

Witches' Camps in Northern Ghana: Are They Safe for the Inmates? – A Qualitative Study on the Psycho-Social Conditions of Alleged Witches in Some Witches' Camps in Northern Ghana

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Abstract Witchcraft and associated accusations are a disturbing feature of a lesser-known form of violence to which women can be subjected to in some areas of the world, most especially Africa. There have been media reports about the deplorable condition of women living in witches' camps in Ghana. This study examined the state of women perceived as witches, particularly their psycho-social and health condition. Purposive sampling technique was used to select eight participants perceived as witches at Kukuo witch's camp. The study approach was qualitative with an interview and observation guides as a data collection tools. There were also three focused group discussions in each community from which the witches came from. Again, four key informant interviews from relevant actors who have in-depth knowledge in the area were conducted. The information obtained from the participants was categorized based on themes as it emerged and which are important to the description of the phenomenon. From the study, women perceived as witches are exposed to deplorable social and environmental conditions with high health risk and low economic statuses associated with old age. These beliefs and practices tend to interfere with their rights in respective communities. The alleged witches claimed they were innocent and were 'cleansed', however, due to stigma and fear of fresh attacks from their previous communities, they chose to remain in the camp. It is recommended that women's groups must be strengthened, and people should be educated on the rights and responsibilities of citizens, and financial institutions must readily give loans to these women. Prompt renewal of the Health Insurance Identification Cards should be done to take care of the health needs of residents.

Keywords Witchcraft accusation, Women, Northern Ghana, Witches camp

1. Background

The belief in witchcraft is a common phenomenon in African societies and is a feature of traditional African religion. This is rooted in belief in the existence of mystical forces or powers that can be trapped by human beings who have the knowledge to do so for good or ill (Azongo, 2014). According to Adinkrah, (2004), a witch is someone who can use his/her power to cause misfortunes, death, problems in relationships, lack of progress in life and even business losses.

Farmer (1990) has indicated that one of the contributing factors to witchcraft accusations may require an understanding "structural violence" of poverty and social inequality. In a similar vein, witchcraft is seen as a way of

interpreting and constructing modernity when it comes to solving conflict and misfortune (Sanders 2003). In this regard, Stewart and Strathern (2003) have indicated, witchcraft as a phenomenon have been studied both as an explanatory theory and as a means of social organization.

Be that as it may, there is a general belief that, there may exist good and bad witches. The essential difference between a good witch and a bad witch is that the good one counters the effects of the bad one. The alleged witches are supposedly full of jealousy and are believed to use some magical powers to harm others through supernatural means using the devil as a conduit (Kathleen, Jennifer, & Erica, 2016).

Around the world, a wide range of doctrines and religions, including Christianity, Islam and indigenous religions, hold beliefs in possession by supernatural good or bad spirits (Hanson & Ruggieiro, 2013). The role of the churches in dealing with witchcraft accusations cannot be ignored (Yidana, 2014; Van Eck Duymaer van Twist, 2009). Aleksandra, Vladimir, and Željko (2015) have indicated that

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Received: Sep. 7, 2020; Accepted: Sep. 30, 2020; Published: Oct. 15, 2020

Published online at <http://journal.sapub.org/sociology>

Islam discusses Satan's in the plural; the Satan's are generally incarnated as Jinn and Shaya tin. The latter spirits are generally considered to be responsible for illness and madness that is attributed to satanic possession. Also, the number of women who suffer abuse, stigma and exclusion in Sub-Saharan Africa, which sometimes tend fatal as a result of witchcraft accusation are uncountable. In recent years, the printed press, television, radio and internet sited in most parts of Africa regularly reports shocking news on the violent acts against women alleged to be witches (Bekoe, 2016).

It is worth noting that the belief related to witchcraft is not necessarily problematic in itself, what makes it challenging is when it involves accusations that often results into emotional, physical and psychological, abuse, sometimes with fatal outcomes such as death of the accused. Victims in most instances are women. This seem to find expression in Grindal (1972) who echoed society's notion that female (witches) are by nature destructive and evil, while male (wizards) perpetrate fewer evil deeds with their witchcraft.

