

Life after accusation: Forced internment, human rights violations, and the urgent case for criminalizing witchcraft claims in Ghana

Abubakar Muhammad Jibril^{1*}, Ramalina Ranaivo Mikea Manitra², Arafat Hossain¹

¹Faculty of Law, University of Indonesia, Jl. Lingkar, Pondok Cina, Kecamatan Beji, Kota Depok, West Java 16424, Indonesia

²Legal Affairs, ASTA Research Centre, II G 9 RPA Antsobolo-Ambatomaro, 101 Antananarivo, Madagascar

*e-mail: abubakarmuhammadjibril765@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Accusations of witchcraft in Ghana are still causing forced displacement and severe human rights violations in impoverished, aging women, and other disadvantaged persons. This research is a sociolegal examination of the legal reaction to the protracted crisis in Ghana. Assisted by doctrinal methodology, this article critically examines Ghana's 1992 Constitution, the Criminal Offences Act, 1960 (Act 29), and the Criminal Offences (Amendment) Bill, 2022, against relevant international human rights obligations under the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the ICCPR. To effectively implement the law, this study employs qualitative data gathered from eight lengthy interviews with survivors, representatives of civil society, religious and traditional leaders, and policymakers. The research indicates that the current criminal law of Ghana offers no clear assurances against unfounded accusations of witchcraft; the bill, nevertheless, makes an effort to close the legislative lacuna by designating malicious accusations as an offence, which is punishable with imprisonment and compulsory compensation. The development has been long due to fostering essential rights relating to security, dignity, and non-discrimination. However, the delay in presidential assent highlights the necessity for continued advocacy. This research demonstrates that the passage of criminalization, alongside systemic reforms, police training, community sensitization programs, and reintegration assistance, is key to bringing forced internment to an end and making Ghana's domestic law consistent with its constitutional obligation and international human rights commitment.

Keywords: Witchcraft accusations, forced internment, human rights violations, Ghana, witch camps, criminalization.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The majority of people in Ghana, like most other countries, do believe in witchcraft (Yakubu et al., 2024). According to research, around 90% of Ghanaians think that supernatural forces are responsible for evil things that happen. They tend to make these accusations following unusual problems occurring, such as death, illness, or nightmares (Adinkrah, 2011). Most of the time, these accusations are made against individuals who are already under economic or social stress, including poor, old, and widowed women. The moment someone is accused of being a "witch," they are already in danger. Accusations by witchcraft can be dangerous. Neighbor, family members, or relatives present around the accused can harm them and subject them to trials that can be gruesome, like making them ingest poison (Das Gupta et al., 2023). Several people have lost their lives to lynching or physical attack. Ghana has hosted some highly publicized cases, including the 2010 burnt alive case of a 72-year-old woman and the 2020 lynching of 89-year-old Akua Denteh (Owusu, 2020). Those who escape violent attacks often find themselves in informal "witch camp" in northern Ghana. Gambaga, Kuku, Gnani, Bonyasi, Nabuli, and Kpatinga are well-known witch camps, all of which are in rural areas in the north. The camps initially served to protect accused witches from vengeance attacks. However, all camps now see frequent violence (Adinkrah & Cody, 2024).

There were four Gambaga camps, Kuku, Gnani, Kpatinga, and Gambaga, which opened in 2020 and housed approximately 500 people. Later estimations revealed that the number had climbed to approximately a thousand; one estimate indicated that there were approximately 800 women and 500 children in the camps. According to Amnesty International's 2025 report, the four camps housed "more than 500 individuals, mostly women aged 50 to 90 years." They had no running water, obtained food intermittently, lived in huts with leaking roofs, and received little to no medical care. Prisoners survive on leftovers or labor for their survival; the government provides no support or help to rehabilitate them. They "have no means of supporting themselves, and there are no government programs to enable them to start again," says an Amnesty report. This ongoing disregard for their plight indicates the seriousness of the human rights crisis facing suspects in Ghana (Makumbe, 2025).

The Figure 1 captures an image of the "priests of the earth," who are traditional authorities based on the Tindaanee witch camp in Kpatinga, Ghana. This photo reflects the increasing incorporation of such camps into the overall fabric of local societal experience. In the example at hand, a community figure acting as a priest holds a certain amount of authority over the camp, even as it persists in economic hardship for the population.



Figure 1. The Birgen Project (Turman, 2020)

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The phenomenon of witchcraft accusation in Ghana has been studied by researchers and activists through various lenses (Gavi, 2019). Anthropology and human rights-based research highlights the gendered and socioeconomic nature of this phenomenon. Most studies indicate that accused individuals are women, typically older, widowed, or lacking in family support (Pierre, 2018), for instance, employs an intersectional framework to describe witch hunts in Ghana as "discrimination against specific kinds of women.". Empirical research, such as that of Adinkrah (2011), shows that rumors, domestic disputes, mental illness, and unfavorable situations are responsible for the rise in accusations. Adinkrah (2011) notes that the accused persons suffer gossip, divinatory rituals, exorcistic rituals, and, in some instances, torture or death. Our research supports these findings: NGO reports demonstrate that women undergo physical attacks, burn with hot plastic, or are forced to drink poison upon accusations. At the Gambaga and Kukuo camps, some prisoners explained that they fled from mobs that assaulted them or beatings.

