

CONCEPT NOTE & PRELIMINARY DATA

**In Support of Advocacy for the Elimination of Harmful Practices:
Accusations of Witchcraft and Ritual Attacks**

November 2020

PURPOSE

The purpose of this concept note is to draw attention to the nature and extent of ongoing harmful practices arising from accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks (HPAWRA) worldwide. We do so with a view to:

- urging adoption, at the UN Human Rights Council, of a resolution condemning these harmful practices;
- calling for further research and documentation on the matter from the UN office of the high commissioner for human rights;
- calling on member States to take effective protection, non-discrimination and accountability measures; and
- informing organizations and individuals working in the area of protection of human rights so as to be better positioned to advocate and mobilise against these harms

SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

Based on our preliminary research and reported cases, over 20,000 victims of harmful practices: accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks have been reported in the last decade, across 60 countries. This includes over 5,250 unlawful or wrongful killings, 60 disappearances in suspicious circumstances, 14,700 attempted killings and physical attacks, 420 incidents of trafficking, and 90 grave robberies. A significant number of victims are persons with albinism, older persons, women, and children. Details of the cases arising from different types of harm are mapped below in Appendix A.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Terminology

This document and the associated research and advocacy group has adopted the term '*harmful practices: accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks*' (HPAWRA) after extended deliberation and consultation with a wide range of interest groups.

The expression is intended to convey the following points in particular:

- The advocacy for change is not aimed at the belief in witchcraft *per se*, but at manifestations of that belief that result in harmful practices. This is in line with the human right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief, with limitations only able to be applied to the freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs.
- The operating phrase (and condemnable act) in the context of this initiative is "harmful practice" and is contextualized to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks

specifically. Benign or positive practices related to beliefs in witchcraft are not covered by this initiative. Useful criteria for identifying harmful practices have been set out by the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.

- The expression does not encompass traditional medicine as [defined](#) by the World Health Organization as a field distinct from harmful practices.

Background to the issue of *Harmful practices: accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks*

Much of the content below is based on the discussions at the witchcraft and human rights workshop held in Geneva in September 2017.¹ It is also based on subsequent discourse at a conference in January 2019 at Lancaster University, UK² and research conducted by the independent Witchcraft Accusations and Human Rights Working Group who are the joint authors of this report.³

In numerous countries around the world, HPAWRA has resulted in serious violations of human rights, including discrimination and stigmatization, banishment from families and communities, and various forms of torture and ill-treatment, such as beatings, shackling, burnings, cutting of body parts and amputation of limbs; grave desecrations, exploitation in the context of human trafficking, and killings. Women, children, older persons, and persons with disabilities, including persons with albinism, are particularly vulnerable. Despite the seriousness of these human rights violations, there is often no robust state led response. National judicial systems frequently fail to act to prevent, investigate or prosecute human rights violations linked to HPAWRA. This institutional failure perpetuates impunity.

Beliefs and practices related to HPAWRA vary considerably between different countries and even within ethnicities in the same country. There is limited understanding of the belief in witchcraft, how it may be practiced in some cultures and why it is linked to violence and harmful practices in some places more than others. The Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Philip Alston, stated in his 2009 report to the Human Rights Council that human rights abuses carried out due to beliefs in witchcraft have “not featured prominently on the radar screen of human rights monitors” and that “this may be due partly to the difficulty of defining “witches” and “witchcraft” across cultures – terms that, quite apart from their connotations in popular culture, may include an array of traditional or faith healing practices and are not easily defined.” He observed that “the fact remains, however, that under the rubric of the amorphous and manipulable designation of ‘witchcraft’, individuals (often

¹ A/HRC/34/59.

