News
Ministry



People are pictured who reside at the Kaya Godoma Rescue Centre in Kilifi, a coastal town in Kenya. Some elderly individuals at Kaya Godoma have been accused of witchcraft by members of their community and even their relatives. This has led to them being violently driven from their homes. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)



by Doreen Ajiambo

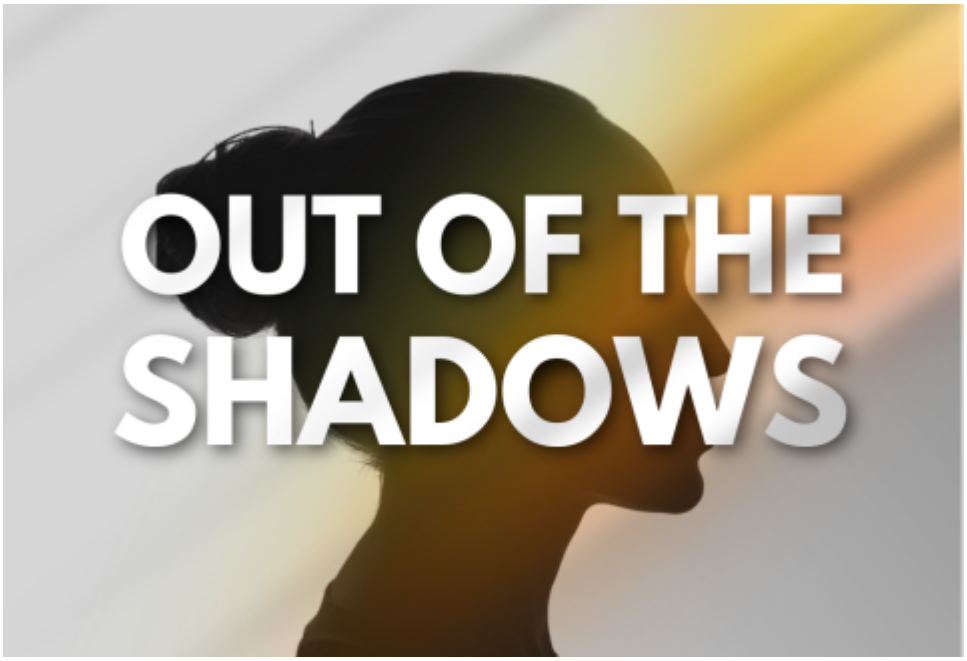
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Editor's note: *This story is part of Global Sisters Report's yearlong series, "Out of the Shadows: Confronting Violence Against Women," which will focus on the ways Catholic sisters are responding to this global phenomenon.*



(GSR logo/Olivia Bardo)

In the picturesque villages along Kenya's coastal region — where the Indian Ocean breeze whispers through coconut palms and sand-covered paths wind through homesteads — a sinister crisis is unfolding.

Older people, particularly widows, are increasingly becoming victims of a brutal wave of violence fueled by superstition and greed. Accused of witchcraft, many are attacked, displaced or even killed by relatives or others seeking to seize their land or eliminate them from inheritance chains. What might appear on the surface as cultural belief is, in many cases, a form of gender-based violence targeting vulnerable women under the guise of tradition.

These witchcraft accusations have fueled a wave of violence, leaving thousands displaced and over 160 people dead, though leaders and advocates claim the unreported number of deaths far exceeds that figure.

Older people are often stripped of dignity and security in their final years, forced to flee from their homes and seek refuge in over a dozen makeshift shelters operated by religious groups and humanitarian organizations.



People are pictured who reside at the Kaya Godoma Rescue Centre in Kilifi, a coastal town in Kenya. Some elderly individuals at Kaya Godoma have been accused of witchcraft by members of their community and even their relatives. This has led to them being violently driven from their homes. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

"This is no longer just about cultural beliefs," said Sr. Rosalia Kimuyu of the Little Sisters of the Poor, whose congregation runs a shelter in the region. "It's about power, property and a total disregard for human dignity."

Her congregation operates Nyumba ya Wazee, Swahili for "Home of the Elderly," a refuge established in 1969. Today, it houses more than 50 elders — most of them victims of violent attacks or threats related to accusations of sorcery and land disputes.

"We have an elderly man here whose relatives tried to kill him to inherit his land," Kimuyu said. "He fled to a nearby church, which referred him to us. We also have women who were attacked by their children after being accused of causing sickness or death through witchcraft."

Land, lies and greed

Kilifi region, home to more than 1.4 million people, has long contended with allegations of witchcraft. But activists and community leaders say these accusations are increasingly being used as a cover for land grabbing and inheritance conflicts, particularly as tourism and real estate development drive up land values.