Leading non-governmental organizations and campaign groups have recently released detailed reports. Amnesty International's 2025 briefing, entitled "Branded for Life," highlights that the accusations are "rooted in misogyny and harmful stereotypes" and classifies them as a basic violation of the rights to life, safety, and non-discrimination (Assaf, 2025). A related report spearheaded by Amnesty in 2024 presents extensive testimonies from the camp: a resident of 60 years at the Kukuo camp reported that villagers regularly looked for excuses to brand the hardworking woman a witch. ActionAid reports (2015, 2022) also point out the adverse impact on women's physical and mental well-being (Abudu & Adam, 2023). For instance, in research conducted by ActionAid, it was found that "more than half" of the residents in the camps are depressed and almost all of them have a "poor quality of life." All these realities emphasize that witchcraft accusations cannot be minimized as cultural exceptions in themselves, but are rather grave human rights issues (Mabefam & Appau, 2020).

Intersectional feminist analysis points out that in Ghana, accusations of witchcraft are made against largely old, widowed, disabled, or impoverished women, thereby bringing to light the multifaceted intersections between ageism, patriarchal institutions, and economic marginalization. Employing the model of intersectionality proposed by (Crenshaw, 2018), it is crucial to examine the accusations not simply through the lens of gender alone but as taking place as a result of intersecting vulnerabilities, particularly those associated with old age, physical disability, and solitude. Adinkrah (2004, 2011) documents that elderly women who have physical disabilities or are mentally ill are likely to be accused of witchcraft, which is viewed as a manifestation of "spiritual contamination." Amnesty International (2024, 2025) corroborates this fact, reporting that most camp residents are over 60, widowed, and lack family or economic support. In nearly all cases, the accused are held responsible for universal diseases such as stroke, dementia, and epilepsy, conditions that are construed by communities as supernatural retribution. These findings confirm that allegations operate not only as gendered violence, but also as structural violence against women rendered socially invisible based on age, sickness, and poverty.

However, most recent literature tends to be predominantly social, health, or global advocacy oriented. Little legal scholarship exists to address this phenomenon within the domestic law context of Ghana. Few studies have critically analyzed Ghana's statute law or its constitutional commitments. The current controversy with respect to the new Anti-Witchcraft Accusations Bill (2022) – its content and implications for the law – is just beginning to emerge. Therefore, there remains a gap in an in-depth legal analysis of how Ghanaian law addresses (or fails to address) accusations of witchcraft and their consequences. This study attempts to fill this gap by carefully reviewing the Criminal Offences Act and related legal structures, alongside human rights standards, to assess the need for new criminal legislation.

2.1. Gaps and Significance of Research

The biggest research gap is legal; there is no prior in-depth analysis of Ghanaian law on witchcraft accusations. Reports and news articles often call for legal reform without explaining the law. This study fills this gap in literature. Using doctrinal (legal) research methods, we identify deficiencies in the current

law and discuss how reforms can make a difference. The issue is urgent: dozens of accused women will die each year, while Ghana delays enacting protective laws. Ghana's actions serve as a regional example. Accusations of witchcraft are made in other African countries, so Ghanaian court rulings could establish regional precedents for human rights. This research will (1) outline the legal framework of Ghana's Constitution, criminal law, and international obligations as they pertain to false accusations; (2) examine the newly passed (though unsigned) criminalization bill, its contents concerning ascertained needs; and (3) discuss whether and how criminal sanctions against accusers should be implemented. It intends to present a concise, evidence-driven argument for the criminalization of witchcraft accusations in Ghana as a means of protecting vulnerable citizens and bringing Ghana into compliance with its human rights commitments.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a socio-legal methodology that combines doctrinal legal analysis and qualitative empirical data to examine the legal and human rights dimensions of witchcraft accusations in Ghana. The investigation of legal issues is guided by the 1992 Constitution, the Criminal Offences Act of 1960 (Act 29), the Criminal Offences (Amendment) Bill of 2022, and Ghana's international obligations under the African Charter on Human and People's Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). These are augmented by the analysis of parliamentary debates and explanatory materials to uncover legislative intent and gaps in law. To situate these findings, we conducted semi-structured interviews with eight purposively selected informants: three accused women from the Gambaga and Kukuio camps, two civil society activists (ActionAid and CHRAJ), a traditional priest (Tindana), a human rights lawyer, and a Member of Parliament. Interviews were held in June 2025, transcribed, anonymized, and thematically analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) process. The results provide compelling evidence on behalf of accused people and society for the enactment of laws against witchcraft accusations. The merging of legal documents and personal testimonies contributes to the significance of this study to the legal scholarly community, in addition to promoting human rights (see Table 1).