² <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/languages-and-cultures/research/witchcraft-and-human-rights-past-present-future-perspectives---conference/>

³ The members directly responsible for this report are: Ikponwosa Ero, United Nations Independent Expert on the enjoyment of human rights by persons with albinism, Miranda Forsyth (Australian National University), Ibolya Losoncz (Australian National University), Gary Foxcroft (Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network), Kirsty Brimelow (Doughty Street Chambers, UK), Louise Meincke (Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network), Charlotte Baker (University of Lancaster) Philip Gibbs (Divine Word University, Papua New Guinea) and Leethen Bartholomew (National FGM Centre, UK).

those who are somehow different, feared or disliked) are singled out for arbitrary private acts of violence or for Government-sponsored or tolerated acts of violence”.⁴

The exact number of victims of such abuses is unknown and is widely believed to be underreported.⁵ At the very least, it is believed that, globally, there are thousands of cases of people accused of witchcraft each year, often with fatal consequences, with others being mutilated and killed in ritual attacks.⁶ The literature asserts that these numbers are increasing, with cases becoming more violent, the practices spreading, and new classes of victims being created, although the difficulty in proving such claims quantitatively is acknowledged.⁷ These practices are also increasingly a challenge for countries in the global North, mainly within migrant communities.⁸

Various forms of HPAWRA have been addressed by the UN, although often from a particular perspective and in a specific country and context. These include the Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) on violence against children, the Special Rapporteur (SR) on violence against women (SR VAW), its causes and consequences⁹ as well as the Working Group on the issue of discrimination against women in law and in practice,¹⁰ the SR on freedom of religion or belief,¹¹ the SR on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment,¹² and the SR on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions (SR summex).¹³

Some experts have also sent communications to national governments on the matter, including the SR on the independence of judges and lawyers, as well as the Independent Expert on technical cooperation and advisory services in Liberia. The Independent Expert on the enjoyment of human rights by persons with albinism has also raised the topic in her last two reports, sent communications concerning it with the SR on disabilities, SR VAW and SR summex, and considers that a more holistic approach to the phenomena is necessary.

⁴ A/HRC/11/2, 2009

⁵ See for example, Karen McVeigh, Child witchcraft claims increasing as ‘hidden crime’ is investigated, 8 October 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/oct/08/child-witchcraft-claims-hidden-crime-met-police-under-reported> Also see, Ruth Evans, ‘Witchcraft abuse cases on the rise’, 11 October 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-34475424>

⁶ See Philip Alston, “Of witches and robots: the diverse challenges of responding to unlawful killings in the twenty-first century”, *Macalester International*, vol. 28 (2012) and Jill Shnoebelen, Witchcraft allegations, refugee protection and human rights: a review of the evidence, UNHCR, Research paper No. 169, <http://www.unhcr.org/4981ca712.pdf>

⁷ Miranda Forsyth, ‘The regulation of witchcraft and sorcery practices and beliefs’, *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, (2016) 12: 331-351, available at <http://www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev-lawsocsci-110615-084600>

⁸ Edwards SM. 2013. ‘The genocide and terror of witchcraft accusation, persecution and related violence: an emergency situation for international human rights and domestic law.’ *Int. Fam. Law* 2013:322–30; Garcia AD. 2013. ‘New Issues in Refugee Research: Seeking Meaning: Voodoo, Witchcraft and Human Trafficking in Europe.’ *Geneva: UNHCR*; Powles P, Deakin R. 2012. ‘New Issues in Refugee Research: Seeking Meaning: An Anthropological and Community Based Approach to Witchcraft Accusations and Their Prevention in Refugee Situations.’ *Geneva: UNHCR*

⁹ See Report by SR VAW, A/HRC/20/16), which has dedicated a section (section n.2) on killings of women due to accusations of sorcery/witchcraft. Also see A/HRC/23/49/Add.2, with a Chapter on sorcery-related violence, tribal violence and displacement.

¹⁰ See A/HRC/41/33 at paragraph 28.

¹¹ See for example A/HRC/25/58/Add.1

¹² See for example A/HRC/31/57 at para 14.

¹³ See A/HRC/11/2

How HPAWRA Are Manifested Around the World

According to joint General Comment No. 31 on harmful practices, adopted by the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, human rights violations inherent in and emanating from accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks are harmful practices.

