possession.
- Public confession of witches and confessions under duress must be discouraged, as it leads to stigmatisation and isolation.
- Medical help must be sought when spiritual causes are not determined
- It is against human rights to chain people with mental disability

Contending with the Problem

- The use of herbs and other illegal substances must be banned
- Government and human rights organisations should work with community and religious leaders to educate operators of prayer camps and the public
- We must all ensure that directives and regulations governing the activities of prayer camps and isolation centres are respected and implemented.
- Religious leaders and pastors who speak out against unhealthy practices at prayer camps are perceived as unreligious.

Plenary discussions

Participants were given the opportunity to make contributions and suggestions on their appreciation of the belief in witchcraft as a belief system in Ghana, and how we can collectively protect victims, especially women, against witchcraft accusations.

Fati Alhassan, President of the Anti- Witchcraft Campaign Coalition

- There is lack of security for most victims of witchcraft accusations.
- They are from poor and deprived communities where ignorance underlies most individual and community actions. Formal education is usually low in such communities.
- There should be negotiation with those who accuse others of witchcraft, as a part of the process of education and sensitisation.

Adolf Awuku Bekoe, Executive Member of the Domestic Violence Coalition and Lecturer of Psychology, Methodist University

- He wondered: “Why can we immediately disband the witch camps?”
- Education and economic empowerment should be intensified in those communities.
- Archaic customs should be modernised and deployed as tools for development
- The laws and regulations on such abuses should be activated and put to use

Rosaline Obeng Ofori, Savannah Women’s Empowerment Group

- The girl child and women remain victims of discrimination and accusations in our communities. Empowerment campaigns should be sustained.
- Not many of the women in the witch camps want to go back to their original communities for fear of reprisals and re-accusations.
- After reintegration, who follows us to see how they have been received?
- There should be greater law enforcement in those communities

Ken Addai, Executive Director of TUDEC and National Coordinator, Anti Witchcraft Allegation Coalition

- Involve chiefs, women and youth groups in education on human rights
- Multi party/partnership approach to development should be adopted
- Police should be resourced and supported to deal with cases of accusations
- Legal aid for those who take up cases in the courts

Adam Barni, CHRAJ/ Member of the Regional Reintegration of Alleged Witches Committee

- There is overwhelming need to accelerate process of reintegration of alleged witches
- The nature of the process requires the collaboration and support of all Ghanaians
- Education and sensitization are needed in affected communities

Prince Akhenaten, Tamale, School Teacher

- Witchcraft is part of African belief systems and Ghanaians believe in witches
- Questioned the authority of non-governmental organisations to solve traditional problems since they are mostly regulated and funded by international institutions in foreign Western countries
- Advocated for “African solutions to African problems”

Pastor Andrew Boateng, Apostles Continuation Church

- Witch camps are safe havens for victims who escape the wrath of accusers

- Accusers should also be sent to witch camps
- Sampson Laan, Member of Presby Go Home Project, Gambaga
- Education should be intensified in affected communities to restore cohesion
- Stakeholders should “adopt procedures to interrupt accusations.”

Nana Kofi Tandoh, PRO, Great One Herbal and Spiritual Centre

- The government should establish whether those accused are witches or not.
- Why bring home people accused of witchcraft? “They could be dangerous.”
- There is the likelihood “they could come to bite those at home.”

Nii Adjei Klu, Programmes Director, Obonu FM

- Involve national service persons in the education of communities against negative traditional practices and beliefs
- NGOs should intensify public education and sensitisation in communities
- Generally, Ghanaians need rigorous mental reorientation on customary beliefs

Ernestina Fiawoo, Ghana National Fire Service

- Manifestations of menopause and other women problems can be confused for witchcraft; many women have suffered accusations because of this
- Awareness campaigns on menopause and customary beliefs in rural communities

DSP Adongo, Ghana Police Service

- There are gaps in laws and prosecution methods for cases involving witchcraft accusations and other spiritual issues
- There is the need to increase education about the existence of laws
- Increase police presence in vulnerable communities

Prophet Nakoah Nazareth Ansah Jamson, President of the Prophets of Spiritual Churches Council and Leader of Israel King of Jews Church

- Witchcraft is a disease, according to the Bible
- Managers/operators of witch camps also have the disease
- Religious bodies take advantage of witchcraft accusations to enslave victims
- Witchcraft accusations result in unhealthy stigmatization
- Advocate for immediate closure of the camps

Alexander Ackon, Deputy Minister of Gender, Children and Social Protection

- Conference on witchcraft accusations is part of a continuous process towards consolidating our human rights experience
- Existing laws should be enforced to properly deal with violations
- FIDA and other human rights agencies should promote the campaign by encouraging free legal services for victims of accusations
- Ministry of Gender and ActionAid have collaborated effectively to advance the reintegration process and improve rights awareness in communities
- All stakeholders in the process, especially the Ministry and ActionAid, are open to ideas and suggestions on the best way to deal with witchcraft accusations
- Parties remain committed to the “assimilation” and reintegration of the alleged witches in all the six camps into welcoming communities.

Comments and suggestions from other contributors

- Dismantling camps without proper protection for the victims is risky
- Stronger legislation and training of law authorities
- Reintegration and sensitisation should lead to destigmatisation
- Alleged witches need psychological assistance
- Reintegration and disbandment of camps should be gradual
- There is endemic poverty in the communities of the accused women
- More education needed to sensitize communities about dangers of accusations
- Increase training for law enforcement personnel and institutions
- Modernise traditional and customary practices to protect victims

Other suggestions

- Raise awareness about young females who are accused of witchcraft because their parents or family members have been previously accused.
- Increase partnership with chiefs and traditional authorities
- Provide and increase resources for institutions working to human rights
- The media should keep monitoring and reporting developments at witch camps and other places noted for human rights violations
- Increase education and sensitisation at the camps and in the communities
- Increase mental health education and sensitise communities on implications of witchcraft accusations and the damage they cause to people’s dignity
- NGOs must work together to concentrate resources

Attendance: 310 participants from different professional callings attended the conference. They included representatives from government institutions, Agencies of the United Nations, human rights organisations, the religious and spiritual community, and activists from various civil society organisations.

Media Coverage: The conference received wide coverage from local and international

media, including APF from France, GTV, TV3, UTV, Citi FM, Radio XYZ and other local public and private newspaper organisations.

Rapporteurs: 1. Kwesi Tawiah-Benjamin, ActionAid Ghana
2. Anastasia Kaldi, Ministry of Gender, Children and Social, Protection