

## IN BRIEF

# WITCHCRAFT ACCUSATION AND “CLEANSING” FEMICIDE IN KENYA

## Executive Summary

This technical brief emerges from Kenya’s socio cultural analysis of femicide (UN Women Kenya report, 2026) and examines femicide linked to witchcraft accusations and so called “cleansing” violence as a distinct, geographically concentrated, and highly preventable typology. Evidence from coastal and western counties shows that witchcraft accusations most often directed at older women and widows act as direct triggers for lethal violence, frequently following illness, death, or inheritance disputes. These accusations are commonly used to justify collective attacks and are closely followed by rapid dispossession of land and homesteads, revealing economic motives masked as cultural belief. Survivors and witnesses often report threats in advance, yet responses by chiefs, police, and communities are delayed or dismissive, allowing predictable escalation from rumours to mob violence. Institutional gaps include the absence of a witchcraft risk protocol, weak early protection, unsafe customary forums, and lack of data classification. Preventing witchcraft linked femicide requires recognising accusations as high risk warning signs, enforcing immediate protection and relocation, safeguarding property rights, disrupting harmful norms, and strengthening accountability through county level data and coordinated justice responses.

## 1) Introduction

### Witchcraft accusations as lethal triggers



Kenya’s socio cultural analysis shows that in parts of the Coast and Western regions, witchcraft accusations against mostly older women act as direct precipitating factors for lethal violence that communities rationalise as “cleansing,” often after misfortune (illness, death) or during inheritance tensions. These incidents are commonly followed by rapid dispossession of land and homesteads, indicating economic motives cloaked in cultural justifications. Independent reportage and rights documentation corroborate systematic attacks, displacement, and killings of elderly women in Kilifi/Kwale, with shelters now housing survivors who fled after accusations; advocates consistently link these assaults to land grabbing and inheritance claims rather than purely spiritual beliefs.

## 2) Sociocultural Context

### Beliefs in sorcery and “community cleansing”



In targeted counties, accusations of witchcraft sit within cosmologies that explain misfortune through sorcery and prescribe collective “cleansing” rituals

yet these practices become a social alibi for criminal violence when mobilised against widows or older women. The UN Women study documents how such framings strip the killing of its criminal character, recasting it as a communal act for the public good. Parallel investigations in Kilifi describe ritualised attacks and mass displacement of elders, with advocates noting that as tourism and land values rise, accusations are increasingly instrumentalised to clear claimants from valuable plots.

### Gendered targeting of older women



Victims are overwhelmingly women especially widows or those living alone who lack male protection under patrilineal norms and may practice herbal healing or hold/occupy contested land parcels. The primary study and coastal monitoring show that these women are publicly named, threatened, then attacked by groups including relatives, and that communities often remain silent or complicit. Evidence from church run shelters and human rights groups estimates scores to over 160 deaths in recent years and thousands displaced figures believed to be under counts due to fear, stigma and weak reporting systems.

### 3) Typical Progression of Cases

Across narratives, the escalation pathway is strikingly predictable:

**1** Triggering event (death/illness, boundary dispute, succession tension) -> rumours and whisper campaigns naming an older woman as a witch.

**2** Threats and intimidation (often by relatives seeking land), with reports to chiefs dismissed as “family talk,” thereby normalising imminent harm.

**3** Public labelling -> social abandonment (neighbours refuse help) and collective attack framed as cleansing (beatings, machete attacks, burning).

**3** Post killing dispossession: homestead seized, crops destroyed, land subdivided; survivors/witnesses are warned into silence, cementing impunity and asset transfer.

Rights monitors at the Coast describe this same trajectory, noting that “cleansing” rites and clan gatherings frequently precede violence and coincide with spikes in property disputes and real estate speculation.

### 4) Case Evidence — Kilifi and Bungoma

**Kilifi (Ganze):** The primary study documents a case in which an older woman repeatedly reported explicit threats to the chief; she was later dragged from her kitchen and killed by relatives accusing her of sorcery, after which her land was taken and her daughter intimidated for pursuing justice. Coastal reportage details similar attacks, with shelters (e.g., Kaya Godoma, Nyumba ya Wazee) receiving elderly women expelled following accusations; advocates emphasise the property motive behind many cases.

**Bungoma:** Narratives from Western Kenya show widows killed amid inheritance conflicts, with deaths reframed as clan affairs and immediate homestead seizures. In some incidents, ritualised violence (e.g., burning of the widow's house during funerary rites) is used to enforce community judgments and erase claims to land. Press and civil society note persistent community complicity and pressure on survivors to accept extra legal outcomes instead of criminal prosecution.

## 5) State and Community Dynamics

### Chiefs minimising threats



The UN Women report shows victims frequently warn authorities before attacks, yet chiefs/assistant chiefs often label threats as “family matters,” delaying police referrals and missing the prevention window. Studies of the justice chain in Kenya identify similar patterns of informal redirection and late evidence capture, which undermine prosecutions.