HPAWRA manifests in various forms. On the one hand, there is the belief in an individual's supernatural power being able to cause harm or damage to persons or things. This belief leads to witchcraft accusations against individuals, often followed by violence, social rejection and/ or discrimination. Not infrequently, this may lead to death, mutilations, injury or the ostracizing, stigmatization and displacement of the accused and their family members. In many of these cases, older women¹⁴ and children with disabilities are the most affected.¹⁵ For instance, it is reported that more than 2,586 older women were killed between 2004 and 2009 in Tanzania and more than 20 older women were killed in Zimbabwe, as a result of witchcraft accusations.¹⁶ In the United Kingdom, in the period of 2017/2018, there were 1,630 reported cases of child-survivors of abuse related to accusations of witchcraft. That number increased by 11% from the previous year.¹⁷

In Papua New Guinea, the gendered nature of witchcraft accusations, its inherent violence and the stigma flowing from these have been noted.¹⁸ In the period January 2016 to June 2020, local researchers recorded 1,331 persons (45% women) accused of witchcraft in three provinces alone.¹⁹ Of those, 259 (56% women) were either killed or survived serious physical attacks.

Furthermore, in 2009, it was reported by Amnesty International that 1,006 persons were accused of witchcraft in the Gambia in one instance alone. These were subsequently detained and forced to drink hallucinogenic concoctions. Other accused are physically assaulted, banished or psychologically abused. For instance, in a five-year period, in northern Ghana, more than 1,000 older women accused of being witches were banished to live in 'witch' camps in intolerable conditions.²⁰

Another form of HPAWRA manifests in the belief in the ability to acquire or increase fortune or power through recourse to the supernatural. This leads to violent attacks and ritual killings

¹⁴ FA Eboiyehi 'Convicted without evidence: Elderly women and witchcraft accusations in contemporary Nigeria' (2017) *Journal of International Women Studies* 247.

¹⁵ Cimpric, Aleksandra. 2010. *Children accused of witchcraft: An anthropological study of contemporary practice in Africa*. Dakar: UNICEF WCARO.

¹⁶ Eboiyehi, above n.14

¹⁷ Reported as child abuse "linked to faith or belief." See FGM Centre. Also see <https://vcf-uk.org/census-suggests-11-increase-in-cases-of-child-abuse-linked-to-faith-or-belief/>

¹⁸ P. Gibbs, 'Engendered Violence and Witch-killing in Simbu' In *Engendering Violence in Papua New Guinea*, M. Jolly, C. Stewart, C. Brewer (eds.), (2012) 107-136, Canberra: Australian National University E-Press. <http://epress.anu.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/ch032.pdf>

¹⁹ A study conducted by the Australian National University. For further details see Forsyth, Miranda and Gibbs, Philip and Hukula, Fiona and Putt, Judy and Munau, Llana and Losoncz, Ibolya, Ten Preliminary Findings Concerning Sorcery Accusation-Related Violence in Papua New Guinea (March 27, 2019). *Development Policy Centre Discussion Paper No. 80*, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3360817> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3360817>

²⁰ Eboiyehi, above, note 14

in order to procure body parts of designated groups of people for ritual purposes. The designated groups are often believed to possess (supernatural) qualities that can facilitate the acquisition of fortune. These cases extend to ritual rape and grave desecration, for the purpose of stealing and trafficking the remains of targeted persons. For instance, the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of human rights by persons with albinism, has received hundreds of reports of persons with albinism who have been targeted or attacked in many parts of Africa, under the belief that certain body parts of a person with albinism can be used, through rituals or traditional medicine, to ‘induce various benefits, commonly wealth, good luck and political success.’²¹ Children are particularly vulnerable to these forms of ritual attack and harmful practices.

Another form of harmful practice manifests through “juju” rituals that are used to coerce a person into trafficking, while assuring their obedience and preventing them from reporting, or escaping from their traffickers. Young women, often from Edo and Delta states in Nigeria, are targeted to be sold into sexual exploitation in Europe. The Nigerian National Agency for Prohibition of Traffic in Persons (NAPTIP), noted that 90% of girls from Delta and Edo states sent into slavery in Europe had undertaken such rituals.²² Although recording systems are inadequate, there are records of prosecutions of cases involving such women in a significant number of European countries.

All three forms of HPAWRA have led to gross human rights violations across multiple continents, as demonstrated by available data. There is no indication that the situation is improving globally. On the contrary, there are many documented examples of localised increases in violence and new forms of exploitation.

²¹ International Bar Association’ Waiting to disappear: International and regional standards for the protection and promotion of the human rights of persons with albinism (2017) 20. Also see Explanatory Notes and Data on How the Independent Expert has collected this data: <https://actiononalbinism.org/page/xgr7osblfukwn9ghmwj98uxr>

²² See for instance, “When the occult meets the criminal: the connection between human trafficking and witchcraft”, <https://www.polity.org.za/article/when-the-occult-meets-the-criminal-the-connection-between-human-trafficking-and-witchcraft-2012-11-16>, accessed August 21, 2019.

