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GHANA

SUBMISSION TO THE COMMITTEE ON THE ELIMINATION OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN

94TH PRE-SESSIONAL WORKING GROUP, 27-31 OCTOBER 2025

Amnesty International submits this document ahead of the adoption of the List of issues prior to reporting (LOIPR) by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in October 2025. It is not an exhaustive account but focused on human rights abuses linked to women accused of witchcraft, based on Amnesty International's research on the issue in 2023 and 2024. The result of this research was published in 2025 in the report: *Branded for Life: How Witchcraft Accusations Lead to Human Rights Violations of Hundreds of Women in North Ghana*.¹

HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES LINKED TO WOMEN ACCUSED OF WITCHCRAFT IN GHANA

Witchcraft is a system of beliefs that exist in various communities around the world, including in Ghana, where people accused of witchcraft end up in camps in the North-East and Northern regions. While the belief in itself is protected under the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, CEDAW has recognized witchcraft accusations and related abuses as a harmful practice.²

The organization visited four camps during two research trips and interviewed 93 people accused of witchcraft, as well as national and international organizations working on the issue, and government officials, including local authorities.

The lack of economic resources in these regions compared to the rest of the country, contributes to tensions within the communities and increases the risk that already marginalized individuals, particularly older women, are accused of practicing witchcraft. Such accusations often arise from tragic events, such as an illness or a death, but can also be triggered by community members who experience vivid dreams or are simply envious.

Those accused of witchcraft generally face intersecting forms of discrimination and are unable to defend themselves as they typically possess one or more characteristics that put them at greater risk within the community. These characteristics may include being older, being a woman, living in poverty, having limited formal education, having a disability or suffering from a mental health condition.

Women who are unmarried, successful, or otherwise do not conform to stereotypical gender roles are more likely to be targeted, as are widowed women who do not have an adult son. Accusations frequently start with family members and can lead to violence, including killings, leaving many accused individuals with no choice but to flee.

Amnesty International's research shows that the Ghanaian state has failed to protect the rights of people accused of witchcraft. The right to life and security of the person includes the duty of the state to put in place a legal framework to protect individuals from foreseeable threats by other people, especially for individuals in vulnerable conditions.

In Ghana, incidents of violence against individuals accused of witchcraft are rarely reported to the police, and when they are, they are not systematically investigated. This lack of reporting is partly due to a lack of understanding among affected people regarding their rights, as well as the fear of going to the police. The absence of specific laws addressing witchcraft-related attacks, combined with a lack of a national, comprehensive campaign targeting impacted regions, infringes upon the rights to life and security of those accused and those at risk of being accused.

¹ Amnesty International, *Branded for Life : How Witchcraft Accusations Lead to Human Rights Violations of Hundreds of Women in North Ghana* (Index: AFR 28/9099/2025), 14 April 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2025/04/ghana-branded-for-life/>

² CEDAW, *Harmful Practices as Gender-based Violence against Women and Girls: CEDAW Convention, General Recommendations (Nos 12, 14, 19, 31 and 35) and Practice of the Committee with Recommendations and Guidance to State Parties to the Convention*, 1 September 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/tools-and-resources/harmful-practices-gender-based-violence-against-women-and-girls-cedaw>, para. 3.

In addition, the state has failed to provide safe shelters for those who have had to flee their towns. As a result, the accused end up in privately-owned camps run by traditional priests, where they remain until they die unless a family member or another community agrees to take them in.

Access to food, safe housing and clean water is limited in the camps. Those accused usually farm in other people's farms or otherwise rely on donations. The government provides a cash transfer programme, but not everyone in the camps is registered for it. Moreover, for those who receive financial assistance, it is not always paid on time and the amount is insufficient to provide an adequate standard of living in the camps.

The floors of the huts in the camps are often in poor condition, and the roofs do not effectively prevent rain from entering the huts. Those living there, particularly vulnerable and unable to provide adequate shelter for themselves, rely on the government to meet their basic needs. However, the government has failed in its responsibilities.

Access to water is another significant challenge, as piped water is inaccessible in the camps, despite a national policy aimed at ensuring access to water for everyone. As a result, women in the camps must often walk for hours through mountainous areas to fetch water from the nearby river. The Ghanaian authorities have failed to ensure sufficient and continuous availability and access to clean water for camp residents, who live in remote areas and are particularly vulnerable due to their age and economic situation.

Given the living conditions in the camps, residents are particularly at risk of getting sick. Most people in the camps interviewed by Amnesty International are covered by the national health insurance but must pay out of pocket for medications that are not covered under the insurance, which they can rarely afford. In addition, the clinics near the camps often lack the required medications. Mental health is also a serious concern in the camps. The state holds the primary responsibility for ensuring the right to health is fulfilled. However, according to Amnesty International's research, the state has failed to provide adequate access to healthcare for people in the camps, who are particularly vulnerable. As a result, these individuals often depend on the assistance of NGOs or other individuals, which can sometimes be insufficient to guarantee their access to quality healthcare.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to address these concerns, Amnesty International is urging the Ghanaian authorities to:

- Protect the right to freedom of religion and belief whilst ensuring that no one within its jurisdiction is deprived of the right to life, liberty or security of person because of religion or belief;
- Adopt legislation specifically criminalizing witchcraft accusations and related abuses, which should include protective measures for potential victims and should not force anyone to leave the camps;
- Establish and allocate enough resources for the implementation of a long-term national strategy to sensitize impacted populations and raise awareness about the harm caused by witchcraft accusations, to challenge the harmful practice of witchcraft accusations - taking into consideration the intersectionality of the discrimination victims face, to ensure that it is implemented in a sustained manner in consultation and coordination with traditional and religious leaders, women as well as men in the communities;
- Ensure the police service has enough resources to respond to incidents and that there are enough police stations close to areas where witchcraft accusations are predominant. Police officers intervening when there is an incident and receiving complaints should also be trained on how to handle sexual gender-based violence and elder abuse;
- Ensure access to healthcare, livelihood and the right to adequate food, clean water, adequate housing and financial assistance in all the camps without any kind of discrimination;
- Establish a national strategy and enough resources for progressively and safely reintegrating people accused of witchcraft and ensure they have adequate living standards:
 - Engage in individual consultation and mediation for each reintegration initiative;
 - Allow people who want to remain in the camps to stay, maintaining adequate living conditions and leaving camps open as long as there are people who wish to remain.
- Ratify the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Older Persons in Africa.