

## Policy Brief - Mental Health and Quality of Life Situation of Women Accused of Witchcraft in Northern and North East Regions in Ghana

### Executive Summary



Witchcraft accusation is common in Northern Ghana, especially towards older, poorer women. It often leads to human rights abuses of alleged witches and banishment from their communities to live in witches camps. This study was conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of the trauma and psychological impact, the quality of life, and gender dimensions of witchcraft accusations among people resident in four alleged witches camps in Northern and North East regions of Ghana. The findings of the study show a high level of depression and low quality of life among alleged witches, and that women accused of being witches are more often maltreated compared to men. This, alongside other differences noted between men and women accused of witchcraft that arose in the study is indicative of the marginal status of women and their subordination in communities in the Northern and North East regions of Ghana. Criminalising the practice and abolishing the alleged witches camps would help protect the human rights of women.

### Introduction



In postcolonial Africa, the continuing manifestation of witchcraft accusations has led to a renewed interest in African witchcraft and magic. In Northern and North East Ghana, people, especially women are accused of possessing such magical powers and banished from society to live in special camps designated as witches camps. The processes leading to their banishment, admission, and living in the camps may affect their psychological wellbeing and quality of life. In addition, embedded in the beliefs and practices of witchcraft are gender dimensions. This study was conducted to determine the prevalence of depression, quality of life and reveal the gender dynamics in witchcraft beliefs and accusation in four alleged witches camps.



## General/Specific Objectives



The general objective of the study was to determine prevalence of depression and quality of life amongst alleged witches and uncover gender dimensions embedded in witchcraft accusation in the Northern and North East Regions of Ghana.

The specific objectives of the study are:

1. To determine the prevalence of depression among people accused of witchcraft and living in the witches camps;
2. To determine the health-related quality of life of people accused of witchcraft and living in the witches camps;
3. To explore the gender dimensions of accusing people of witchcraft;
4. To explore ways of reintegration and improve the quality of life of people accused of witchcraft
5. To explore ways to protect the human rights of women accused of witchcraft

## Ethical Approval:

The protocol for study was reviewed and approved by Ghana Health Service Ethics Review Committee (GHS-ERC 014/09/21). During data collection, we adhered to the COVID-19 protocols

## Methods



**Design:** Descriptive and narrative study designs

**Study Period:** November, 2021-January 2022

**Approach:** Mixed method: quantitative and qualitative

**Study Sites:** Northern Region, North-East Region and National Level Stakeholders

**Study Participants:** Both men and women accused of witchcraft, caretakers of the alleged witches camps, local authorities, human rights advocates, policy makers and implementers

**Sampling:** Involved all people accused of witchcraft. Purposive sampling for stakeholders

**Data Collection:** Structured question used for the quantitative data collection. The Patient Health Questionnaire 8 (PHQ-8) tool was adopted for measuring depression. The World Health Organization Quality of Life (WHOQOL) questionnaire used for assessing quality of life. Questionnaires were developed using the Open Data Kit (ODK) for onsite electronic data collection using tablets. In-depth interview guide developed. Face-to face interviews conducted and recorded.





## Conclusion

The majority of the women accused of witchcraft have low or extremely low quality of life with high depression. Although witchcraft is framed within a socio-cultural context, the narrative within its practice is highly gendered with power relations, and gender agency playing a critical role.



## Data Analysis

**Quantitative:** Descriptive using STATA 16, PHQ score <10 indicate depression. On the severity of depression, a PHQ total score of 5 to 9 represents mild depressive symptoms; 10 to 14, moderate; 15 to 19, moderately severe; and 20 to 24, severe. QOL score ≤ 45 extremely low QOL; score 46–65 low QOL; score 66–86 moderate QOL, score 87–101 relatively high QOL and score > 102, excellent QOL.  
**Qualitative:** thematic analysis with the aid of NVivo 13.  
**Data Triangulation:** Merging of quantitative and qualitative data in presenting the results.



## Key Findings

1. More than half (52.7%) of the women living in the alleged witches camps have depression;
  - a. About 23.5% having mild depression, 37.2% with moderate depression, 7.2% moderately severe depression whilst 2.9% had severe depression.
2. Over 97% of alleged witches have low or extremely low quality of life.
  - a. None have high or excellent quality of life.
3. About 93.5% of the people accused of witchcraft are women and 66.5% of them were widows.
4. All alleged female witches were maltreated at their community of origin when they were accused of witchcraft, followed by banishment.
5. Majority (73.3%) of the alleged witches want to be reintegrated.
6. All participants support the closing down of the alleged witches camps; however, concerns were raised about acceptance by community members and safety.





## Recommendations

1. While the continued existence of the alleged witches indicates the prevalence of witchcraft accusations and the belief system(s), it is important for government to initiate processes that would lead to the abolition of these alleged witches camps.
2. Allocation of funds by government and district assemblies is required to improve the living conditions of the alleged witches camps to make them more habitable in the interim whilst initiating plans to relocate them to their communities and abolish the camps.
3. Quarterly Health Screening by multi-disciplinary team (comprising nurses, doctors, clinical psychologist, social welfare officers) for residents of the alleged witches camps by the Ghana Health Service is required to improve their health conditions
4. The government should enact laws to criminalize witchcraft accusation to ensure that accusers are severely punished. This could be done through collaboration with human rights lawyers in Parliament through a private member's bill.
5. Intense community sensitization and education on witchcraft beliefs is required before abolition of the alleged witches' camps and reintegration of alleged witches. This presents an opportunity for civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations to lead the process.
6. Sensitization and education of police service and government institutions involved in the human rights and social protection on witchcraft beliefs and practice should be done. This could be led by Songtaba Ghana and other non-governmental organizations who already have experience working with the alleged witches camps.
7. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) should advocate for increased enrollment of girl child in schools in the Northern and North East regions of Ghana. Embedded in the dynamics in witchcraft accusation is high level of illiteracy and poverty among women.
8. There is the need for further research on the causes of accusations, willingness of the communities to accept alleged witches to the community and the challenges of reintegration.

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## FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT SONGTABA



0372099180 / 0244203791 / 0246456478



[songtaba.org](http://songtaba.org)



[info@songtaba.org](mailto:info@songtaba.org)



Songtaba



@SongtabaNGO