There is common understanding among scholars in the field of anthropology and human rights law, that suggest that witchcraft accusation is a gendered practice that tend to be bias towards women as a group (Drucker-Brown 1993; Goody 1970; ActionAid 2013; Adinkrah & Adhikari 2014). The use of the term 'witches' for female and not 'wizards' for male across the literature again shows how bias it is towards women and how women are usually the target of witchcraft accusations.

In most cases, the accusers are usually family members or revivalist Pentecostal churches leaders/prophets (Cahn, 2006). These new churches are generally set up by preachers based on personal mystical revelations. Preachers are not necessarily at the source of accusations, but often merely confirm accusation by the family who allegedly faces disruption in their lives, thereby asking a preacher to justify their misfortune. In situations where families turn to churches to get themselves rid of their misfortunes. In doing so, they show their genuine belief in witchcraft and in the pastor's ability to interpret the mystical word (Fox et al., 2010).

In Ghana, the issues of witchcraft and witch camps have recently attracted a lot of public attention, with most Ghanaians holding the belief that people accused of being witches and wizards in the camps do not fair treatment as far as their freedoms and fundamental human rights concerned.

As soon as people are accused, the accusation becomes a label which eventually turns into a stigma. The objective of the study was therefore to assess the psycho-social effects on women perceived as witches in the Kukuo witch camp.

1.1. Labelling and Stigma Theories

Labelling theory begins with the assumption that no act is intrinsically criminal; rather, criminality is established by those in power through the formulation of laws and the interpretation of those laws by law enforcement agencies. To

understand the nature of deviance itself, we must first understand why some people are tagged with a deviant label and others are not. Those who enforce the boundaries of proper and acceptable behaviour are the very people who provide the source of labelling. By applying labels to people, and in the process creating categories of deviance, these people are reinforcing the power structure of society.

This study, therefore, used the above theory to find out about the situation in Kukuo witches camp by providing answers to the issue of criminality. Again, it will help in finding out whether there are groupings based on being a witch or not as a way of stigmatization with a certain attribute that others see as unacceptable. The criteria used by community members to label someone as a witch was done based on the above theories in order to find answers based on the research questions of the study.

Stigma theory was propounded by Ervin Goffman (1963). In his opinion, shortcomings and handicaps are discrepancies that are so discrediting that they set some people apart from others. People who are stigmatized supposedly possesses features that their societies see as (Westbrook et al., 1992). Stigma starts with the identification of the person(s) and the supposed characteristics seen in the persons behaviour (Gilmore & Somerville, 1994). Dominant cultural beliefs according to Link and Phelan (2001), also contribute into linking the perceived persons to the undesirable characteristics. This qualify such individuals to be isolated where the labels such as "us" and "them" are created. Once they succeed in isolating them, they will then be considered as bad, to lay the foundation for them to be despised and avoided (Campbell & Gibbs, 2009). This may lead to status loss with its attendant discriminatory tendencies and outcomes (Link and Phelan, 2001; Yang et al., 2007). Once an individual experience social disapproval, it sets the stage for stigma and stigma theory (Westbrook et al., 1992).

2. Methodology

2.1. Study Setting

The study area was Nanumba South District (NSD) situated about 211km southeast of the regional capital Tamale, with Wulensi as the administrative capital. The district has an estimated land area of about 1.300sqkm. It is further divided into four (4) health sub-districts namely: Lugni, Nakpayili, Pudua, Wulensi. It has a total projected population of 64,577 (projected from 2000 population and housing census). The district shares boundaries with Nanumba North district to the north and west, Zabzugu District and the Republic of Togo to the east, Nkwanta South district to the south-east, the East Gonja district to the south-west and Kpandai district to the south. It has one hundred and nineteen (119) communities with four hundred and thirteen (413) community- based surveillance (CBS) volunteers and Community- based agents (CBA) who assist in carrying out health activities at the community level.

2.2. Study Design

The qualitative research approach was used as the study design. The main advantage in using qualitative research is that it provides a textual description of lived experience of people within a given phenomenon or situation, including its effectiveness in obtaining information that are culturally specific in a given population (Mack et al., 2005).

2.3. Study Population and Sampling

The study population include women perceived as witches at Kukuo witches' camp. The study employed a purposive sampling technique to select the participants. Thus, a sample size of eight alleged witches in the Kukuo witches' camp was selected.