"Many victims are targeted not because of any wrongdoing, but because someone wants their property," said Julius Wanyama, program officer with Haki Yetu, a human rights group advocating for marginalized communities in Kenya's coastal region. "It's greed disguised as tradition."

> 'We never thought our golden years would look like this. We are refugees in our own land.'
>
> —Karisa Ndenge, 79
>
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Land issues in Kenya's coastal areas are complex and deeply rooted in history. During colonial rule, British settlers seized vast tracts of land. Post-independence governments failed to rectify these historical injustices, leading to decades of landlessness and disputes. Today, according to Haki Yetu, a patchwork of unclear land ownership and weak governance allows opportunists — often family members — to take advantage of elderly relatives holding title deeds.

"We never thought our golden years would look like this," said Karisa Ndenge, 79, a widower now living at Nyumba ya Wazee. "We are refugees in our own land."



Seventy-nine-year-old Karisa Ndenge displays his scars from an attack a few years ago, during which he said members of his family and community attacked him with machetes. He managed to escape and sought refuge at one of the centers in the Kilifi region. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

Villages without older residents

Global Sisters Report's recent visit to several villages in Kilifi — including Ganze, Kaloleni and Malindi — revealed a pattern: few residents over the age of 50 remain in their homes.

In Ganze, for instance, only two of the ten households GSR visited had older residents. The rest had fled or been killed, often after being accused of sorcery by relatives or neighbors, according to GSR interviews. Many such accusations often arise after unexplained illnesses, deaths or even unemployment.

"Most of these elders are practicing witchcraft which has killed many people, made people poor, and brought sickness," said a 35-year-old man in Ganze who asked not to be named. He claimed his uncle had bewitched him to prevent him from getting a job, despite having a degree in actuarial science from the University of Nairobi.

"They are very bad people. I don't think they should live," he added. "We attacked my uncle. He escaped. But if he hadn't, we would have killed him."

When asked if his uncle had any history of sorcery, the man shook his head. "No one has proof. But we know."

Global Sisters Report visited a majority of the more than 12 shelters in Kilifi region, which mostly exist to house individuals accused of witchcraft, as homes for the elderly are rare in Kenya and in most African countries. In these visits, GSR witnessed firsthand that this phenomenon has displaced thousands of adults.



Elderly women evicted from their homes for witchcraft accusations seek refuge at a center in Kilifi, a coastal town in Kenya, on April 24, 2025. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

Belief in witchcraft runs deep in these communities, sometimes transcending religion. In dozens of homes GSR visited, symbols of protection against witchcraft were visible: chicken feathers nailed above doorways, walls smeared with sacrificial blood, and ritual gourds placed near beds. Even among Christian families, such fear shapes how people interact with elders, particularly those who live alone or are suspected of being strange.

Church leaders say the result is a culture of suspicion, where every misfortune — from infertility to business failures — is blamed on an elder.

"Every death or accident is attributed to witchcraft," said William Charo, a church catechist in Kilifi. "It's always someone's fault — usually a grandmother, stepmother or widowed aunt."

The elderly, especially widows, are seen as easy targets. "Those with land are most at risk," Charo said. "They spend years getting a title deed, and then their own children want to take it — by any means."

Witchdoctors under fire

Witchdoctors, once revered traditional healers, are also increasingly in danger. Many are themselves elderly, and several have been assaulted or driven out of their communities after being blamed for sicknesses or deaths, according to Haki Yetu, a human rights group advocating for marginalized communities in Kenya's coastal region.

"These people come to us when they want success — a job, a child, a husband," said a 63-year-old witchdoctor in Kilifi, whose home was lined with animal bones, beads, gourds and talismans. "But when things go wrong, they blame us. It's not fair." He asked not to be named.

Human rights organizations such as Haki Yetu say these accusations are a convenient way to eliminate elders and take their land, while avoiding lengthy legal inheritance battles.

"This has nothing to do with witchcraft," said a community worker in Ganze who asked for anonymity due to safety concerns. "People want land. They kill their elders and say they were witches."

Shocking numbers, few arrests

Wanyama said their 2023 research showed that between 2020 and May 2022, up to 138 elders were killed in Kilifi over witchcraft accusations. He added that the number has since risen to more than 160 cases.

"These numbers are likely lower than the reality," Wanyama said. "Many cases go unreported because families don't want the police involved. The attackers are usually close relatives."

Women bear the brunt of the violence. Wanyama noted that widows, who often inherit property from deceased husbands, are disproportionately targeted.

"When a man dies, the wife should legally inherit the land," he said. "But greedy in-laws accuse her of witchcraft so they can take it."

