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Condemned without trial: women and witchcraft in Ghana

Executive summary

In northern Ghana hundreds of women accused of witchcraft by relatives or members of their community are living in 'witch camps' after fleeing or being banished from their homes.

The camps, which are home to around 800 women and 500 children, offer poor living conditions and little hope of a normal life. The women have fled discrimination, threats or even mob justice after being accused of witchcraft and blamed for 'crimes' such as causing sickness, droughts or fires, cursing a neighbour or even just appearing in someone's dream.

Those who reach the witch camps are the lucky ones. Women have been murdered after accusations of witchcraft. Recently a mother of three was beaten and set on fire after being blamed for making a child sick through witchcraft. In 2010, the case of a 72-year-old woman who was set on fire and killed made headlines around the world.²

Some elderly women have lived in the camps for as long as 40 years – abandoned by their families and trapped in the camps until they die. Their only companions are young girls, often granddaughters or family members, who were sent with the women as 'attendants'. Most of these girls have never gone to school, or have dropped out, and even when they reach the age when they could leave the camps, they usually cannot because they are tainted by the word 'witch'.

In 2011 the Ghanaian government announced that the witch camps should be closed down as soon as 2012. ActionAid is firmly against the closure of the camps in such as short space of time, because although they can be seen as ghettos, the camps do provide a safe haven for women accused of witchcraft. The women themselves say they would prefer to stay in the camps rather than face discrimination or risk violence or death back home.

ActionAid is leading an anti-witch camp campaign with the ultimate aim that all the women labelled as witches are able to leave the camps and be safely reintegrated into society. However the government must not rush into disbanding the camps as this would leave the women even more vulnerable to attack.

There is a widespread belief in witchcraft in Ghana, as in many other countries. Though both men and women can be accused of witchcraft, the vast majority are women, especially the elderly.

Women who do not fulfil expected gender stereotypes, for example if they are widows, unmarried or cannot have children, are vulnerable to being branded as witches. ActionAid believes the witch camps are a cruel manifestation of gender inequality and violence against women in Ghana, as well as a denial of the rights of the women and girls who live there.

The camps only exist in the northern region of Ghana, where poverty levels are far higher than other areas of the country. ActionAid has been working in the camps since 2005 to provide basic services such as food, water, shelter and education. In recent years the focus is also on enabling the women to organise themselves, learn about their rights and fight for improved services and access to social benefits. They now feel self-confident enough to be leading the campaign to prevent the immediate closure of the camps, through marches, media engagement and community education.

Conditions in the camps

"A lot of the women leave with absolutely nothing, sometimes not even slippers on their feet and sometimes with wounds or bruises because they have been beaten."

Adwoa Kwateng-Kluvitse, ActionAid Ghana country director

The six 'witch camps' of Gambaga, Kukuo, Gnani, Bonyase, Nabuli and Kpatinga are located close to or even within 'ordinary' towns or villages and all are in remote areas of northern Ghana. They are not fenced off but residents and those outside are very aware of where the camps' boundaries lie.

The camps consist mainly of mud huts with flimsy thatched roofs. Food supplies are inadequate and, in some camps, women have to walk several miles to collect water. Virtually no regular services are provided by the government or its agencies and there are few basic health or education facilities. Even if these are available, the women cannot afford them.

The women do not have a voice or representation in deciding matters affecting their lives. They are not allowed to attend village meetings (or prefer not to because of discrimination) and have little or no access to justice.

"It's not easy leaving your home and coming to live in a different environment without the support of your family, so first and foremost a woman in the camp is very lonely," says Lamnatu Adam, programme coordinator at Songtaba (which means 'let's help each other' in the local Dagbani dialect), a coalition working with alleged witches.

"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."

Once a woman is accused of witchcraft she is often banished from her village by a mob which sometimes includes her relatives or children. "Most of the time the allegation of witchcraft happens quite quickly," says Adwoa Kwateng-Kluvitse, ActionAid Ghana country director. "A lot of the women leave with absolutely nothing, sometimes not even slippers on their feet and sometimes with wounds or bruises because they have been beaten."

When a woman arrives at a camp she is subjected to rituals involving the slaughter of chickens to prove whether she is innocent or guilty of the crime of which she is accused. This 'purification ceremony' is performed by camp chiefs or male priests known as *Tindanas*, who are believed to possess supernatural powers and can ascertain the innocence or guilt of the accused. They are also thought to be able to exorcise the witchcraft spirit, and thus set the victim 'free'.