2.4. Data Collection and Analysis

The data was collected using the semi-structured interview and observation guides as tools to conduct face to face interviews and observations. A focused group discussion was organized. Again, an in-depth interview was conducted with four key informants with in-depth knowledge in the study area including the traditional authorities and Non-Governmental Organizations working in the camp. With the observation, the study actively looked at the camp; where the women sleep, prepare their meals, accessibility to social amenities etc. this was to give some clues on the effects of the labelling and how they cope with their daily demands of life. Data were analysed using content analysis where themes and sub-themes were formed to guide the discussion.

2.5. Ethical Consideration

The protocol regarding this study was presented to the University for Development Studies Ethics Committee for approval. Verbal informed consent was sought from all study participants before the commencement of the interview. Study participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty. Information collected from the study participants were treated with the utmost confidentiality.

3. Results

3.1. Demographic Characteristics of Women Perceived as Witches

From the study, the majority of the respondent were between the ages of 71-80, followed by the ages between 61-70, while just a few were of the ages between 50-60. The results indicate that majority of the respondent which is usually the aged with less energy in them requiring a lot of attention from their people were those perceived as witches. Again, 80% of them had children aged 5-10 years, while the remaining 20% had children aged 1-5 years. In terms of religion, 90% were Muslims with the remaining 10% being

traditional people. It again emerged that 63% were widowed that is married but lost their husbands before they were accused of witchcraft. Others got divorced (25%) when they were accused of being witches. Lastly, 12% of reported been single. The occupation of the Respondents targeted for this study, who have accused witches at the Kukuo witches camp was assessed and the findings show that most respondents had no form of occupation or business (90%), while a few were petty traders before the accusation of witchcraft came in. Out of the eight (8) respondents interviewed, the majority came from Nakpali, in the Zabzugu district and Kpeni in the Sagnerigu municipality, both of the Northern region of Ghana. The rest came from Yendi (13%), Savelugu (13%) and Tamale (13%).

3.2. Source of Witchcraft Accusation

The study tried to find out about the concept of witchcraft and the causes leading to women () being labelled as witches. The study found that it usually starts as a rumour and gradually spread throughout the community. Sometimes it takes years even without the knowledge of the accused. Participant 1, who said that she felt being avoided by her closed relatives and friends opined.

About a year before I was finally accused, I felt that certain people were avoiding me; even including my closed relatives.

Processes involved in acquiring a label is opaque. It is often difficult for the alleged witches to know where, when and who starts the rumour about them being witches; the only signals they get is when their friends and close relations start avoiding them. Others acquire the status by virtue of the fact that witchcraft runs in their families. This means that most these things may be with people for long, waiting for someone to trigger the process.

Old age again appears to play an important role in brewing the perception of witchcraft. From the study, accusations come about when someone dies mysteriously. If a young man dies in an unexplained manner, people will usually want to raise suspicion and ascribe possible causes of such deaths. The presence of an old woman in the house is enough to label her as the culprit. Participants 3 espoused in her submission.

My husband died and I moved to stay with my brother who also died a year later; the accusations started when a boy died in the community. I together with two other old women were accused of being behind those deaths.

Accusations normally come from closed relatives. sometimes it is the accused woman's husband who will raise the accusation and other family members will endorse it. As participant 6 put it;

Accusations started when my son, the firstborn died through a road accident. After the final funeral rites of my son, some members of my husband's family, some of the community members, the village chief and his elders decided to do soothsaying to find out the cause of the

accident leading to the death of my son. I told them I wasn't in support of the idea because as Muslims, it is against our religion and that didn't go down well with them. I was then summoned by the chief and his elders and accused of bewitching my son, once I refused for them to carry out the soothsaying.

Participants also indicated that widowhood is the main factor as majority of them (7 out of the total 8 respondents) opined that changes in one's position in society are not without challenges some which are vulnerability to witchcraft accusations.

3.3. Pronouncing Someone a Witch

The study revealed that, depending on the situation and the community in question, there are several ways by which witches are declared and this is unconventional. Sometimes the accused may call for a probe to exonerate herself of the accusation, or the supposed victim or a family member could ask for a probe to confirm their assertion. If the situation is life-threatening; either a terminal illness or an accident, the supposed victim or the family member may want to save the situation by confirming the accusation to demand a cure or remedy.

