

## **Consortium Press Statement on Lynching of Elderly Women in Gusiiland**

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The lynching of four older women in Kisii County on allegations of witchcraft is an abominable, discriminatory, unjust, dehumanizing, and deeply oppressive, trend that largely targets old and poor widows in Gusiiland. While some old men have been victims of the horrid practice of “witch burning” in Gusiiland, women – particularly poor, old widows - are predominantly targeted. We must work together to stop this grotesque practice with a fierce sense of urgency. As a consortium of the 22 organizations listed below, we have united to call for an urgent change in response to these events.

On 17<sup>th</sup> October 2021, four elderly women from Mokona Village, Marani Ward in Kisii County were lynched on allegations of being witches. The four women (Sindege Mayaka, Jemima Nyang’ate Mironga, Sindege Nyakwara Masaku and Agnes Moraa Ototo) were suspected of having bewitched a form four student. According to police records, the student was unable to speak, prompting the villagers to initiate a process of identifying the alleged witches.

Witchcraft accusations and the resulting extreme violence meted on women suspected of being witches are on the increase in Gusiiland, and other parts of the country - including Kilifi. This barbaric behavior is usually sanctioned by some members of the communities where these acts are rampant. There are many reports of very close family members (including women) colluding to instigate this violence, harass, intimidate, maim, and even murder widows by hacking them to pieces and/or burning them alive.

One of the “witch burning” victims of Sunday, October 17, 2021 had buried her husband two weeks before she met her brute death at the hands of by a rowdy, angry, and blood-thirsty mob that had labeled her a witch!

Statistics indicate that about six people face violence every month on suspicion of being witches in Gusiiland. An analysis of most of the “witch” burning cases shows a linkage between these horrendous acts and resource conflicts in the social, political, and economic arena. Most of the victims are widows whose accusers are relatives from the families of their deceased husbands. Witchcraft accusations against widows are traceable to land scarcity, greed, selfishness, and misogyny. Even where there was no conflict in the lifetime of the husbands, the accusations arise immediately upon the death of their husbands, with families ganging up against the widows and

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accusing them of witchcraft, emboldened by the community attitude and social stigma associated with witchcraft.

Once these widows are labelled and isolated, they become easy prey. As soon as the witchcraft accusation is dangled at them, it is only a matter of time before a “victim” of their witchcraft is identified and they are lynched. Consequences of lynching include the stigmatization of the family of the “witch” and forcible removal of the “witches” families from the area only for the accusers to appropriate themselves of the land.

This needs to stop. The lynching of older women, and in some cases older men has led to social exclusion, victimization, and a repeat of heinous acts against the surviving families. The practice of “witch burning” has led to slow economic growth that is characterized by unproductive/illegal behaviors such as destruction of property, forced migration from rural to urban areas, homelessness, poverty, and conflicts among community members. The isolation of older men and women leads to untold suffering to their families and adds to this non-productivity.

In many cases, when widows with children – especially minors – are murdered, their husbands’ family members disinherit them by grabbing their parents’ land and other resources. These children often end up on the streets where they are extremely vulnerable to human rights violations of all kinds, such as human trafficking, child labor, physical, emotional, sexual, other forms of violence, and even murder.

These killings that have been happening in Gusiiland for many decades are NOT a tradition or cultural practice of the Abagusii people but acts of extreme violence driven by greed, selfishness, misogyny, and deeply held patriarchal assumptions and values that devalue girls’ and women’s lives. Traditionally, widows were protected from harm by the Abagusii people.

These killings which target widows are also a symptom of deeper patriarchal beliefs by some people within the Gusii community that girls and women should not inherit nor own land and other property. The broader question of girls’ and women’s right to inherit land and other property from their parents cannot be ignored within the context of widow killings. While most women in Gusiiland gain access to land through marriage, some community members who believe that women do not deserve to own property resort to dispossessing them by killing them.

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Unfortunately, older people are also susceptible to accusations of witchcraft in instances where they suffer from dementia, Alzheimer's or Parkinson's diseases. Older persons need care not accusation!

What is of even greater concern is that the perpetrators of such illegal and heinous acts get away scot-free. This emboldens would be perpetrators and encourages the public to abuse, violate and kill old people in the most inhumane ways imaginable with impunity. Whereas we recognize that the Inspector General has ensured the arrest and detention of four individuals in the most recent case in Gusiiland, we:-

- a) Demand that the National Police Service officers undertake a thorough and speedy investigation into the killing of the four women in Gusiiland.
- b) Further demand that the Office of the DPP institutes proceedings to prosecute in accordance with the law, those found to have been involved in the murder of these four women.
- c) Call on the Cabinet Secretary in charge of internal security to ensure that the safety of older persons is guaranteed in Gusiiland, Kilifi and other areas where this practice is rampant.
- d) Call on the Cabinet Secretary for Health to create awareness on mental illnesses affecting older persons to stem the stigma associated with such illnesses.

Call on the National Land Commission of Kenya to investigate and resolve all cases of land disputes and other property injustices in Gusiiland, Kilifi, and other places, where old people (women and men) have been meted with violence and/or murdered, and their land/property taken away from them, their surviving spouse and/or children, illegally.

Call on the National Land Commission of Kenya and National Gender and Equality Commission to jointly work together to ensure the realization of girls' and women's' land and property rights through legitimate succession and inheritance processes; as stipulated in the 2010 Constitution of Kenya, instead of being discriminated against, violated, marginalized, and murdered when their fathers or husbands die.

- e) Call on leaders at all levels of the Gusiiland, Kilifi, and other areas where this is happening, to courageously speak out against this practice and work with community members, civil society,

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government, and other partners to enable the necessary transformative change that will end the killing of widows and older people in general.

f) Firmly urge the Government of Kenya to ratify with speed and implement the AU Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Older Persons in Africa that clearly provides for the protection of the property, land and inheritance rights of older women. This Protocol in Article 8, prohibits abuse from harmful traditional practices and specifically calls on governments in Article 8(2) to take measures to eliminate harmful traditional practices including witchcraft accusations which affect the welfare, health, life, and dignity of older people, particularly older women.

### **Signed by:**

1. Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC)
2. Open Society Initiative for East Africa (OSIEA)
3. HelpAge International
4. The Uongozi wa Utu Initiative (TUWUI)
5. Tabaka Ward Uongozi wa Utu CBO
6. Federation of Women Groups
7. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women)
8. Interreligious Council of Kenya (IRCK)
9. Federation of Female Lawyers (FIDA)
10. Coalition on Violence Against Women (COVAW)
11. Ageing Concern Foundation (ACF)
12. Kenyan Aged people Require Information, Knowledge & Advancement (KARIKA)
13. Kenya Diaspora Alliance-USA
14. Mwanyagitinge USA
15. Kibera Day Care Center for the Elderly (KDCCE)
16. Women for Dementia Africa
17. Coalition for Grassroots Women Rights Defenders
18. Young Women's Leadership Institute (YWLI)
19. Feminists for Peace Rights and Justice
20. Echo Network Africa (ENAFRICA)

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21. Community Advocacy and Awareness Trust (CRAWN)
22. Kibera Women for Peace and Fairness

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