Table 1. Interview Data Collection

Code	Role	Location	Date Interviewed	Language
INT-01	Woman accused of witchcraft	Gambaga Camp	25 June 2025	Dagbani/English
INT-02	Woman accused of witchcraft	Kukuio Camp	25 June 2025	Dagbani/English
INT-03	Tindana (traditional priest)	Gambaga	26 June 2025	Dagbani/Interpreter
INT-04	ActionAid Ghana Field Officer	Tamale	26 June 2025	English
INT-05	CHRAJ Representative	Accra	26 June 2025	English
INT-06	Human Rights Lawyer	Accra	27 June 2025	English
INT-07	Local Imam (faith leader)	Salaga	27 June 2025	Hausa
INT-08	Member of Parliament	Accra	27 June 2025	English

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Existing Legal Framework

No offence in existing law criminalizes the false accusations of witchcraft in Ghana. In one analysis, "there is no belief offence whatsoever in the Criminal Offences Act [1960]". Act 29 of 1960 includes general provisions for preventing harm to others but nothing regarding false accusations of supernatural offences. Practically, instances where a claim has resulted in violent action enable offenders to be tried under current homicide or assault laws (Igwe, 2019). Occasionally, individuals have been accused of perpetrating such acts by taking the law into their own hands: two individuals guilty of murdering 90-year-old Akua Denteh, who was lynched in 2020, received a sentence of 12 years (Mutaru & Sekyi, 2023). Such prosecutions are targeted at the violent act and not the practice of witchcraft as claimed. Defamationn to criminal law, Ghanaian defamation law would possibly address false statements, but in practical terms,

defamation actions are not often initiated in the rural community and are not a form of preventive remedy against mob violence.

The Constitution of Ghana assures fundamental rights to "every person" within its jurisdiction (Article 17), including dignity, personal security, and equality. The witchcraft accusations operate directly against these rights: the accused lose their security, can lose their lives, are subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment, and are discriminated against. Moreover, the mere existence of camps contradicts the protection provided by the Constitution. No constitutional provision directly addresses the issue of superstitious accusations. Protection for accused people must thus be found in statutory law. Ghana lacks explicit legislation safeguarding individuals from baseless witchcraft accusations until 2023. Understanding this lacuna, Ghana's Parliament unanimously approved an Anti-Witchcraft Accusations Bill on July 27, 2023. The Bill (formally Criminal Offences (Amendment) Bill, 2022) seeks to amend Act 29 to criminalize accusing, declaring, naming, or labelling any person a witch. MPs debating the bill clarified that the amendment was "long overdue" to avert persecution and provide security agencies with a clear mandate. The key provisions of the proposed law (as reported) include the following.

- **New offence:** It is a criminal offence to make false accusations of witchcraft. The Bill expressly "proscribes to the declaration, accusation, naming, or labelling of another person as a witch". This goes further than simple superstition in criminalizing malicious accusations as criminal offences to be tried.
- **Sanctions:** The bill would punish an offender with up to five years of imprisonment, according to parliamentary reports. It also mandates that the accuser compensate the victim for damages incurred (paying medical expenses, legal fees, counseling, etc.). The law hence includes criminal sanctions as well as restorative justice mechanisms (Ohenewaa-Brown, 2022).
- **Enforcement powers:** Not publicly spelled out in the budget reports, the amendment would logically give the police and prosecutors the power to move on to complaints of witchcraft accusations, or else they might consider these complaints "cultural" and don't wish to get involved. By including this crime in the Criminal Offences Act, law enforcement agencies would have a specific mandate to investigate and prosecute offenders.
- **Relation to Witch Camps:** Debates have suggested that MPs perceive a connection between camps and accusations. Some even demanded that camps be destroyed as a form of deterrence. The Bill itself contains general language, implying that stopping witchcraft accusations would facilitate the reintegration of the camp inhabitants.

These reforms, although specifically targeted at accusations, mirror international human rights standards. By harmonizing Ghanaian domestic law with the need to safeguard persons from superstitious abuse, the bill would further treat obligations under instruments such as the African Charter (prohibition of discrimination) and the ICCPR (rights to security and dignity). Disallowing unfounded witchcraft accusations can be thought of as analogous to hate speech or incitement offenses elsewhere adapted to the Ghanaian situation (see Figure 2).