### Community complicity



Bystander silence is common; neighbours may refuse to intervene or later justify attacks as “purification,” while post attack intimidation limits witness testimony. The primary study underscores social permission for violence once a woman is branded a witch. Coastal monitoring and faith based shelters add that fear and stigma drive under reporting and sustain impunity in witchcraft linked femicide.

## 6) Policy Gaps — Absence of a witchcraft risk protocol

Despite the predictable escalation and concentration in specific counties, Kenya lacks a standard risk flagging protocol treating witchcraft accusations as a GBV/femicide high risk indicator. There is no mandatory first hour response (chief -> police/DCI), no national ban on clan “cleansing” hearings prior to evidence capture, and no dedicated data field for “witchcraft accusation” in homicide statistics gaps that obscure the typology and impede county targeting.

## 7) Recommendations — From principle to practice

A

### Mandatory protection response (first 1–48 hours)

- ▶ Classify any witchcraft accusation against an older woman as an immediate high risk femicide indicator, with chiefs required to record the report, notify police/DCI within one hour, and trigger escorted relocation/safe stay if threats are live.
- ▶ Prohibit clan/“cleansing” meetings until scene preservation, medical legal documentation, and initial witness statements are complete; ODPP to guide early charge pathways.

B

### Public messaging and norm disruption

- ▶ County commissioners, chiefs, faith leaders and kaya elders should issue joint statements that delegitimise witchcraft linked violence, clarify criminal liability, and reframe accusations as potential property motivated abuse, not community justice.

- ▶ Run county wide dialogues that expose land grabbing behind accusations and encourage early reporting to DCI and GBV services.

### C Relocation and safe accommodation models

- ▶ Establish county funded shelters and short stay protection pathways with escorted night transport; partner with existing church run refuges to create referral pipelines and longer term relocation options where hostility persists.

### D Land and property safeguards

- ▶ Activate automatic caveats/injunctions when a witchcraft threat case involves contested land; integrate land boards and registries into GBV referral so no transfer proceeds while threats are active.

### E Data and accountability

- ▶ Add a femicide indicator with a “witchcraft accusation” sub tag to homicide/GBV records; publish county dashboards tracking early warning flags, response times, relocations, and prosecutions.
- ▶ Institute quarterly county reviews (NGAO–DCI–GBVRCs–CSOs–faith actors) to resolve bottlenecks and recalibrate hotspots.

## 8) Conclusion

Witchcraft accusation and “cleansing” femicide is a typology with visible early warning signs, concentrated in identifiable counties and disproportionately targeting widows and older women. The evidence base shows these killings are predictable and preventable when systems:



Recognise accusations as high risk,



Move instantly from chiefs’ logs to DCI protection,



Ban ritual forums until evidence is secured, and



Resource relocation and land safeguards that block dispossession. Implementing these measures will disrupt impunity, protect tenure, and save lives.

## References

- **Primary:** *Kenya's socio cultural analysis of femicide* (UN Women Kenya report, 2026).
- **Global Sisters Report (2025):** Witchcraft accusations and elder displacement/killings in Kilifi/Kwale.
- **Haki Yetu (2024):** *The Aged, on Edge*—documentation of accusations and violence against the elderly at the Coast. [[the-star.co.ke](http://the-star.co.ke)]
- **OSV/Good Newsroom (2025):** Coverage linking witchcraft narratives to **property motives** and documenting patterns of **group attacks and displacement**. [[globalsist...report.org](http://globalsist...report.org)]
- **TWG/GBV via The Star (2026):** Gaps in femicide classification; leading motivators and need for typology aware responses. [[oicrf.org](http://oicrf.org)]

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## Acknowledgement

This brief was derived from the report on the Socio-Cultural Analysis of Femicide in Kenya, developed by UN Women Kenya in collaboration with the University of Nairobi. It synthesizes key findings and insights to inform evidence based programming and policy dialogue on ending violence against women and girls. This brief was developed by Mary Wanjiru-UN Women Kenya Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Team Leader; Jack Onyisi Abebe- UN Women East and Southern Africa Knowledge Management and Research Specialist and Emily Mwasame-UN Women East and Southern Africa Knowledge Management Assistant under the overall guidance and leadership of Adama Moussa-UN Women East and Southern Africa Deputy Regional Director; Antonia N’Gabala-Sodonon-UN Women Kenya Country Representative and Dan Bazira-UN Women Kenya Deputy Country Representative.

We gratefully acknowledge the invaluable contributions of Joan Obunga-Legal Expert; Christine Okeno-UN Women Kenya Programme Analyst; Evelyn Okatch and Fatuma Abbas, Programme Associates in the Ending Violence Against Women portfolio. Their technical expertise, strategic insights and unwavering commitment were instrumental in shaping the content, strengthening the analysis and ensuring the relevance and quality of this brief.

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