The accuser or accused, depending on the situation may report to the chief palace, chief priest or a shrine regarding the issue. In all cases, the issue will end up at the shrine, if the accused denies the accusation; otherwise, the matter ends at the chief's palace and the required punishment is meted out to the accused. As a focus group discussant opined;

Usually, when a child is not able to sleep and it is believed that he is being pursued by a witch, his parents report the matter and it is taken up to the chief's palace for redress.

3.4. Participants' Status and Witchcraft Accusation

Majority of the participants who were accused of witchcraft had weak financial capabilities and low societal status at the time of the accusations. A lot of them were also old, widowed, single or barren and had no social support at their disposal as was espoused by participant 8.

At old age, we are very weak and vulnerable to many things. They look at your state and accuse you as being a witch. When the young boys attack you, you cannot fight back because you are very fragile and weak.

From the focus group discussions there is no justification for accusing anybody of illegality if there is no evidence to back it. People aren't perfect in our behaviours and in living our lives. Respondents to the study denied being either deviants or immoral in society as to warrant any of the accusations levelled against them. Participant 8 indicated;

I don't think I have behaved in any way to warrant this accusation. I have lived life to the best of my ability and have contributed my quota to raising my children and to leading responsible life in society. If this is my reward for that, fine.

3.5. Effects of Witchcraft Accusation on the Health of the Accused

For most of the old women living in a community with the continuous nightmare of being beaten, stoned or even lynched is a terrifying experience. The fear of abuse and death, psychological and emotional trauma may push these accused women from their own homes and communities to witches' camps. These experiences are human rights issues because they infringe the rights of these accused women.

The study assessed how the situation of witchcraft accusation has affected the health-seeking ability of these accused witches and found that there is a clinic in the community and many of the women are registered onto the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS). This was done by NGOs and other benevolent organizations including SONGTABA, Action Aid etc. However, most of them had their NHIS cards expired, and thereby making it un-useable for the purpose of securing health. As participant 3 put it.

My health card is expired and the assemblyman for this area took it to renew but was told I have to be present before they can renew it, but am very weak and old.

The study also observed that some inhabitants of the camp had no NHIS card and could not access orthodox health facilities. Challenged by difficulty in accessing modern health care, some of the alleged witches' use herbal medicine as alternatives. Participant 2 shared her experience.

You see, my son! because I do not have money to do health insurance, I do not visit the Doctani (Doctor) when I am sick. I simply seek care from herbalist.

The provision of the traditional medicine is done by the Priest at the camp, and sometimes relatives of the accused persons. As participant 7 indicated;

I am currently experiencing some pains in my whole body. The chief priest prepared some concoction for me yesterday for use...

The study observed that a number of the accused witches did not look well. They could probably be suffering from Malaria, largely due to environmental conditions. From our observations, the whole camp was bushy with weeds all over, which could breed mosquitoes and other insects and reptiles.

Access to food at the Witch camp

Access to food is a challenge for the majority of the residents at the camp and they indicated that it was very hard for them to eat three times in a day. Those who are with no major issues when it comes to feeding are those whose relatives brought them some food and continuously come to visit them. These people probably were brought by their children to avoid being lynched by tags in their communities. For instance, a participant indicated;

...currently we have no food. Getting enough food is not easy here. ...if I had food items, I would have cooked for myself. For now, I manage with whatever little I get.

In view of the fact that they face these difficulties, some of the relatives who are well to do support them, even though many have expressed that it is often not regular. According to a resident:

“You will not believe that the last time my son visited was a year ago. One good thing here is that colleagues and sometimes the Tindana with enough food support those who have nothing”.

As the respondent asserts, they practice the principle of sharing so that everyone will survive. With the support of the chief priest, they are able to eat to survive.

They were delighted in the way the chief priest responds to their feeding needs. However, some claim the help is not without pressure on the priest. The chief priest, they claim sometimes arrange to send some of them to his farm, especially during planting and harvesting periods to assist, to be able to raise some food for their upkeep.

As a respondent put it

“...we do support at the farm of the priest to supplement the household food requirement”.

Relationship with former communities

The study sought information regarding the relationship between the accused witches and their community members, as to whether they still have cordial relations. It found that most people in the alleged witch's communities, including family members, detest these women and have no form of relationship with them since the accusations and chasing them out of the communities.

“Nobody in my family even wants to talk to me again. They think I am going to harm them if they relate with me”. A respondent indicated.

