

LAUNCH EVENT OF THE BASELINE STUDY REPORT ON ACCESS TO JUSTICE AND GENDER BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST ELDERLY WOMEN ALLEGED AS WITCHES IN GHANA

KEYNOTE SPEECH & LAUNCH OF THE BASELINE STUDY REPORT –

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INTRODUCTION

- In September 2021, CHRAJ in collaboration with Crossroads International instituted a project titled, “Access to Justice Project on Gender Based Violence Against Elderly Women Alleged as Witches in Ghana”.
- The main objective of the project is to accelerate efforts towards access to justice through the prevention and reduction of gender-based violence (GBV), increased knowledge and better access to justice for survivors.
- As part of the project, a baseline study has been conducted in the East Mamprusi and Yendi municipalities where the Gambaga and Nyani witches’ camps are located.

CONTEXT

- **Highlights of GBV in Ghana** - Women and girls face varying forms of abuse/violence in Ghana, which can be attributed to deep seated patriarchal systems coupled with socio-cultural and religious practices and beliefs. Instances of these GBV against women/girls in Ghana include;

- Violence against elderly women alleged as witches
 - Child, early and forced marriages
 - Female genital mutilation
 - Inhumane widowhood rites
 - Rape/Defilement (*38.2% of women aged 15-19, 40.4% of women aged 20-24, and 38.3% of women aged 30–39 reported having experienced at least one act of sexual violence according to the Ghana 2016 survey on domestic violence*)
 - Sexual harassment
- **Witchcraft allegation & GBV in Ghana** - The abuse of elderly women accused of witchcraft is one of the most silent, yet prevalent GBV committed against women in Ghana.
 - Although witchcraft accusations occur around the country, it is prevalent in the Northern, North-East and Savannah Regions of Ghana.
- **Human rights violations suffered by alleged witches:**
 - From the Baseline Study Report, the following rights of alleged witches and children that accompany them to the alleged witches' camps are violated:
the right to health, education, food, shelter, movement, freedom from torture, discrimination, stigmatization, association, liberty, and safety.
 - Specifically, these elderly women alleged as witches suffer verbal and physical assault, discrimination, stigmatization, disinheritance, isolation and banishment from their families and communities and threats to their lives (*e.g., 90-year-old Akua Denteh was beaten to death in broad daylight at Kafaba on 23rd July 2020*)

- Though the alleged witch camps provide safety for these elderly women, they were not ideal for human habitation (*e.g., leaking roofs, lack of adequate food etc*)
- Also, these elderly women face challenges in accessing justice (both social and legal) due to socio-cultural constraints and/or proximity to the state agencies they could seek redress from.
- The phenomenon of witchcraft allegations and associated GBV violates various International Human Rights Instruments Ghana is party to such as:
 - ✓ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (*e.g., Article 3 – right to life, liberty and security of person*)
 - ✓ Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
 - ✓ Convention on the Elimination of All Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
 - ✓ Sustainable Development Goals (*e.g., Goal 2 – zero hunger, Goal 4 – quality education, Goal 5 – gender equality etc.*)

CHRAJ'S Efforts:

CHRAJ, as the national human rights institution in Ghana; has the mandate to promote and protect universal human rights and other freedoms relating to civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. In this regard, the Commission actively works to promote and protect women's rights through:

- The receipt and investigation of cases on women's rights (*e.g., spousal rights, maintenance, violence, witchcraft allegations etc*) and child, early and forced marriages
- Through the Access to Justice Project, the Commission aims to accelerate efforts towards access to justice for elderly women

accused of witchcraft through the prevention and reduction of GBV.

- Prior to this, CHRAJ as part of the Reintegration Committee worked to close down two alleged witches' camps and reintegrated the alleged witches back to their communities.

▪ **Solutions/Critical Issues –**

As duty bearers and stakeholders gathered here today, we all have a significant role to play in preventing witchcraft allegations and associated human rights violations, as well as in ensuring access to justice for women and children experiencing this atrocity.

- The Constitution (1992) provides for protection for women against all forms of discrimination and for their inclusion into mainstream economic development of Ghana. Yet many elderly women suffer violence and torture due to witchcraft allegations.
- The Criminal Offences (Amendment) Bill 2021 a Bi-partisan private members bill sponsored by both Majority Leader Hon. Osei Kyei-Mensah Bonsu and the Minority Leader Hon. Haruna Iddrisu and three other Members of Parliament which seeks to proscribe the practice of witchcraft allegations with accompanying criminal sanctions for all involved in this atrocious and dehumanising practice needs the commendation and support of all of us gathered. The Commission calls on the Attorney-General and Minister of Justice Hon. Godfred Dame and the Rt. Honourable Speaker of Parliament Albert Sumani Alban Bagbin to demonstrate political commitment to access to justice for these elderly women alleged as wiches by the swift passage of the Bill as soon as possible. It is confident hope that H.E the President of the Republic of Ghana Nana Addo-Dankwa

Akufo Addo to swiftly assent to the Bill when passed by Parliament. All of us gathered at this launch event must also work assiduously in supporting advocacy for the passage of this bill into law.

- There is the need for targeted public education by CHRAJ and NCCE, in the various communities where witchcraft allegations are rampant in order to educate people against the practice and to encourage reporting of such incidences to relevant state agencies (*Ghana Police Service, CHRAJ, Office of the Attorney General, Ghana Legal Aid Commission, Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit of the Ghana Police Service etc*).
- Institutions for redress such as the Ghana Police Service, must visibly establish their presence (Police report centres) in these communities.
- Ghana Health Service needs to establish CHP compounds at the various alleged witches' camps as these women have to travel distances to access healthcare.
- Also, Ghana Education Service must ensure that the schools in the alleged witch camps are well resourced with the necessary school supplies and enough teachers to ensure quality education for children at the camps.

LAUNCH OF BASELINE STUDY REPORT

- This baseline report contributes to the knowledge of key factors that results in the occurrence of violence against women accused of witchcraft by providing a evidence-based reference for future policy actions.

WAY FORWARD/CONCLUSION

- As relevant stakeholders (CHRAJ, NCCE, Department of Social Welfare, Legal Aid Commission, Ghana Police Service/DOVVSU, Office of the Attorney General's), we have a role to play in ensuring the prevention of witchcraft allegation and access to justice for elderly women experiencing these human rights violations
- In May 2022, CHRAJ intends to use this baseline report for further targeted programmes such as capacity building workshops for Community Gender Equality Champions and other relevant actors in Gambaga and Yendi. All partners present here are encouraged to use the baseline report for further activities at their institutional level the Baseline Study Report on Access to Justice and Gender Based Violence Against Elderly Women in Ghana.
- More importantly, there should be effective collaboration among state actors to ensure that cases of witchcraft allegations are reported to the relevant state agencies and justice served.
- On this note, I have the honor and privilege on behalf of all stakeholders of this project to declare the Baseline Study Report on Access to Justice and Gender Based Violence Against Elderly Women in Ghana duly launched.

I thank you all

