

# **CONCEPT NOTE & PRELIMINARY DATA**

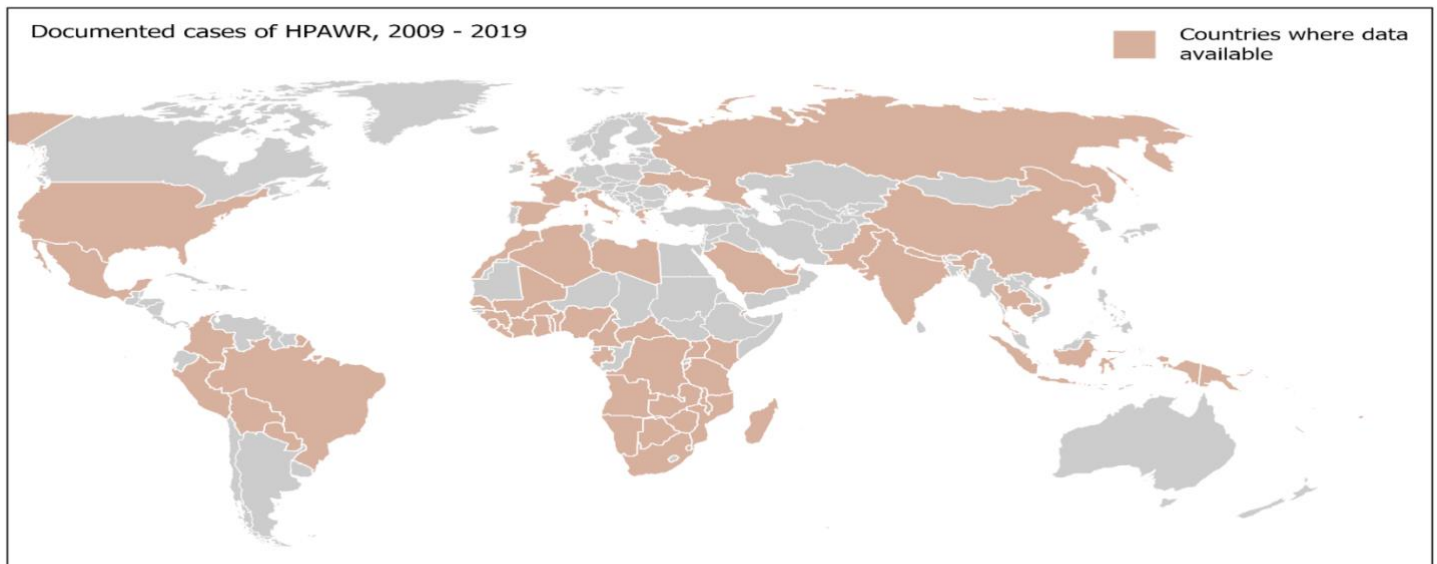
## **Elimination of Harmful Practices: Accusations of Witchcraft and Ritual Attacks**

March 2020

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**Compiled by the United Nations Independent Expert on the enjoyment of human rights by persons with albinism, in collaboration with the Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network & its member-organizations, Under the Same Sun, The National FGM Centre, UK, Doughty Street Chambers, UK, Australia National University, Divine Word University, Papua New Guinea, Lancaster University, Staffordshire University, the Centre for Human Rights of the University of Pretoria and the International Human Rights Program of the University of Toronto**

**SUMMARY OF CASES:** Over 20,000 victims of harmful practices: accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks have been reported in the last decade, across 60 countries. A significant number of victims are persons with albinism, older persons, women, and children. The following map indicates all countries where cases have been reported / data is available. For other visual representation of data, see [Appendix: All Data Maps](#)



**ENDORSEMENTS:** *This concept note and preliminary data has been endorsed by experts, researchers, experienced field workers and non-government organizations working on the issue of HPAWR. These include: The Pagan Federation (UK); Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementias In Zambia; Human Rights Monitoring Institute; Equipe Pastorale auprès des Enfants en Détresse; Ethnologue-Politische Bildung; Dean and Professor, School of Nursing, Trinity Western University; Department of Political Science; Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis; University of London; African Network for Protection and Prevention Against Child Abuse and Neglect, Malawi; Associate Professor, Anthropology Section, Department of African and Gender Studies, University of Cape Town; Freedom Now Africa, Freedom Now International Foundation; Andhra Shraddha; Nirmulan Samiti; MSc Safeguarding; Medical Assistance Sierra Leone; Epilepsy Association of Sierra Leone; Stepping Forward; Education for Development; CEO Storychangers e.V; Nyandengoh; African-Caribbean Institute; Sierra Leone Association of Persons with Albinism; EACO Uganda; University of Pretoria; Stop Child Witch Accusations Coalition.*

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## THE ISSUES

### Context:

In numerous countries around the world, HPAWR have 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 HPAWR. This institutional failure perpetuates impunity.