Witchcraft Accusation Bill Summary

Characteristic	New Offense	Sanctions	Enforcement Powers	Relation to Witch Camps
 Description	Criminalizes false witchcraft accusations	Imprisonment and victim compensation	Mandates police and prosecutor involvement	Aims to facilitate camp inhabitant reintegration
 International Standards	Mirrors international human rights standards	Mirrors international human rights standards	Mirrors international human rights standards	Mirrors international human rights standards

Figure 2. Processed by the Author 07/06/2025

4.2. Implementation Status and Advocacy

Notwithstanding the Parliamentary vote, by the end of 2023, the bill was not finalized into law because of inaction on the part of the president. In October 2023, President Nana Akufo-Addo sent the bill back, claiming that it ought to have been introduced by the executive and not by a private MP. This technicality amounted to a veto of the law; he indicated that he would have been reintroduced appropriately in the future. There was disappointment among opposition MPs and civil society. MP Francis Sosu (the Bill's sponsor) described the rejection as "very strange and inexplicable." Human rights groups demanded assent from the President. The Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice of Ghana, for example, publicly "called on the president to assent" to the Criminal Offences (Amendment) Bill, 2022. The Commissioner of CHRAJ, as stated, pointed out that the Bill had been passed "in June 2023" and called for its implementation, noting that the purpose of the law is "to proscribe the declaration, accusation, naming or labelling of another person as a witch". Likewise, Amnesty International's Ghana office held forums to rally support, and the director for the country remarked that the passage of the law sent a clear message that witchcraft accusations have no place in a modern, progressive society (see Figure 3). The bill was not signed until May 2025.

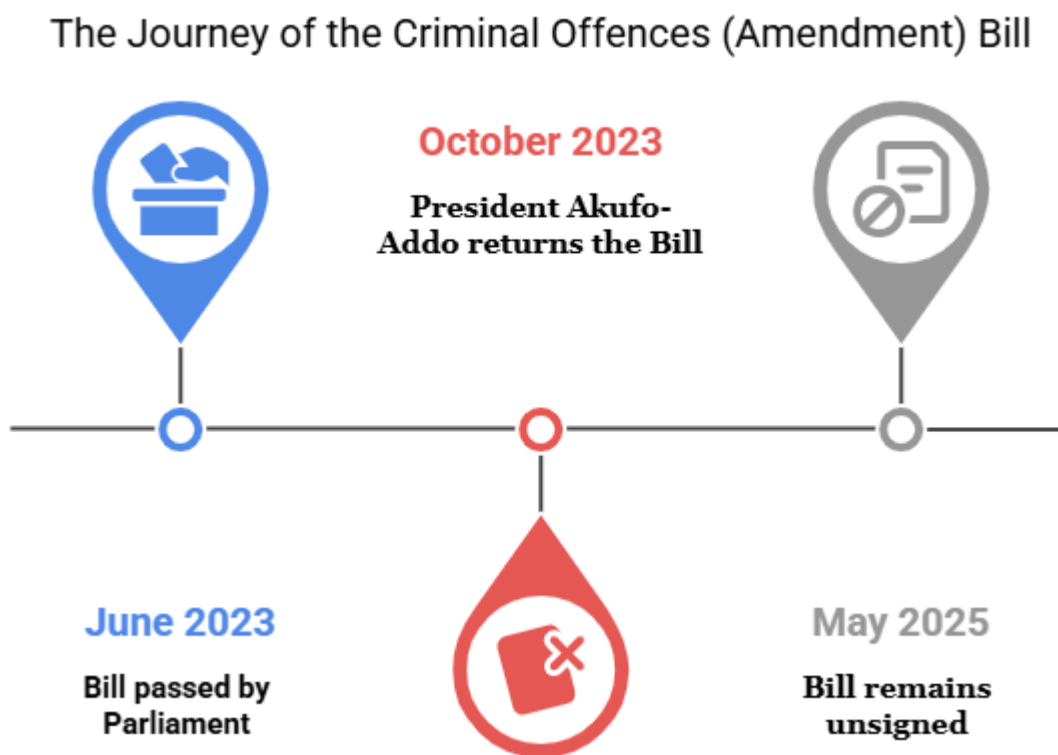


Figure 3. Processed by the Author 06/06/2025

4.3. Life After Accusation: Human Rights Impacts

Alleged witch victims suffer widespread human rights violations. Reports compiled by NGOs provide a window for camping life. It is true that huts routinely have gaping roofs: one woman told how "Water falls through the roof when it rains," and others spoke of crawling back in to sleep on their faces. There is a shortage of food and medical attention is all but out of the question. One Amnesty fieldworker reported that numerous individuals have chronic illnesses (arthritis, blindness, neglected injuries, and dementia), which are accounted for by the community as witchcraft. Villagers survive on remittances or charity alone; pensions and state benefits never get to them. It is a national shame, one former Deputy Gender Minister has said, that old women are "alleged witches all the time" when in fact they are simply in poor health (see

Figure 4). Most accused women bring young family members. These images show how accusations destroy an entire family. Camps may comprise children and orphans, who are looked after by accused women.



Figure 4. camp resident with her grandchildren at the Tindaanzee witch camp in Kpatinga (Commons, n.d.)