Explanatory Notes and Caveats

Source

The sources of records of HPAWRA are varied. They include government sources, inter-governmental organizations including United Nations Agencies, non-governmental organizations, academic sources and the media (print and online). None is comprehensive.

Timeframe

The majority of cases included in the database are those reported between 1 January 2009 and 25 August 2019.

Criteria of Inclusion

Cases were included in the database where they were, prima facie, issued by a credible source, and contain reliable information.

Factors for assessing credibility include, the nature of the source, its mission or ethos, its length of existence, previous reports, current and past work. Factors for assessing reliability include, the credibility of the source, as well as provision of name of victim(s) locations as well as other details that may permit traceability.

Reported Cases

Spoken or written account of HPAWRA that someone has observed, heard, done, or investigated.

Categories of HPAWRA

Categories of attacks are based on categories used in criminal law as well as dictionary definitions. All categories were reported in circumstances of HPAWRA

Category	Definition used in this Database
Killings	The unlawful or wrongful killing of one human being caused by the act, procurement or omission of another. All forms of killings have been included.
Survivors of Attacks	Someone who survives a physical attack or attempted killing
Disappearances	A person who is reported missing in suspicious circumstances
Grave Desecration for the purpose of stealing or	The act of taking the remains or part of the remains of a deceased person unlawfully from a burial or cremation place.

trafficking human remains (sometimes reported as “grave robberies”)	
Trafficking	A live person who has been the subject of human trafficking

Considerations for Interpretation of data below

Overall	The aim of this database is to demonstrate that there are significant and widespread human rights abuses associated with HPAWRA globally. It does not show or purport to show the full extent of the problem. It is likely that what is reported in the media and other sources is a very small reflection of the scale of the reality. In addition, HPAWRA resulting in non-physical violence such as stigmatisation, which is often inter-generational, ongoing displacement of those accused and their families, as well as destruction of houses and property, is not captured in this dataset. Overall, cases are indicative of extreme violations of human rights as well as underlying problems in the enjoyment of human rights by various marginalized groups across the world.
Africa	While the region of Africa seems to have a high number of cases relative to other regions, it is important to note that there is significant awareness on the issue in the region and a relatively high quantity of quality research and data collection. While this is a potential indicator that the region has a relatively high number of these cases, it is also important to note that relative awareness tends to result in more reports. Take, for instance, the difference between cases reported in the UK versus France. The former is significantly higher than the latter. A relevant but at present unquantifiable explanation for the difference in numbers is that data has been gathered on the issue in the UK, and such data was readily available and accessible for this data compilation.
Regional Variances	HPAWRA is more widely recognized in some countries than in others, and this impacts how cases are recorded in the media and government reports. In African countries, for example, a news article might say that a man murdered his child due to him believing the child was a witch whereas in western countries the story would be reported as a man killing his child due to mental illness. This makes it difficult to find relevant cases in some western countries.
Language barriers	Due to limited time and funding /conditions of funding, data-gathering processes were focused on English-speaking sources. While data from non-English sources such as Spanish, Portuguese and French were ultimately included, data should be interpreted in light of the fact that numbers might be skewed to emphasize those reported from English-speaking States.