At Gambaga camp, the accused and the complainant both send a chicken to the shrine which is then sacrificed to the gods. The innocence or guilt of the accused is determined by the final posture of the chicken as it dies. If it dies with its face down it means the accused is guilty of being a witch. If it dies face up she is innocent. Sometimes the women are forced to drink a potentially fatal 'cleansing concoction' that can include chicken blood and earth. Even if found innocent, very few can return home because their communities will not accept them.

According to local beliefs, the camps, some of which came into existence as long as 100 years ago, are 'safe places' where witchcraft cannot be carried out, which is why the alleged witches can live there in safety. They are under the leadership of Tindanas, or women leaders known as *Magazias*. The Magazias are also victims of witchcraft allegations and have been resident in the camps for many years.

Some camps, for example Gnani, have male residents who have been accused of wizardry. However most of the camps contain only alleged witches and the total number of men in the camps is far lower than the number of women. This is because men are generally less vulnerable than women as they are economically better off and more able to resist physical violence. This illustrates that vulnerability is a key underlying factor in witchcraft accusations.

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Lamnatu Adam, programme coordinator at Songtaba, a coalition working with alleged witches

Often women who are banished to the camps are 'given' a young child – perhaps a grandchild and almost always a girl – to help look after them. This happens in cases where the families of the accused still want to support them but cannot protect them in their own community. In other cases, where the accused woman is living with a child in her village – for example an orphaned grandchild – the child is also banished to the camp.

The girls in the camps suffer from huge violations of their rights. They too have limited access to food, shelter and education. Most do not attend school because school facilities are limited and remote from the camps, and because they suffer stigmatisation and discrimination by their peers and sometimes their teachers. Most of their time is spent doing household chores and, when they are older, some take paid labour selling wood or carrying loads in order to support their grandmothers.

The witch camps are effectively women's prisons where inmates have been given no trial, have no right of appeal but have received a life sentence. It is because of this that ActionAid and Songtaba

condemn the camps as a violation of the rights of the women who have to live in them. But the camps also provide a haven for accused women, and, in the absence of any social support and protection in their own communities, can be a relatively safe place for women if the conditions are humane and dignified.

Adwoa Kwateng-Kluvitse believes we have to recognise that if the camps were not there, women accused of witchcraft would be even more vulnerable. "Once they are in a camp, technically they are safe, nobody will attack an alleged witch in a witch camp so she is safe from being lynched or beaten. We know of cases where the family of an accused woman will take her to a camp to keep her safe from the young men in the community who would put her at risk by attacking or beating her."

Murder case

A woman from the town of Jillig number 2, near Gambaga camp, was murdered after being blamed for the death of a child through witchcraft. The child was ill, and because one day a bat flew over it, a mob believed the illness had been caused by witchcraft. They found the woman, beat her until she was unconscious and then set her alight. She left three young children aged 11, 9 and 7.

"These children have no mother and their father had already died," said the town chief. "These children can no longer do anything. They have no mother. They have no father. It has been left in my hands to make sure they get some daily bread. We have these orphans without anything to support them."

Belief in witchcraft

PHOTO: VICKY MARKOLEFA



Asana's story

Asana, 27, was accused of being a witch by her ex-husband, who beat her severely and poured melted plastic over her while she was pregnant. He accused her of being a witch after getting ill and dreaming that Asana was trying to kill him. She fled to her mother's house, but he followed her, beating not only Asana but also her elderly mother and younger brothers. Her new husband said he couldn't protect her so he took her to Gambaga camp to keep her 'safe'.

"When I first came here my whole body was in pain because he first hit me and then they tried to burn me with melted plastic," says Asana. "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."

"Most religions believe in good and evil. The main issue is how people respond to this belief in witchcraft. It is to do with the way that society copes when misfortune hits – whether it is ill health, an accident, loss of jobs or property."

Professor Dzodzi Tsikata, University of Ghana

In Ghana, as in many other African countries, belief in witchcraft is widespread and entrenched. Witches and wizards are believed to possess inherent, supernatural powers that are used to create evil or misfortune. Sicknesses, the inability to have children, accidents, the loss or destruction of property, droughts, floods and fires are among the events blamed on witches.