As stated earlier, most of the accusers tend to be family relations of these alleged witches and so these accusations end up marring the relationship existing between the accusers and the accused and most of their close relations.

“For me, I have not forgiven them, and I will never forgive them till we meet on the Day of Judgment when God Almighty shall judge between us.” Indicated a respondent.

3.6. Access to Existing Economic Activities

The alleged witches at the Kukuo camp were also questioned about their engagement in any economic activities before and after they moved to the camp. It was found out that most of them had no business and did not engage in any economic activity before they were accused of witchcraft.

A few of them were doing petty trading, including charcoal selling and cotton twinning. But after they moved to the witches' camp, they no longer engaged in any form of economic activity apart from the farming assistance they render to the chief priest mentioned earlier. Some of those who are a bit strong do go to render labour on people's farms for a fee.

“When I am free, not sick, I do go to people's farms to render services, especially during harvesting, so that they can give me something; Either in a form of money or foodstuff”. A respondent said.

3.7. Access to Spiritual Needs

Regarding religious or spiritual needs, the study revealed that the alleged witches have no problem worshipping God. Most of them are Muslims and there are several mosques around that they can worship in and nobody prevents them from worshipping at these mosques.

“...as for this place, we can pray whichever way we want, nobody worries us. ... In my previous community, nobody even wanted to stand by me when we are praying in the mosques”.

Most respondents feel abandoned by their most loved relatives. Some are their husbands, daughters; sons etc who they say have abandoned them because they perceive they want to avoid danger from these alleged witches.

“My whole family has abandoned me. Nobody cares about me, nobody asked of me. I have nobody now”. Said a respondent.

“Nobody respects me. They rather fear me. Who am I to be feared? I have nothing; I am nobody.” Said a respondent.

3.8. Housing Conditions

The Kukuo community has some few social amenities, including electricity and a primary school. If one moves towards the east, towards the stream, a giant signpost is mounted to welcome to the witch camp. These are buildings that are not fenced. In terms of the structure, the camps lack beautiful buildings as compared to the main community.

In view of the fact that they went there as individuals, single rooms or huts are put up for them. About three to four of these rooms forms a compound structure. Others live in single isolated houses within the area all of which are built using mud and thatch.

The chief priest indicated how these rooms are put up;

As people in this community, what we do is that we organize communal labour to put up these huts for them to live in, because most of them come here without their families.

Often times, family of the alleged witches are expected to build their own huts. However, some relatives of alleged witches were claimed to be unwilling to do this. Thus, an old hut could be renovated and allocated to new resident or existing persons. One difficulty identified was the fact that the thatch roofs in most of the rooms leaks, exposing them to all manner of bad weather conditions. According to a Respondent,

‘It is very difficult to sleep anytime it is raining, because the whole place is water’.

These attitudes by relatives of alleged witches sometimes put unnecessary pressure on the traditional authority since, in some cases, had to re-roof these rooms. From the study, it was observed that benevolent organizations also assist in renovating or putting up new the rooms. Organizations like Songtaba have been very instrumental in this regard, however, they they also sometimes face challenges due to inadequate funds.

Many of the accused persons are always appreciative they found themselves out of danger and, constant fear.

“hmmm, my son, I am comfortable in this room. I do not live in fear in this room.....nobody can come around to knock on my door and accuse me of killing his/her so and so”. A male respondent highlighted.

4. Discussion

4.1. The Witchcraft Accusation

Witchcraft accusations usually start as a rumour and gradually spread throughout the community. It appears that it sometimes takes years even without the knowledge of the accused. One important thing gathered is that victims often feel being avoided by their closed relatives and friends. Several of these studies have been analysed in Northern Ghana as far as witchcraft accusations is concerned (Tait 1967; Tait, 1963; Drucker-Brown, 1993). In this regard, there is often a distinction made between legitimate and illegitimate forms of aggression especially between male wizards whose standing in the community was enhanced by suspicion of witchcraft and female witches who were hated and punished severely. Among the Gonja, it is being a wizard or a witch is based on gender because wizards are expected to protect their dependants from evil attacks, while witches kill for meat, for spite or caprice. Tait (1967:155f) explored the belief and practice of sorcery among the Konkomba and indicated that ‘they use magical medicines to procure the death of a selected victim.’