The common vulnerabilities are widely manifested among the population of the witch camps. The 2025 Amnesty International report characterizes residents who mostly comprise members of previous generations and frequently bear evident disabilities or mental illnesses, with most of them coping with untreated illnesses such as dementia, blindness, paralysis, or symptoms of trauma. These illnesses are frequently misinterpreted by rural communities, casting them in terms of alleged "proof" of supernatural powers. Poor widows with no sons or property are particularly vulnerable because their assumed deficiency in economic utility or protective potential exposes them to scapegoat. One of the women who participated in the Gambaga interviews indicated that her paralysis due to a stroke was interpreted by the villagers as "proof" that she had bewitched a child. Another participant indicated that her disorientation following the recent death was interpreted as possession. The above cases demonstrate the intersection of old age, gender, widowhood, and health status, which together result in the identification of a highly vulnerable category among the accused. The above statement supports the explanatory potential of intersectionality in describing the social processes underlying witchcraft persecution (Mgungwe, 2023).

Social isolation within camps is profound. In a survey, more than half of the camp residents were depressed and 97% had a very poor quality of life. Nutritional conditions are also poor; in one camp, a single borehole serves as a water source for miles. The following photos (taken at the Tindaanzee camp) show a human face during the crisis. We observed an elderly woman clutching her two grandchildren and a frail, blind, elderly woman with her grandson. These images are consistent with reports that several prisoners have disabilities or mental illnesses, which render their care problematic. Amnesty reports that

"women with serious medical conditions" (i.e., blindness or dementia) are completely vulnerable in the camps:

Gross Human Rights Violations: Overall, the practice infringes upon a chain of rights. Suspects are exposed to infringements on the right to life (lynching), security of the person (violence from mobs, banishment), freedom from torture/degrading treatment (ordeal by violence), freedom of movement and residence (forced banishment), and equality before the law (sex- and age-based discrimination). Denial of food, water, and medical treatment also violates economic and social rights. Inhuman treatment is prohibited by Ghanaian law (Article 15), yet responses to allegations are accepted with impunity. Human rights monitor consistently demand protection for the victims under the law; for instance, both Amnesty and ActionAid stress that signing the Anti-Witchcraft Bill would "significantly enhance protection of human rights in Ghana."

4.4. Need for Criminalization

Our doctrinal analysis finds that only a new criminal offense can properly address these abuses (Adinkrah, 2004). Without law, accusing someone of witchcraft remains free for all. Criminalizing accusations can serve several purposes.

- **Deterrence:** Possible accusers (usually neighbors or family members) would be aware of the legal punishment they would receive. The suggested five-year jail term and compensation payment would deter frivolous and false accusations. As MP Sosu simply explained, the law says to people, "you cannot accuse a person of witchcraft... if you do, that's criminal and the law will take its course."
- **Accountability:** The police would have to investigate accusations before violence occurs. A 2025 Amnesty report specifically urged Ghana "to criminalize witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks through legislation." Without such a law, a few leaders could dismiss accusations as ordinary disputes. Criminalization would allow courts to sanction those individuals who force people into camps or worse.
- **Victim Remedies:** Required compensation holds offenders accountable for the damage they have caused. If accusers are liable to be sued for counseling expenses and lost income from the accused, victims (and society) will be able to achieve some recourse. This illustrates the principle of restorative justice.
- **Symbolic condemnation:** Legally declaring it unacceptable to charge a person with witchcraft, affirming equality and human rights. According to the country director of Amnesty, enacting the law sends "a clear message that witchcraft accusations have no place in [modern Ghana]." It places Ghana's law in conformity with constitutional values (Article 17) and international human rights standards.

Critics occasionally sound alarms about religious practices or free speech. However, as written, the bill aimed at malicious intent behind false accusations, not cultural or religious expressions. It functions like hate speech laws or false complaint bribery statutes: it criminalizes malicious behavior, not thought. Additionally, the law explicitly provides that it does not exclude belief in witchcraft per se, but rather forbids accusation based on "black magic" or ill will. Even though the government of Ghana seems to favor the content, in withholding his assent, President Akufo-Addo stated that "the contents of these bills have my support," his reasons for objection being procedural only.

Comparative human rights analysis emphasizes urgency. African human rights mechanisms (e.g., the ACHPR) condemn camps as harmful customary practices. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals and the CEDAW call for an end to violence against women. Prohibiting false witchcraft accusations would directly advance these commitments. The CHRAJ Commissioner linked the Bill directly to the protection of women's rights and urged its passage during a National Policy Dialogue on the subject "Stop Witchcraft Allegations Now: No Woman Should Die Because She is Perceived a Witch".