Across Africa – in Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola and the Central African Republic – women and children are targeted as witches and suffer horrific abuse. The recent case of 15-year-old Kristy Bamu, killed in London by his sister and her partner because they believed he was a witch, shows that belief in witchcraft is present in the UK. But it is not limited to Africa or the African diaspora and belief in spirits is widespread throughout the world, including the practice of shamanism, wicca, voodoo and paganism among others.

When the belief system leads to people being persecuted and abused it becomes problematic. Even an accusation, whether or not it is followed by violence or banishment, can be seen as psychological abuse. Songtaba and ActionAid Ghana do not engage in discussions on the existence or otherwise of witchcraft. The focus of our campaigning is on seeking to uphold the rights of women who are accused of witchcraft and to

help reintegrate them into their communities if they wish to return.

Professor Dzodzi Tsikata, an expert in development sociology at the University of Ghana, believes witchcraft is a way for people to explain misfortune. "Witchcraft accusations are thought of as mostly to do with traditional and 'backwards' beliefs, but they are an integral part of belief in religion. Most religions believe in good and evil. The main issue is how people respond to this belief in witchcraft. It is to do with the way that society copes when misfortune hits - whether it is ill health, an accident, loss of jobs or property. When people do not have a rational explanation for this they tend to use the supernatural to show that someone somewhere is responsible for this misfortune and to find a way of removing this person so they are no longer able to harm them."

Spiritual beliefs are also strongest in the poorest areas. Lamnatu Adam, of Songtaba, says it is no coincidence that the witch camps are found only in northern Ghana, which is one of the poorest regions of the country and suffers from low education and literacy standards. According to the UN, three-quarters of adults in northern Ghana are illiterate compared to 43% nationally.³

Poverty in Ghana

Ghana is often described as one of west Africa's development success stories: the country's growth and poverty reduction rates are among the very best in the region. Since 1991, Ghana's poverty rate has dropped by almost half, while the proportion of people going hungry has been reduced by three quarters in the past two decades. Almost eight out of ten children, girls as well as boys, are now in school. ActionAid⁴ research in 2011 showed that Ghana has reduced its dependency on foreign aid from 46% to 27%. ⁵

However poverty rates in the country are uneven and the north is drought-prone and offers far fewer economic opportunities than in the south. The northern regions have seen only slight decreases in poverty rates in recent years, which tend to be two to three times the national average.

Witches, but not wizards

Though both men and women can be accused of witchcraft, the vast majority are women, especially the elderly. Widows, childless or unmarried women are vulnerable to being branded as witches as they do not fulfil expected gender stereotypes. In addition, widows and unmarried women usually have weak social protection systems – lacking an influential person to support them. There is also a high correlation between the perceived noncontribution of women to the economic needs of the household and witchcraft allegation.⁶

An ActionAid survey of the witch camps in 2008 found that in one camp – Kukuo – more than 70% of residents were accused and banished as witches after their husbands died. In a patriarchal society, a woman without the protection of a father, husband, or sometimes a brother, is extremely vulnerable to being labelled a witch. The survey also found that almost a third of the women in Kukuo camp were not engaged in any form of economic activity before they were banished there. This implies that others see them as not 'useful' to their community.

"The camps are a dramatic manifestation of the status of women in Ghana," says Professor Dzodzi Tsikata. "The issue is linked to the whole issue of gender inequality in our country. When women are younger, more useful to society, they are in their child bearing years, they are working and have a husband and are conforming to what society expects, then there is no problem and no one will accuse them of behaviour which might then be attributed to witchcraft. But most of those accused are older, usually they are widowed and no longer looking after children and living alone on the edge of society. Then they become a target because they are no longer useful to society and not conforming to what people expect."

Accusations of witchcraft are a convenient excuse for the cruel treatment of women who are poor, excluded, different, or seen to be challenging the status quo. Very occasionally women who are economically successful and independent are

accused, as a way of taking away their wealth and power.

Lamnatu Adam says women who are outspoken are also often accused of being a witch. "Women are expected to be submissive and subordinate, so once you are seen to be outspoken then it's like something is wrong with you, you might be possessed. So in order to eliminate you, they just say something like 'I saw you in my dream and I think that you are a witch'."

