

## Burkina Faso moves to support banished women accused of witchcraft

The government plans to offer legal, financial and psycho-social help to Burkinabe women facing witchcraft charges, but some say the measures do not go far enough

By: Brahim Ouédraogo



Centre Delwindé in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, houses women chased out of their homes following allegations of witchcraft. Photograph: Patrick Delahanty/Flickr

It is called "the bearing of the body". In Burkina Faso, when a death is deemed suspicious, a group of men carry the corpse through the community, believing the deceased will guide them towards the person responsible for the death. The accused – almost always women – are then chased out of their homes. According to the ministry for social action and national solidarity, about 600 women across the country have fallen victim to this practice. Most have found precarious shelter at one of 11 centres around the country, run by NGOs.

"It's generally women who are accused of witchcraft – when it's men, they are able to move to other villages," said Gérard Zongo of Commission Justice et Paix (CJP), an NGO that has launched a campaign to support women accused of witchcraft.

Burkina Faso recently adopted a plan of action to end the practice of banishing women accused of witchcraft from their homes. Under the plan, to be implemented between now and 2016, the ministry for social action will assume responsibility for victims of this type of social exclusion. Women driven from their

homes will have access to legal and psycho-social support, as well as financial assistance to re-establish their livelihoods.

The plan has been five years in the making, said Boukary Sawadogo, director general of the ministry, because its final drafting was complicated by the sensitivity surrounding witchcraft in the west African country.

"We're not passing judgment on sorcery in Burkina, but we will respond to the facts, which are exclusion and violence," said Sawadogo. "It's a social phenomenon which one cannot simply decree an end to. It's a process that calls for a favourable environment to secure participation by everyone. If the traditional chiefs are not ready, then you'll never achieve it."

Although civil society and human rights organisations welcomed the action plan, they are not entirely satisfied with the government's ambition on the issue.

"Contrary to what many people think, we could quickly put an end to this phenomenon," said Zongo, who directs CJP's programmes against social exclusion. "It calls for clear legislation; for example, we could ban 'the bearing of the body'. The authorities must be more ambitious to achieve the plan's objectives. We feel they are not very proactive."

The plan calls for legal support for women who have been excluded, but to date only one woman has won a case and been reunited with her family.

"It's an excellent thing to have an action plan, but it's still not perfect," said Haridata Dacouré, president of the women's rights NGO Femmes et Droits pour le Développement.

Dacouré believes any approach that attempts simply to punish people who threaten and beat women accused of witchcraft will fail. She points out that such actions are carried out by crowds that are difficult to prosecute, convict and sentence en masse. Instead, she suggests measures that would oblige the head of the community, perhaps even the chief, to pay damages to the victim.

"I'm convinced that when we target the wallets of these people who burn down women's houses, who assault and exclude women like this – when, instead of the government taking care of the victims, we go into their pockets for money to reintegrate people – they'll think more carefully before they act," said Dacouré.

As part of its campaign to support women accused of witchcraft, CJP is organising a series of "solidarity days" intended to end the women's isolation and facilitate their reintegration. The campaign includes the adoption of victims by sponsors; to date, 120 women have been paired with sponsors, who pay them regular visits to help ease their social isolation.

Sister Maria, from Ouagadougou's Centre Delwindé, which was established in 1965 and houses nearly 400 excluded women, said: "We believe that the gravity of the problem needs to be urgently recognised, to raise popular awareness so measures can be taken to avoid so much harm to people whose only crime is lacking the power to defend themselves."

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