Once an individual is accused, she can call for a probe to exonerate herself of the accusation, or the supposed victim or a relative could also ask for a probe to confirm their assertion. If the situation involves a life and death situation; the supposed victim or the family would want to save the situation by confirming the accusation to demand a cure or remedy. The Accuser or Accused, depending on the situation will report to the chief priest or a shrine regarding the issue. As reported by Baba Iddrisu Musah (2020) at the Gnani witches camp in the Northern Region of Ghana, the processes involved in the identification, once an individual enters the camps as an accused, it becomes the sole responsibility of the chief priest to identify and declare an accused person innocent or guilty. Thereafter, they provide shelter, health care and basic food needs when necessary. In the opinion of Turner (2002), allegations of witchcraft typified breaches of customary regularity of social relations which subsequently resulted in a crisis, redressive action and then re-integration or recognition of schism.

In terms of the status of the accused, most of them had weak financial capabilities and low societal status at the time of the accusations. A lot of them were also old, widowed, single or barren and had no social support at their disposal. Scholars have explained witchcraft accusation in relations to gender constructions and power struggles between males and females (see Federici 2010).

Victims of witchcraft accusation are often subjected to detrimental accusations and beatings, and often times they live in constant fear in their own homes. The fear of abuse and death, psychological and emotional traumas push these accused women from their own homes and communities to a witch camp (Gibbs, 2015) which tend to provide security for them, even though some may see the camps in a different light. These experiences are human rights issues because they infringe upon the rights of these accused women.

Since many of the people in the camp are aged, access to food often becomes a challenge with many complaining of how difficult it was to afford three meals in a day. Those who are with no major issues when it comes to feeding are those whose relatives brought them some food or other items and continuously come to visit them. These people probably were brought by their children to void being lynched by tags in their communities.

With regard to relationship with their former communities, members, including family members, detest these women and have no form of relationship with them after the accusations and subsequently chasing them out of the communities. Turner (2002) used the concept of social drama to illustrate cases of witchcraft accusation among the Ndembu people of Zambia (then Northern Rhodesia). He argued that, as social processes, accusations mirrored tendencies and structures that were in operation in the communities. Turner observed that by making such accusations, these latent tensions and conflicts became manifest.

A few of them were into petty trading, including charcoal selling and cotton twinning. But after they moved to the witches' camp, they no longer are engaged in any form of economic activity apart from the farming assistance they render to the chief priest mentioned earlier. Some of those who are a bit strong do go to render labour on people's farms for a fee. Based on her study of Tonga in Southern Zambia, Colson (2000, 341) attributed such imputations to new forms of power relations that focused on adult male members of the populations: “In illness or other difficulties, suspicion and then divination usually point to an older male kinsman, to a rival for a job or other resource”. She argued that men, unlike women, had a strong incentive to acquire the medicine to advance economically and to protect themselves and their economic exploits.

Residents of the camp are housed in single round rooms or huts. Several of these huts constitute a compound structure. Those who are not found in compound structures live in single isolated houses within the area. The rooms are built with mud and roofed with thatch. Once accused persons opt to remain in the camp, a piece of land to put up a hut is

usually allocated to them by the chief priest. This is different from what happens at the Gambaga camp, as reported by Bekoe, (2017); who concludes that the Gambaga Traditional Council takes responsibility for catering for the housing needs of the accused witches.

5. Conclusions

The study realized that certain beliefs and practices pose a threat to the lives of women (especially elderly women) in our communities today. These beliefs and practices tend to infringe the rights of women in our communities. One of these is the belief in witchcraft. This belief in witchcraft in African communities is usually followed with witchcraft accusations especially when calamity strikes. These accusations are accompanied by insults, physical assaults and emotional tortures. Those who succeed in running to the witch camp face other difficulties.

Although they were running to a better place for peace and safety, they are met with many challenges. Most of these women sleep on the bare floor because their rooms are not concreted and congested. They have no doors to protect them from harmful reptiles and insects. The wider communities still ostracize them and shun their company. However, some religious groups like Muslims, Christians and African religious people find ways of making their lives better. They endeavour to provide food, shelter, clothing, emotional care and financial assistance for them. Religious bodies, government authorities, as well as private companies and individuals, should come together and find practical ways of solving the many challenges of these women and children who live their lives at the witch camp of Kukuo.

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