Witchcraft accusations also stem from a lack of recognition or treatment for mental health issues. According to Dr Akwesi Osei, chief psychiatrist in the Ghana Health Service and medical director at Accra Psychiatric Hospital, women who are accused of witchcraft are often suffering from clinical depression, schizophrenia or dementia: "In traditional communities, there isn't an understanding of depression or schizophrenia. If someone is behaving strangely they may be accused and even confess all kinds of crimes. In the camps you are likely to see a number of women suffering from dementia or depression."

"The witch camps are unacceptable because they are just for women," says Patricia Akakpo, from NETRIGHT, a Ghanaian women's rights network. "Men are not as vulnerable in society... What about men wizards – are they also going to send them from their communities or can they stay because they are men, because they are in authority? I think it is because of a patriarchal society and it is men that make the decision, when you go to the camps it's men that rule over the women."

Failed by laws



Ghana's constitution ensures the rights of citizens and is further supported by international laws and conventions such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), to which Ghana is a signatory. Bodies such as the

Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ), the Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit (DOVVSU) and the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE) all operate at the local level in Ghana to protect human rights, but many of these institutions have difficulty in fulfilling their responsibilities because of a lack of technical expertise, capacity and logistical support. Few people, particularly in rural areas, are aware that they can seek help from these institutions when they, or their relatives, experience violence or abuse after being accused of witchcraft.

"It is extremely difficult for a woman to report a crime to the police," says Lamnatu Adam from Songtaba. "There are so many questions: what structures are there for an uneducated woman to report (a crime)? Do we have policing in every community? What does it take for a woman to leave her community to lodge a complaint? What effort is government making to ensure the police are there for everyone?"

Working to end violence against women

The violence and discrimination suffered by the accused women is a key barrier to women realising their rights and to the achievement of social justice.

Of all the abuses of rights around the world, violence against women is one of the most widespread. One in three women worldwide will be raped, assaulted, or physically or sexually abused in her lifetime. For many women it can be almost impossible to defend themselves against violence because their voices are unheard and they have very little support available to them.

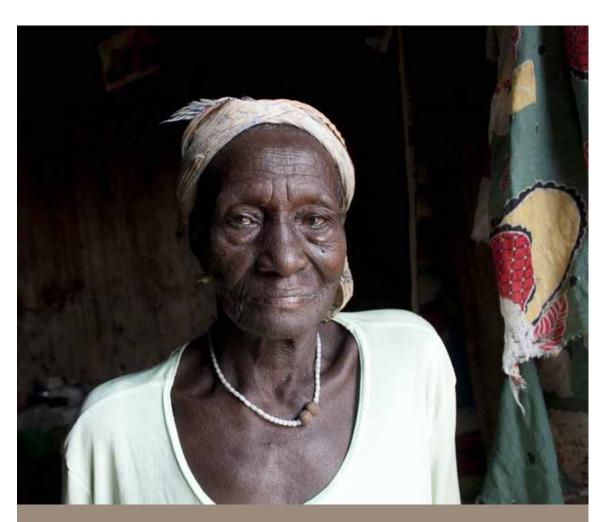
Violence robs women of choices and control over their own lives. It impacts on every aspect of their lives, causing injury and death, but also preventing girls from going to school and women from earning money. It stops women from participating in their communities and wider society, and forces them to live in fear.

ActionAid is working with partners worldwide to campaign for changes in the law, demand access to justice and provide services for survivors of violence and support programmes for women's empowerment.

"The ultimate objective is for us to close down the camps, not to have them exist, but we are not also going to force the women out because we see those camps as safe havens."

Hawawu Boya Gariba, deputy minister of women and children's affairs

PHOTO: JANE HAHN/ACTIONAID



Sano Kojo's story

Sano Kojo, 66, has been living in a camp since 1981 when she was accused of witchcraft by allegedly pressing on her cousin's chest until he died.

"People don't care about alleged witches. Once you are here you are forgotten."

Reintegration

ActionAid's ultimate objective is for all alleged witches to leave the camps and be safely reintegrated into society. But, for the women, the process of being released from the camps and going back to live at home is a complex one. Many women do not want to return because of their betrayal by family and community members; the trauma of stigmatisation; the uncertainty about the community's acceptance of their return and the fear of being blamed for any future misfortunes.