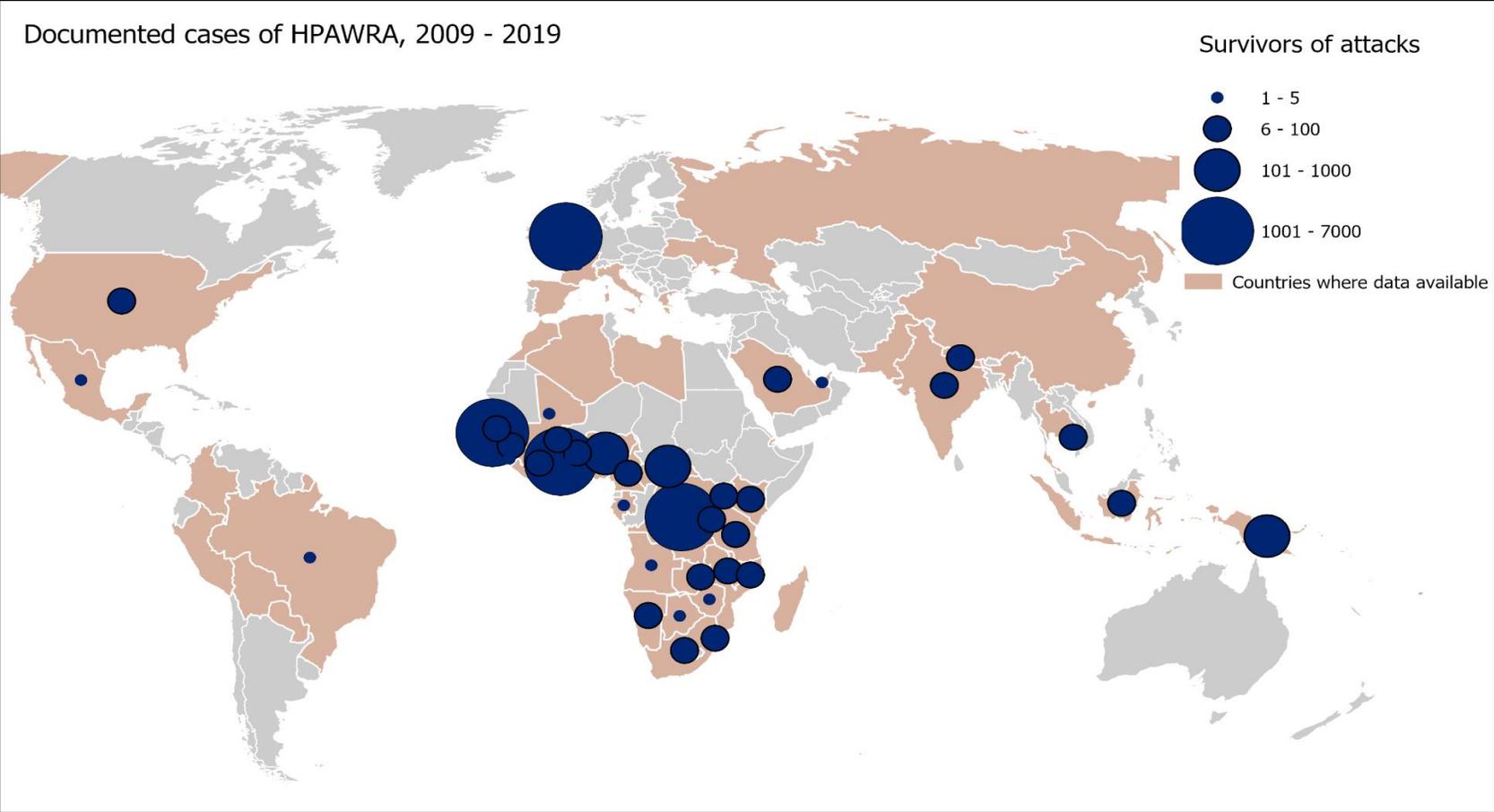
Press Freedoms	The extent to which cases are reported may be impacted by press freedoms.