Figure 5. Processed by the Author 05/06/2025

In Figure 5, our doctrinal and interview examination establishes that Ghanaian law is missing one of the most important mechanisms for safeguarding victims of witchcraft accusations. The proposed amendment would not contravene any superior standards of law; instead, it would plug a loophole. This type of law exists in theory in other nations (e.g., laws against slander and false imputation). Specifically, the Criminal Offences Act has to be a secular instrument; superstition is not a crime, but damaging accusations. Criminalization is, therefore, legally coherent and pragmatically warranted. This Figure 6 exemplifies how Ghana’s most vulnerable (the elderly, disabled, or infirm) can be expelled to camps. This underscores our finding that accused people frequently have serious health issues that require care, yet the stigma of witchcraft deprives them of assistance.



Figure 6 An accused woman and her grandson at the Tindaanzee witch camp. The caption from the photo reads “A blind inmate and her grandson in the Tindaanzee witch camp.”

4.5. Potential Challenges and Social Risks

The criminalization of witchcraft accusations is a great legal reform, but its enforcement can entail unexpected social repercussions if not paired with more extensive structural and cultural interventions. One such danger is the possibility of retaliation against accused or reformed actors. Where witchcraft beliefs are strongly held, legal prohibitions can be perceived as externally imposed or as interfering with cultural autonomy and can therefore cause charges and sanctions to be applied secretly. This can

exacerbate victims' isolation, while accusers can pursue extra legal remedies instead of risking official legal interventions.

Comparative studies conducted in India and Tanzania show the inadequacies of legal systems in countries where community participation is limited. The revision of the Witchcraft Act in Tanzania criminalized witchcraft practice; however, many elderly women, mostly widows, continued to be victims of mob violence in the face of weak enforcement of the law and a lack of public awareness about its contents (de Jong & Ka Menziwa, 2022). Similarly, India's Bihar and Jharkhand legislated anti-witch-hunting laws, but due to the resistance from village elders, religious leaders, and local officials, there was poor reporting and compliance. In some cases, users used religion or traditional rights as defenses. These cases highlight the imperative of cautious and community-aware implementation, especially in customary or rural areas, where state legal authority is likely to be considered secondary to customary law (Basumatary, 2024). Ghanaian legal reform must therefore be augmented by ongoing public education through local languages, drama, and community theater to reshape the illness-misfortune discourse and restore the position of older women (Borah & Das, 2019). Also important is the involvement of religious leaders, traditional leaders, and religious institutions that tend to wield significant moral authority at the local levels. Their involvement in policy education and reintegration programs can increase their legitimacy and reduce cultural resistance. Without such concerted approaches, the law can end up serving a symbolic function with strength in abstract principles but without force in everyday operations. Therefore, criminalization must not be regarded as an isolated gesture, but as one strand within a dense weave of interventions that encompass legal education, psychosocial support, and dynamic cultural conversation.

4.6. Human Rights Impacts

4.6.1. The Role of Traditional and Religious Authorities

Traditional and religious leaders have conflicting and complex positions regarding the continuation and potential decrease in witchcraft accusations in Ghana. In most rural communities, particularly in the Northern Region, Tindaanee earth priests and spiritual mediators remain perceived as custodians of communal rituals, land, and beliefs. Although some Tindaanee serve as buffer agents, safeguarding accused witches, and mediating between disputing parties, others aid in the authentication and legitimation of witchcraft accusations. In interviews conducted in June 2025, one Tindana from the Gambaga area expressed his role as a "guardian of peace," stating:

"I don't call anyone a witch. However, if the family brings a woman, I cannot send her away. It is for protection. I only ask the spirits what they see." (INT-03, interview, June 26, 2025)

This accusation shows the multifaceted role of traditional chiefs; although they seem to be involved in efforts to save suspected offenders from mob action, their religious role tends to reinforce the belief systems that initially drive accusations. One CHRAJ officer interviewed in Accra explained as follows:

"A number of the chiefs do not actively support the accusations, yet they will not go against them either. They fear reprisals from their communities." (INT-04, interview, June 26, 2025)

In the same vein, religious leaders, especially those affiliated with evangelical Christian groups, have from time to time promoted a "deliverance" and "spiritual warfare" rhetoric that portrays women as hosts for evil spirits. Conversely, several faith-based organizations have been at the forefront of demanding the closure of witch camps and the enactment of the Anti-Witchcraft Accusations Bill. An ActionAid representative noted this turn of the events:

"We work with some of the pastors and imams to change the narrative. If they condemn it, they listen. But not all of them are interested." (INT-05, interview, June 26, 2025)

Because of their pervasive influence, incorporating traditional and religious leaders into legal education programs, awareness-raising activities, and reintegration programs should be conducted strategically. Their involvement in community forums, coupled with support from government institutions and non-governmental organizations, can potentially transform their roles from passive followers to active promoters of human rights. Programs aimed at training chiefs, imams, and pastors in human rights law, trauma-informed methods, and conflict resolution should be launched in conjunction with efforts aimed at legal reform to enhance grassroots compliance and cultural relevance. With the participation of these gatekeepers, the Ghanaian government and civil society are well placed to confront not just the legal dimensions of witchcraft accusations but also the moral and symbolic authority they command, which continues to shape public opinion and behavior in rural and semi-urban areas.