This is not an unfounded fear: ActionAid's 2008 survey found that 40% of women who were reintegrated returned to the camps within a year, because they had been accused again. This chimed with interviews carried out by ActionAid in which villagers said they feared the 'witches coming home to eat their children'. Clearly, high levels of stigma continue to exist long after the accusations are made.

In Gambaga camp women have to pay around £70 – a high price – to the chief and to buy animals for a ritual in order to leave. The Go Home Project run by the Presbyterian Church has helped an estimated 1,000 women return home since 1994 by supporting the payment of the price for reintegration. ActionAid supported this initiative by providing economic independence to reintegrated women, through supplying guinea fowls for rearing. Currently, ActionAid collaborates with the Go Home Project to improve conditions in the camps.

Earlier this year, the project helped 75-year-old Napoa Abulai return to her village after living in the camp for six years. After the purification ceremonies, as she was preparing to leave, she was asked how she felt. She simply said: "Once a witch. Now a human being."

PHOTO: JANE HAHN/ACTIONAID

Mercy's story

Although the majority of those accused are elderly women, it is not exclusively so. Twenty-fiveyear-old Mercy was pregnant when she was cast out of her village after being accused by a neighbour. Her husband left her, she had no family and couldn't speak the local dialect in the camp. Mercy was terrified especially as those who had driven her out followed her to the camp to threaten her further. She gave birth alone to a baby boy in the camp. Though younger in age than most of the women, she was poor and powerless - the archetypal profile of those accused of witchcraft.



ActionAid's work in the camps

Mariama Iddrisu, has lived in Kukuo 'witch camp' since she was accused of witchcraft and banished her from her home and family 30 years ago.

PHOTO CREDIT: JANE HAHN/ACTIONAID



In 2005 ActionAid Ghana supported the formation of a coalition called Songtaba, made up of 15 civil society organisations, public institutions and agencies committed to women's rights. As well as providing basic services, more recently there has been a conscious effort to build their communication skills, improve women's self-confidence and raise awareness of their rights.

In June 2009, ActionAid and Songtaba facilitated the formation of a network of alleged witches. Known as Ti-gbubtaba (which means 'let's support each other' in the local Dagbani dialect), the network brings together all the residents of the six camps, giving them a strong, collective voice. The network has met local government representatives and some of their successes include registering camp residents on the National Health Insurance Scheme and obtaining food aid.

In 2010, ActionAid Ghana and Songtaba, in collaboration with the National Commission on Civic Education, facilitated meetings between the network and the 'sending communities' – the villages from which alleged witches flee or are banished. Discussions were focused around the

injustice and inhumane treatment the women receive, and the need to reverse the situation for good.

The 2008 ActionAid survey found that more than 90% of people surveyed in the villages said they were not aware that the women had rights. So literacy and awareness raising groups were set up in Gnani and Kukuo camps, providing opportunities for the women to discuss and analyse their situation and take specific actions to address it. This led to the formation of the network of alleged witches.

"I think ActionAid Ghana has been very effective in working with the alleged witches over the last few years," says ActionAid country director, Adwoa Kwateng-Kluvitse. "We started with dealing with their immediate needs... then we started looking at their own analysis of where they were and why they were where they were, building self-confidence and awareness of themselves as having rights. Two years ago I was in a camp, when a woman said 'we now know we're human beings'. That was a success."

An end to the camps?

In 2011 the Ghanaian government, through the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs, announced that the witch camps should be closed in 2012. However the residents said they preferred to stay in the camps if work had not been carried out in their original villages to prevent further violence and discrimination.

In November 2011 ActionAid organised a two-day national forum on the witch camps to bring together women and children from the six camps, chiefs, priests, local government agencies and civil society organisations.

In a statement the women said the government must put in place a roadmap for the camps to be closed in a sustainable way, so that once reintegrated, the alleged witches feel safe in their communities and are able to support themselves. The women also want there to be no new arrivals at the camps and no new witchcraft allegations.

Demonstrating their new-found self-confidence, the women, with the help of ActionAid, also organised a march through Tamale, the capital of Ghana's northern region, holding up placards which read: 'why are the alleged witches always old women'; 'banishing of women into camps is unjust' and 'the government must act to restore the human rights of the alleged witches'. The women's stance has been recognised by the government who now agree that the camps must close gradually. "The ultimate objective is for us to close down the camps, not to have them exist, but we are not also going to force the women out because we see those camps as safe havens," says Hawawu Boya Gariba, deputy minister of women and children's affairs.