Caveats

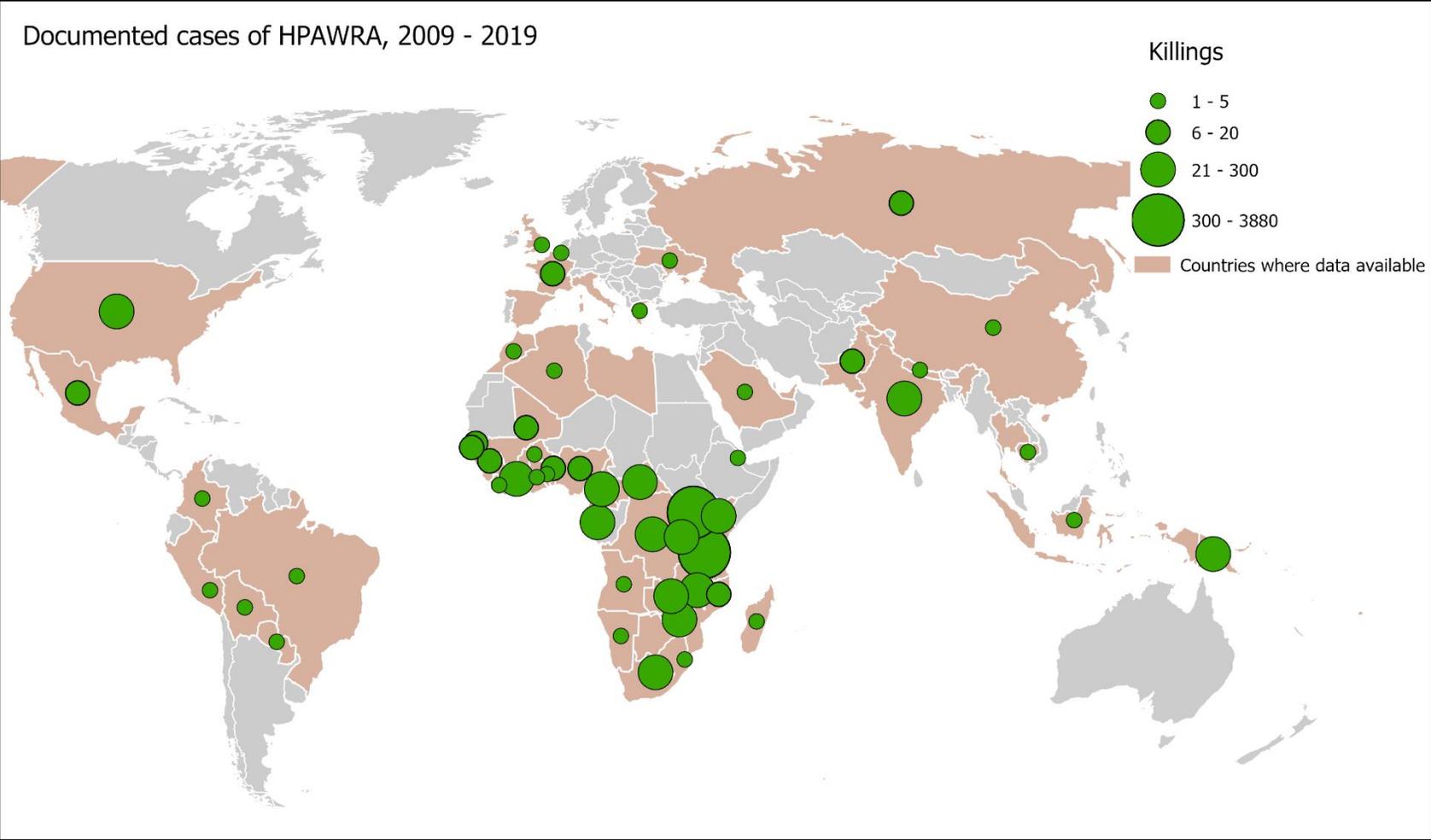
There are limitations on the data resulting from the following caveats

Element	Details of element
Work in Progress	Due to limited time and funding, as well as the need for current data, emphasis was placed on cases reported in the last decade: 2009 to 2019. Therefore, not all cases found have been entered into the database. This is a work in progress.
Reported Cases Alone	These cases are reported cases alone. It is believed that far more atrocities have occurred than reported for several reasons including the challenges of data collection, weak monitoring capacity by civil society, the secrecy that often surround HPAWRA and the reported involvement of family members in certain cases linked to ritual attacks.
Verified	Cases reported have been recorded based on the criteria of inclusion set out above, and a majority have not been verified by those who compiled the data, in terms of tracing and cross-check on the ground.
Incomplete Entry	While we have the names of many of the victims noted in the database, location and other key elements, in some cases these elements were unknown or unavailable. However, the criteria of inclusion in the database means that nearly all cases recorded in this database have sufficient information for traceability.
Errors of Data Entry	It is possible that there are slight discrepancies in reporting e.g. variation in the name of a victim or the name of a location may have caused double entries. However, these are rarer than they are common because inbuilt tools in Excel mitigate this error. Finally, the category of "survivor" which is ordinarily set aside for survivors of attempted murders, maiming and physical assault may have also captured victims of trafficking and ritual rape. This too would be more rare than common.

