



## **Petition to Sign Anti-Witchcraft Accusations Bill into Law**

### **Witchcraft Accusations are Harmful to Society**

For too long, citizens, especially older women, have been victimized by witchcraft accusations in our country. This deep rooted and widespread practice has led to untold suffering, discrimination, and violence. The practice of witch-hunting and witchcraft accusations is extremely harmful. Just mere accusations break up families, the foundational unit of society; destroy lives and livelihoods, and serve as a generational sentence of stigma and suspicion on families. Above all, witch-hunting is based on a deadly phenomenon as we've witnessed the murder, lynching and brutalization of defenseless victims, mainly older women, on regular basis. While a few of these are reported, many attacks and murders go unreported, especially in the rural parts of Ghana.

Witchcraft accusations have led to the banishment of hundreds of vulnerable women into camps in the Northern and North East Regions. These camps serve as outcasts posts where society has chosen to discard poor victims to their fate. The camps where witch-hunting takes place through trial by ordeal are crime scenes because trial by ordeal is specifically proscribed by Ghana's criminal law. The camps serve as open prisons where these women are continually exploited including sexual abuse, child molestation and child marriages. Ghana is the only country in the world with witch-camps. The witch-camps are a permanent stain on the reputation of Ghana.

But witchcraft accusations do not only affect the victims and their dependent minors in the camps. They affect thousands of women across the nation who are ostracized by their own families and live miserable lives under clouds of suspicion and stigma. Many of these victims have had their livelihoods and their lives turned upside down. Witchcraft belief and accusations cannot be allowed to continue in the name of culture and freedom of belief. The constitution requires the state to proscribe all harmful cultural practices. Ghana is signatory to several international human rights instruments which makes it incumbent upon the state to ban such dangerous human right abuses. Witch-hunting is more than a human rights issue and more than a harmful cultural practice. It is a deadly practice that needs to be criminalized.

That is why we are gathered here today, November 19<sup>th</sup> 2024, as the Coalition Against Witchcraft Accusation (CAWA), to urge President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo to urgently assent to the anti-witchcraft accusations bill that was unanimously passed by Parliament in July 2023 to protect vulnerable Ghanaian citizens, widows, mothers, grandmothers, sisters etc. These victims have no voice and have no one within their families and communities to stand up for them. The state remains their only hope.

### **What's the problem?**

The tragic case of Akua Denteh, a 90-year-old woman from Kafaba in the Savannah Region, is just one of countless heart-wrenching examples of the dire consequences of witchcraft accusations. On July 23<sup>rd</sup> 2020, she was brutally lynched after being accused of witchcraft with a large crowd of onlookers cheering on.



These accusations are often driven by superstition, envy and primitive beliefs, leading to severe human rights violations and abuses and fatal consequences. The victims, mostly older women, face brutal attacks, displacement, and social exclusion. Such acts are in stark contrast to the values of justice, human dignity, and equality that Ghana stands for.

### **The need for legislative action**

The Anti-Witchcraft Accusation Bill, which has been carefully developed through extensive consultations with various stakeholders, including the Attorney General's Department, the Ministry of Justice and the Commission of Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ), aims to address this grave and urgent issue. The bill seeks to:

- Make it illegal to accuse individuals of witchcraft, thus deterring such actions through stringent penalties.
- Establish protective measures and support systems for those who have been accused, provide them with psychological support, programs for reintegration into society, and to phase out the camps.
- Implement nationwide campaigns to raise awareness amongst the public about the harmful impacts of witchcraft accusations and the importance of protecting human rights particularly for those who are vulnerable.
- Provide a clear legal pathway for victims to seek justice and compensation, thereby reinforcing the rule of law.

### **The President's Refusal to Assent**

After months of sitting on the bill, President Akufo-Addo cited potential financial implications on the country's consolidated fund as reason for his inability to sign the bill as a private member's sponsored instrument. As far as the president is concerned, protecting the consolidated fund is more important than protecting the lives of the most vulnerable in society. The president made it clear that he had no problem whatsoever with the content of the bill and indicated that he would take steps for the bill to be resubmitted to parliament as a government sponsored bill. The president has since failed to resubmit the bill and has refused to assent to it.

In an advisory opinion on the bill to the President on July 1<sup>st</sup> 2024, CHRAJ observed that the culture of witchcraft accusations and its associated witch camps have tarnished the country's reputation. It noted that the dire consequences of witch-hunting on the rights of Ghanaian women are beyond debate. CHRAJ added that witch-hunting undermines national efforts towards the realization of the SDGs, particularly Goal 5 on gender equality.

The Commission emphasized that in a period of constitutional democracy centered on the protection of fundamental human rights and freedoms, the rights of one of society's most vulnerable groups, elderly women accused of witchcraft, must be prioritized by the state and urgent measures must be taken to protect their lives, human rights and dignity.



### **Call to Action**

We believe that signing the Anti-Witchcraft Accusations Bill into law will significantly enhance the protection of human rights in Ghana and demonstrate the country's commitment to eradicating all forms of gender-based violence and discrimination. It will also align Ghana with international human rights obligations. We are therefore joining our voices to that of CHRAJ and countless other reputable national and international bodies to call on the president to sign the bill into law. Mr. President, you are the last hope of the hundreds of vulnerable women and their dependents in the camps, the thousands of others across the nation who live with stigma and suspicion in homes, and the innumerable potential vulnerable victims waiting to be accused, brutalized and murdered.

We believe that the accusations and witch-hunting are the root cause of the untold suffering of the victims. If the bill is signed into law and a program of reintegration is initiated, the camps will naturally dry out over time.

We are also calling on parliament, and the Speaker in particular, Honorable Alban Kingsford Sumana Bagbin, to pursue alternative constitutional ways of getting the bill passed. We cannot accept that the president's refusal to sign the bill should be the last word on this critical issue. That will be dangerous to our cherished democratic processes. Similarly, we call upon former President John Dramani Mahama, the presidential candidate of the National Democratic Congress (NDC), and the Vice President, Dr. Mahamudu Bawumia, the New Patriotic Party's presidential candidate, to publicly commit to defending the lives, rights, and dignity of the vulnerable, and commit to signing the bill into law if President Akufo-Addo refuses to sign and leaves office.

Finally, we call on all well-meaning Ghanaians to stand in solidarity with the victims of witchcraft accusations. Add your voice to theirs: urge the President of Ghana to immediately sign the Anti-Witchcraft Accusation Bill into law to protect, save lives and affirm the values of compassion, justice, and equality that is a cornerstone of the Ghanaian society. Your action would help bring back dignity and justice to all those that have been unfairly accused of witchcraft, ostracized, and banished to decades of misery for the rest of their lives.

### **Signed**

Rev. Prof. John Azumah  
Convenor  
Coalition Against Witchcraft Accusation

Member Organizations: The Sanneh Institute, ActionAid Ghana, Amnesty International Ghana, Oxfam in Ghana, Songtaba, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Ghana, Crossroads International, Ghana Somubie, International Alliance Against Witchhunts, LAWA Ghana