Adwoa Kwateng-Kluvitse called on the government to ensure consultation with the women in the camps before making any plans to close them. "We need to highlight that what happens to these women is an abuse of human rights. But the reality of it is that disbanding the camps would be a long process – it could take 10 or 20 years. We have to do a lot of work with their

communities so that they are able to return without being lynched or subjected to reaccusation, for example if a cow jumps over a fence and knocks down something. It will need time because it is not only a social or cultural practice, there's a psychological dimension too. We are going to have to disabuse people's minds and that takes a long time."

At the same time advocacy and campaign programmes are needed to end the myths surrounding witchcraft and start the process of ending discrimination and stigmatisation of the women and children who live in the camps.

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Adwoa Kwateng-Kluvitse, ActionAid country director

Alleged witch **Katumi Mumuni**, 70, dances in Kukuo village, Northern Ghana

PHOTO: JANE HAHN/ACTIONAID



ActionAid's work in Ghana

Ghana is home to 22 million people. Seventy per cent of Ghana's people depend on subsistence farming to survive. Droughts and floods are common, and many families regularly experience severe food shortages

ActionAid Ghana is part of ActionAid International, an anti-poverty federation committed to finding sustainable solutions to poverty and injustice in over 40 countries. ActionAid began work in Ghana in 1990 and currently works with more than a million people in 234 communities.

Since 2010 ActionAid Ghana has focused on three key areas of work: women's rights, the right to education and the right to food, which also involves work on climate change. It also works on governance, conflict in human security and emergencies and HIV/AIDS.

ActionAid's women's rights work focuses on mobilising poor and excluded women to challenge violence, participate in decision making, and claim their rights to access and control over land. Education work centres on mobilising poor and excluded communities to advocate for educational resources, creating a conducive school environment and promoting the right for all children, including girls, to go to school. Work on food rights and climate change involves promoting sustainable, low-impact farming and mobilising smallholder farmers and their organisations to advocate for policies that promote control over productive resources and access to markets.

Recommendations

These recommendations are based on a communiqué issued by women living in the camps, following the ActionAid-organised forum on the witch camps.

- 1 Women living in the camps must only be encouraged to return home after a sensitive and comprehensive programme of reintegration, involving three key stakeholders: the women themselves, camp chiefs, and opinion leaders in the women's home communities.
- 2 The government of Ghana must not rush into disbanding the camps, but develop a detailed roadmap in consultation with all stakeholders including alleged witches, religious and traditional leaders, priests, and the communities of origin of the alleged witches.
- 3 The government must make it illegal to accuse people of witchcraft and ensure the safe reintegration of the women, and their dependants, into any community of their choice.
- 4 Advocacy and campaign programmes must be carried out by NGOs and the Ghanaian government in order to end the myths surrounding witchcraft and the discrimination and stigmatisation of women and children living in the camps.
- The women in the camps should be further empowered to demand their rights through Reflect (adult literacy) circles and other human rights awareness training.
- In the meantime there is a need to raise the living standards of residents of the camps without the intention of making the camps a permanent home.
- 7 Health and education services should be provided for women and children in the camps through comprehensive and coordinated action by all those working in the camps, as well as local government agencies.

Recommendations to the international community

- 8 ActionAid Ghana calls for the support of the international donor community, including the UK government, to scale up its work in the witch camps and engage the government of Ghana in a human rights based approach to address all issues relating to witchcraft allegations, abuse and the status of the witch camps.
- 9 The international community must act to restore the rights of the alleged witches. United Nations bodies, in particular, must prioritise the plight of these women in their dealings with the government of Ghana and demand specific action in response to the communiqué of the women.

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- ¹ Source: journalist Manusseh Azure Awune, interview with ActionAid, February 2012.
- ² www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/nov/29/ghanaian-woman-burned-death-witch
- ³ www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/afrec/vol22no3/223-closing-ghanas-poverty-gap.html
- ⁴ UN Millennium Developement Goals database.
- ⁵ Real Aid 3: ending aid dependency, ActionAid, 2011.
- ⁶ The state and condition of alleged witches in the northern region of Ghana, ActionAid, 2008.
- ⁷ ibid.

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