

# Reintegration Brings Hope, But Delayed Anti-Witchcraft Bill Hinders Lasting Change

BY Shawana Yussif

**AFTER YEARS** in exile, women once branded as witches are finding their way home. But as Ghana's Parliament delays a law to end witchcraft accusations, the fragile hope of freedom and safety still hangs in the balance.

Once labelled a witch and forced into exile, Adamu Mahama has finally returned home. After years in the Kukuio camp, she has been reintegrated into her community—a move human rights advocate, Shani Abdul Kasiru, describes as a milestone in the fight against stigma and abuse.

When Adamu stood at the edge of her home in Bimbilla, sunlight spilling across her modest compound, it was more than just another morning. It was a moment of triumph, a defiance of the torment, isolation, and pain she endured after being accused of witchcraft by her own community.

Now 68, Adamu is no longer the broken woman banished years ago after a tragic accident claimed her son and another young man. "They said I caused it—that I used witchcraft to kill them," she recalls softly. "But I forgive them. I just want to live in peace."

Her story mirrors that of hundreds of women across Northern Ghana, mostly elderly, widowed, and vulnerable, who face accusations rooted in superstition, fear, and misogyny. Some, like Madam Akua Denteh of Kafaba, never made it to a camp. She was lynched in 2020, her cries for mercy silenced by the fists and stones of her accusers.

Until Ghana develops a legal framework to protect these women, such baseless accusations will continue to rob innocent women of their dignity and safety.

## The History and Decline of Ghana's Witch Camps

For decades, Northern Ghana has hosted camps that served as refuge for women accused of witchcraft—some existing for over a century. Although Civil Society Organisations (CSO) and government efforts since 2012 have led to the closure of several camps, hundreds of women remain confined, still awaiting justice and reintegration.

As of 2012, Ghana had at least six alleged "witch camps" accommodating an estimated 1,000 women. These camps are located in

Bonyasi, Naabuli, Gnani, Kpatinga, Kukuio, and Gambaga, all in Northern Ghana, offering shelter to women banished from their communities.

In the same year, the govern-



The writer

ment of Ghana announced plans to close down all witch camps and intensify public education to dispel the belief in witchcraft. Two years later, then Minister for Gender, Children and Social Protection, Nana Oye Lithur, through Action-

Aid and Songtaba led the disbandment of the Bonyasi camp in the Central Gonja District, successfully reintegrating its residents back into their communities.

By 2015, another camp, the Naabuli Camp, had been shut down. Currently, four camps still remain—Gambaga, Kukuio, Gnani, and Kpatinga—collectively housing more than 500 people; most of them elderly women seeking safety after being accused of witchcraft.

Despite sustained reintegration efforts, led by Songtaba and ActionAid over the years, over 300 women are currently in camps due to witchcraft accusations.

## A System Built on Silence and Fear

Through advocacy, negotiation, and persistence by civil society organisations, Adamu returned home to Bimbilla.

"Witchcraft accusations are a human rights crisis," says Hajia Lamnatu Adam, Executive Director of Songtaba. "These are women who have lost everything—their families, their dignity, their freedom—simply because they were accused without proof."

Some of the accusations that drive vulnerable women into witch camps include, but are not limited to, allegations of causing the death of others, bringing misfortune or illness upon community members, or even being seen in another person's dreams.

In such cases, it often takes the intervention of traditional shrines and their custodians, known as Tindanas (soothsayers), to determine a woman's innocence or otherwise.

Hajia Lamnatu Adam explained that while the camps may offer safety, they are not a long-term solution. "They are open-air prisons. The women live in poor conditions, isolated and forgotten. It's a form of institutionalised violence."

Adamu's five-year stay in Kukuio was marked by loneliness and shame. "I didn't think I would ever come back," she admits. Through sustained mediation, community sensitisation, and sup-

port from Songtaba and ActionAid, her village finally agreed to receive her. Today, she lives in a two-room home built by donors—a symbol of resilience and hope.

A two-bedroom House as part of the reintegration programme.

## Hope in Law: The Push for Legislation

Following years of advocacy, a Private Member's Bill (a legislative bill that is introduced by a private Member of Parliament, not part of a government's planned legislation) to criminalise witchcraft accusations is now under review in Parliament.

A recent visit by the Parliamentary Select Committee on Human Rights to various camps has renewed optimism that legal reform may soon become a reality.

"We are hopeful," says Eugenia Ayishetu Ayagiba, Women's Rights and Campaigns Manager at ActionAid Ghana. "Parliament has seen the conditions these women live in. It's time to show leadership and protect the vulnerable."

The bill seeks to criminalise both accusations and banishment; provide legal and psychosocial support for survivors; establish proper reintegration programmes that ensure reuniting with their families; and provide reliable sources of livelihood for women who have been in the camps for years.

While some traditional leaders fear it may conflict with local customs, others have endorsed it as necessary and overdue. "This bill is not a cure-all," adds Eugenia Ayishetu Ayagiba, Women's Rights and Campaigns Manager at ActionAid Ghana.

"But it's a starting point. It targets the root—the accusation itself—which often begins with a single person labelling another as a witch."

## Amnesty International: "End the Banishment of Women"

International organisations have also weighed in. Amnesty

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Women with children at Gnaani (witch) camp