4.7. Implementation and Alternatives

Legislative passage was just the start. For criminalization to work, the government needs to instruct police and prosecutors on how to manage accusations and make it safe for accused individuals to report threats. This also needs to be combined with social interventions. Ghana has already started some reintegration efforts: authorities report that they have resettled around 220 exiles and shut down two camps. One of the closed camps (Bonyasi) was closed in 2014. For recommendations (outside of the bill), we suggest that displaced women get shelters or pensions, mental health and social services are funded, and there is public education to reverse witchcraft stigma. Others (for example, religious groups) have implied that spiritual redemption or voluntary confession could serve in place of legal structures, but experience shows that without state enforcement, violence continues. The 2020 murder of Akua Denteh occurred despite the campaigns of the church leaders. Ghana treated past witch killings "as normal" until citizens put public pressure on the government to change the law, as John Azumah of the Sanneh Institute details. The authoritarian turn, legally penalizing accusers, is thus explained by the failure of non-legal solutions (Sosu, 2023).

Experiences from different jurisdictions indicate that criminal law alone is usually insufficient to eradicate deep-seated beliefs in witchcraft. In Tanzania, despite efforts through amendments to the Witchcraft Act to limit accusations, elderly women, particularly widows, remain victims of mob attacks, which can be explained by the lack of effective law enforcement and a lack of public education (Adinkrah & Cody, 2024). In Malawi, witchcraft accusations are criminalized by local bylaws in certain districts, although traditional leaders may resist enforcement if the laws intersect with customary practices. Likewise, in India, anti-witch-hunting laws were adopted in states such as Bihar and Jharkhand from 1999, but prosecutions have been only partially successful since community beliefs continued unabated without continued public sensitization (Adolfsson et al., 2024). These cases also underscore the importance of integrating legal reform into larger systems of community education, collaboration with customary leaders, and the delivery of social services to address the underlying causes of allegations and promote long-term transformation.

4.8. Institutional Reforms for Effective Implementation

To achieve the intended impact of the proposed criminalization, Ghana must follow legal reforms with serious institutional measures dedicated to strengthening law enforcement, judicial capacity, and victim services. Without concurrent effort, law enforcement is likely to be ineffective or counterproductive.

a) Police Capacity and Local Enforcement Capability

To bring into force the criminalization of witchcraft accusations renders frontline policing officers sensitive to identifying, recording, and investigating belief-based violence, which is a very different landscape than usual crime. Special training modules should be developed in conjunction with human

rights bodies and civil society groups to educate the police in trauma-informed interviews, victim support, and community mediation. The training program should consider the existence of several police officers who possess belief-based biases that negatively affect impartial law enforcement.

b) Judicial Orientation and Awareness

Judges, magistrates, and prosecutors must be sensitized to specific legal and cultural nuances that are unique to witchcraft accusations. Workshops and ongoing legal education programs must be initiated to assist the judiciary. Accurately enforcing new criminal laws. Reconciling the freedom of belief and banning harmful accusations. To guarantee fair trial proceedings to victims and plaintiffs. Judicial capacity can be strengthened by learning from the successful approaches employed in dealing with hate speech, domestic violence, and belief factor-driven crimes in similar legal regimes.

c) Social Protection: Pensions, Trauma Care, and Shelters

In addition to litigation, it is important to establish vigorous social support networks to help reduce the ongoing cycle of coercive detention and social isolation. Government funding must be directed to prioritize the offering of secure homes and temporary housing to facilitate the reintegration of diaspora women. Social protection initiatives, including pension schemes for elderly widows facing extreme poverty, have been implemented to mitigate the blame risk. Supply of medical care, trauma counseling, and psychological services to victims and their dependents. This is consistent with Ghana's constitutional duty to safeguard human dignity and the African Union's obligations to safeguard vulnerable groups from detrimental traditional practices.

Institutional reform should be coupled with long-term community sensitization campaigns that require the active participation of traditional leaders, religious groups, and local government authorities in de-stigmatizing survivors and enabling their safe reintegration. Collectively, these policies guarantee that the criminalization process is not isolated, but one within an integrated government approach acknowledges the social, cultural, and economic origins of witchcraft accusations.

5. CONCLUSION

The ongoing witchcraft accusations in Ghana are more than superstitions; it is a severe expression of gender, age, and economically based violence that continues to violate fundamental human rights. As this study's doctrinal and socio-legal analyses have revealed, the current law in Ghana provides no direct protection from witchcraft accusations, leaving some of the country's most vulnerable citizens, elderly women, widows, the disabled, and the poor vulnerable to gruesome mob violence, enforced incarceration, and social death. The Criminal Offences (Amendment) Bill of 2022, which was passed unopposed by Parliament but has yet to receive an executive assent, provides a much-needed legal framework to close this gap. By criminalizing the act of accusing, stating, or characterizing another human being as a witch, the Bill not only closes what appears to be an open loophole in Ghanaian criminal law, but also aligns local practice with the Constitution's promises of guarantees for dignity, equality, and security, as well as Ghana's international human rights commitments under the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the ICCPR. However, this study clarifies that criminalization cannot operate in isolation.