Local authorities acknowledge the growing crisis. "The government truly wants to uphold every person's rights," said Consolata Machuko, an official with Kenya's Ministry of Labour and Social Protection. "But we still have a lot of work to do."

Machuko said at least one elderly person is killed each week in Kilifi alone, usually after being blamed for misfortunes such as illnesses, infertility or joblessness.



Consolata Machuko, a local official from the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, speaks to residents at a rescue center in the Kilifi region. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

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Survivors tell their stories

At Kaya Godoma Rescue Centre, one of several shelters in the region, 71-year-old Kavumbi Mamanga lives in fear. She fled her home a year ago after she said she was brutally attacked by her children.

GSR reached out to Mamanga's children for comment, but they declined to respond.

"My son brought a group of villagers," she said softly. "He slapped me, called me a witch. They said I killed their father and two relatives with magic."

Women accused of witchcraft in Ghana find refuge in outpost run by sisters

Her husband had died after a long illness; the other relatives passed away during childbirth. Despite that, Mamanga was beaten, her head bloodied, and forced to drink herbal potions as part of a traditional "test" of innocence.

"The next morning, they gathered in the square. They gave me herbs and said if I were guilty, I'd die," she said. "I survived. They said I was innocent. But the threats didn't stop."

Police helped rescue her and brought her to Kaya Godoma. She said her three-acre plot of land — left to her by her late husband — has since been taken by her children.

"I'm not a witch. Even the elders said so," she said, breaking into tears. "They just wanted my land."



The Little Sisters of the Poor run Nyumba Ya Wazee, which means "Home of the Elderly" in Swahili. Established in 1969, the shelter serves as a safe haven for vulnerable elderly individuals, where they are welcomed with love and treated like

family. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

At Nyumba ya Wazee, another resident, 75-year-old Jacob Thabu, a herbalist, shared a similar story. Five years ago, two villagers died in a road accident while heading to a funeral. That night, a mob came for him.

"They said I caused the accident to enrich myself," he said. "They cut me with machetes. Burned my house. I almost died."

Though Thabu survived, "I lost everything — my home, my work, my community," he said.

> 'They said I caused the accident to enrich myself. They cut me with machetes. Burned my house. I almost died.'
>
> —Jacob Thabu, 75
>
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A generation disconnected from its roots

Religious sisters and local caregivers warn that the killings of elders are slowly dismantling the social fabric of communities. In many traditional societies, elders serve as peacemakers, historians, and spiritual guides.

"When you remove the elders, you remove the wisdom," Kimuyu said. "You create a generation disconnected from its roots."

The Catholic sisters and humanitarian groups running rescue centers have stepped in to provide not only food and shelter but also counseling and legal support. Many also run public education campaigns aimed at challenging superstitions and fostering respect for the elderly.

> 'When you remove the elders, you remove the wisdom. You create a generation disconnected from its roots.'
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"We're teaching people that misfortunes are not caused by old age or magic," Kimuyu said. "We're helping the youth see that their problems won't be solved by killing their grandparents."

Her congregation has also started community outreach programs in which young people visit the shelters to interact with elders and hear their stories. These encounters, Kimuyu said, are slowly changing hearts.

"We've seen some young men come to apologize, saying they didn't know better," she said. "We're planting seeds of compassion."

> 'We're helping the youth see that their problems won't be solved by killing their grandparents.'
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Call for global intervention

Despite the efforts of civil society, activists say the government must do more — and quickly.

"The violence is escalating," said Emmanuel Katana, chair of Kaya Godoma Rescue Centre. "We need stronger laws, faster justice, and education to break these harmful beliefs."

Katana and other advocates are pushing for stiffer penalties for those who commit violence against elders, enforcement of inheritance laws, and a national task force to investigate witchcraft-related killings.

They also call for international support — both financial and diplomatic — to assist shelters, pressure the Kenyan government, and raise global awareness about the crisis.

> 'This is not just a cultural problem — it's a governance crisis. If we don't protect our elders, we lose the foundation of who we are.'

—Sr. Rosalia Kimuyu

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Kimuyu said the sisters are doing what they can but are overwhelmed. "We're caring for people who should be surrounded by grandchildren, not guards," she said.

She believes the issue is part of a broader failure of leadership. "This is not just a cultural problem — it's a governance crisis. If we don't protect our elders, we lose the foundation of who we are."

For now, survivors like Ndenge try to live one day at a time, uncertain whether peace will ever return to their communities.

"Our future is uncertain," he said. "We hear the attacks are increasing. We don't know when — or if — we'll ever go home again."

This story appears in the **Out of the Shadows: Confronting Violence Against Women** feature series. View the full series.