APPENDIX A: ALL MAPS



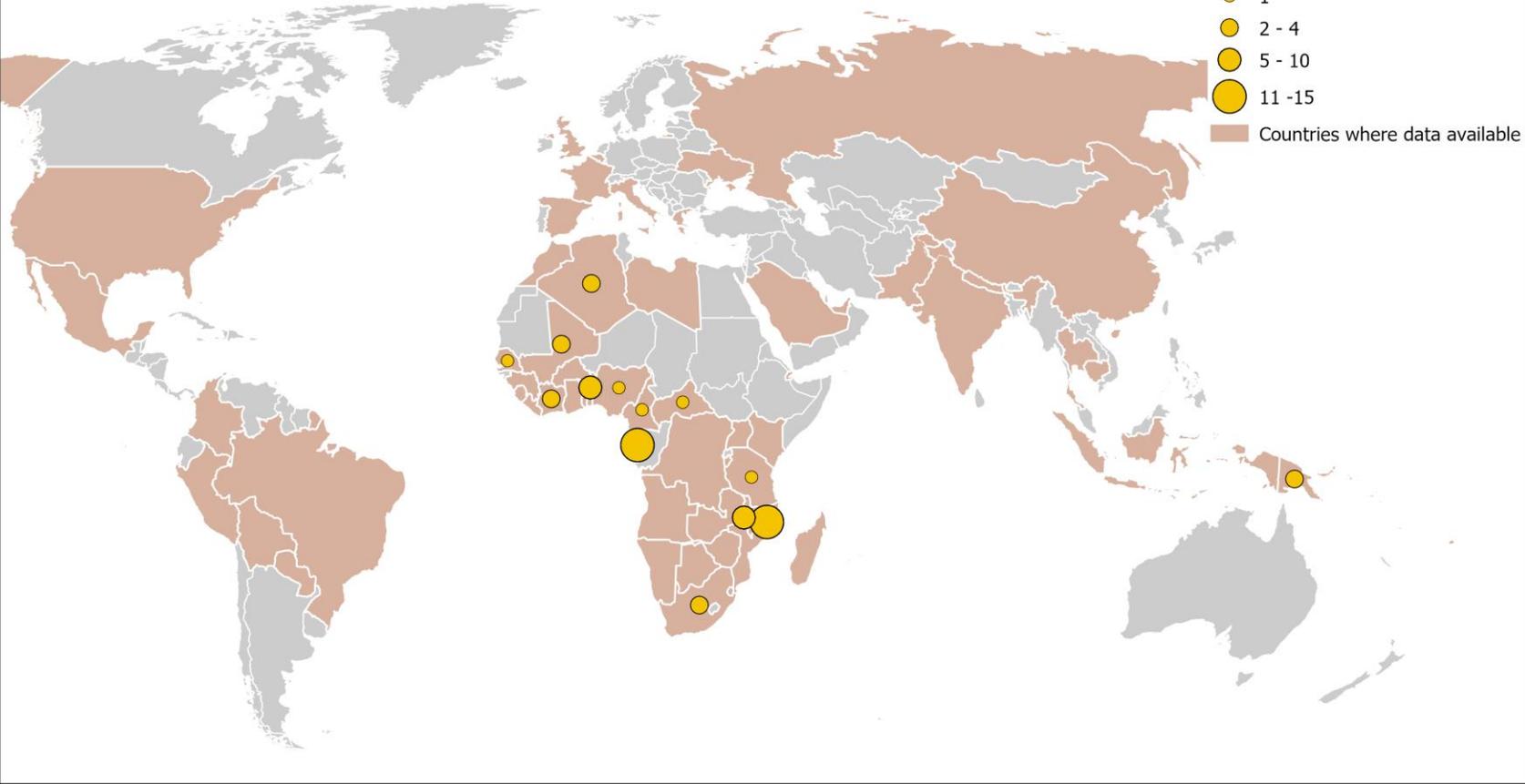
Documented cases of HPAWRA, 2009 - 2019



Documented cases of HPAWRA, 2009 - 2019

Disappearances

- 1
- 2 - 4
- 5 - 10
- 11 - 15
- Countries where data available



Documented cases of HPAWRA, 2009 - 2019

Trafficking

- 1
- 2 - 5
- 6 - 10
- 11 - 407
- Countries where data available