Comparative evidence from Tanzania, India, and Malawi highlights that a legal ban, unless supplemented by intensive community education, engagement of traditional leaders, and transformative institutional actions, ultimately leads to a symbolically empty position. Securing long-term protection for victims necessitates a multifaceted approach that incorporates training for police to address belief-based violence, providing judicial guidance for fair and informed judicial processes, and introducing social protection measures such as shelters, pensions, and trauma support to secure reintegration and break the cycle of forced exile. Above all, the evidence collected illustrates that the stigma and adverse consequences of witchcraft accusations are rooted to an extent that they cannot be erased by a single legislative intervention. As explained by a local campaigner, it is Ghana's responsibility to protect its women to allow

them to age with dignity and without the threat of being accused of witchcraft for just being alive. Fulfilling this commitment requires the collective efforts of governments, civil society, religious leaders, and traditional leaders. In brief, criminalizing witchcraft accusations is legally justified, ethically and pragmatically imperative. This step is a crucial starting point for dismantling this deep-seated cause of violence, while simultaneously reinstating the rights and dignity of the accused. Lawmakers and leaders of Ghana today have the chance to enact statutory law, thus sending a clear message that no Ghanaian citizens must go through the trauma of such accusations in the future.

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Ethical approval

Not Applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and all responses were kept confidential and used solely for academic research purposes.

Authors' Contributions

Conceptualization, A.M.J. and R.R.M.M.; methodology, A.H.; validation, A.M.J.; formal analysis, A.H.; resources, R.R.M.M.; writing original draft preparation, A.H.; writing review and editing, R.R.M.M.; Translate support A.M.J.

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Note on Contributors

Abubakar Muhammad Jibril

Abubakar Muhammad Jibril is a legal researcher specializing in international human rights law with a focus on women's rights and gender-based violence. He is currently affiliated with the Faculty of Law at the Universitas Indonesia. His professional background includes research and policy analysis of human rights protection in Africa, particularly addressing the legal and institutional gaps that affect vulnerable groups. He has contributed to several research papers and academic publications on human rights, Islamic law, and sociolegal reform. His work emphasizes bridging universal human rights standards with local contexts through culturally informed legal frameworks. He actively collaborates with legal practitioners, NGOs, and academic partners to advocate practical reforms that advance access to justice for marginalized communities. He has presented papers at regional and international conferences and continues to develop scholarships that inform policy and support legal reform initiatives. He can be contacted at abubakarmuhammadjibril765@gmail.com

Ramalina Ranaivo Mikea Manitra

He is the Head of Legal Affairs at the ASTA Research Centre, Madagascar. He holds an LL.B. from Universitas Diponegoro and is currently an LL.M. candidate at Universitas Indonesia. His research interests lie in human rights law and comparative law, with a particular focus on the legal frameworks governing justice and social protection. His work explores the intersection of law and policy, analyzing the effectiveness of legal norms in addressing contemporary human rights challenges. He can be contacted at manitraramalina@asta.co.mg

Afarat Hossain

He holds an LL.B. from the Asia Pacific University in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and is currently an LL.M. candidate at Universitas Indonesia. With two years of experience as a legal assistant at the Dhaka Judge Court, he cultivated strong dedication to law and human rights. He has actively contributed to organisations such as Youth for Human Rights International and the Centre for Human Rights Studies, where he served as an assistant coordinator. Arafat brings hands-on expertise in legal drafting, case management, and digitalisation of legal records, along with a background in human rights advocacy and digital marketing. He is committed to leveraging his legal and digital skills to drive meaningful change in a dynamic, growth-oriented environment. arafathossains@gmail.com

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Unpublished Interviews

- INT-01. Woman accused of witchcraft, interviewed at Gambaga Camp, Online June 25, 2025.
- INT-02. Woman accused of witchcraft, interviewed at Kukuo Camp, Online June 25, 2025.
- INT-03. Tindana (traditional priest), interviewed at Gambaga, Online June 26, 2025.
- INT-04. ActionAid Ghana Field Officer, interviewed at Tamale, Online June 26, 2025.
- INT-05. CHRAJ Representative, interviewed at Accra, Online June 26, 2025.

INT-06. Human Rights Lawyer, interviewed at Accra, Online June 27, 2025.

INT-07. Local Imam, interviewed at Salaga, Online June 27, 2025.

INT-08. Member of Parliament, interviewed at Accra, Online June 27, 2025.