Beliefs and practices related to HPAWR vary considerably between different countries and even within ethnicities in the same country. There is limited understanding of the belief in HPAWR, 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 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”.<sup>1</sup>

The exact number of victims of such abuses is unknown and is widely believed to be underreported.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> A/HRC/11/2, 2009

<sup>2</sup> 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>

<sup>3</sup> 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>

acknowledged.<sup>4</sup> These practices are also increasingly a challenge for countries in the global North, mainly within migrant communities.<sup>5</sup>

Various forms of HPAWR have been addressed by the UN, although often at times 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 consequences<sup>6</sup> as well as the Working Group on the issue of discrimination against women in law and in practice,<sup>7</sup> the SR on freedom of religion or belief,<sup>8</sup> the SR on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment,<sup>9</sup> and the SR on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions (SR summex).<sup>10</sup>

Some experts have also sent communications to Member States 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 including with the SR on disabilities, SR VAW and SR Summary executions and considers that a more holistic approach to the phenomena is necessary.

At the regional level, members of the Pan-African Parliament held a consultation with the Independent Expert on albinism on 19 and 20 April 2021, to validate a **Preliminary Report and Guidelines for Parliamentarians on Accusations of Witchcraft and Ritual Attacks: Towards Eliminating Harmful Practices and Other Human Rights Violations**. The Guidelines is the first document of its kind to address the phenomenon of HPAWR comprehensively. During the consultation, preliminary endorsement was obtained from the PAP members, with a more formal and official validation process to follow some time in May 2021 when the plenary session of the Pan-African Parliament will be held. The development of the Guidelines for the Africa region underscores the gravity of HPWAR in the African region and will become a valuable best-practice to other regions.

## Harmful Practices

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<sup>4</sup> 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>

<sup>5</sup> 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*

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> See A/HRC/41/33 at paragraph 28.

<sup>8</sup> See for example A/HRC/25/58/Add.1

<sup>9</sup> See for example A/HRC/31/57 at para 14.

<sup>10</sup> See A/HRC/11/2

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.

HPAWR 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 women<sup>11</sup> and children with disabilities are significantly affected.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> In Papua New Guinea, the gendered nature of witchcraft accusations, its inherent violence and the stigma flowing from these have been noted<sup>15</sup> in the period between 2016 to 2019 where local researchers recorded over 300 women accused of witchcraft in three provinces alone. Of those, 103 were either killed or survived other serious harm. 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.<sup>16</sup>

Another form 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 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,

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<sup>11</sup> FA Eboiyehi 'Convicted without evidence: Elderly women and witchcraft accusations in contemporary Nigeria' (2017) *Journal of International Women Studies* 247.

<sup>12</sup> Cimpric, Aleksandra (2010), *Children Accused of Witchcraft: An anthropological study of contemporary practices in Africa*, Dakar, UNICEF WCARO, pg. 2

<sup>13</sup> Eboiyehi, supra note 11.

<sup>14</sup> 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/>

<sup>15</sup> 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>

<sup>16</sup> Eboiyehi, supra note 11

commonly wealth, good luck and political success.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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 HPAWR 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, for instance in the UK.

## DATA<sup>19</sup>

### Introduction

Current data on these human rights violations is incomplete and the data that does exist is diffused across various disciplines and agencies, with no organization systematically and internationally monitoring and recording violations in a consolidated manner. The secretive nature of HPAWR makes it additionally difficult to systematically track them through standard data sources and leads to underreporting.

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<sup>17</sup> 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>

<sup>18</sup> 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.

<sup>19</sup> Data compiled with the support of the United Nations Independent Expert on the enjoyment of human rights by persons with albinism In collaboration with the Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network & its member-organizations, Under the Same Sun, The National FGM Centre, UK, Doughty Street Chambers, UK, Australia National University, Divine Word University, Papua New Guinea, Lancaster University, the Centre for Human Rights of the University of Pretoria and the International Human Rights Program of the University of Toronto

## **Explanatory Notes and Caveats**

### Source

The sources of records of HPAWR are varied. They include government sources, inter-governmental organizations including United Nations Agencies, non-governmental organizations, academic sources and the media (print and online).

### 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 HPAWR that someone has observed, heard, done, or investigated.

### Categories of HPAWR

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

<b>Category</b>	<b>Definition used in this Database</b>
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	Someone who survives a physical attack or attempted killing
Disappearances	A person who is reported missing in suspicious circumstances



Grave Robberies	The act of taking the remains or part of the remains of a deceased person unlawfully from a burial or cremation place.
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#### Considerations for Interpretation of data below

Category	Definition used in this Database
Overall	The aim of this database is to demonstrate that there are significant and widespread human rights abuses associated with HPAWR 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, HPAWR 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. This is likely because data has been gathered on the issue in the UK, and such data was readily available and accessible for this data compilation.
Regional Variances	HPAWR 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 (This emphasizes the importance of OP5)
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.

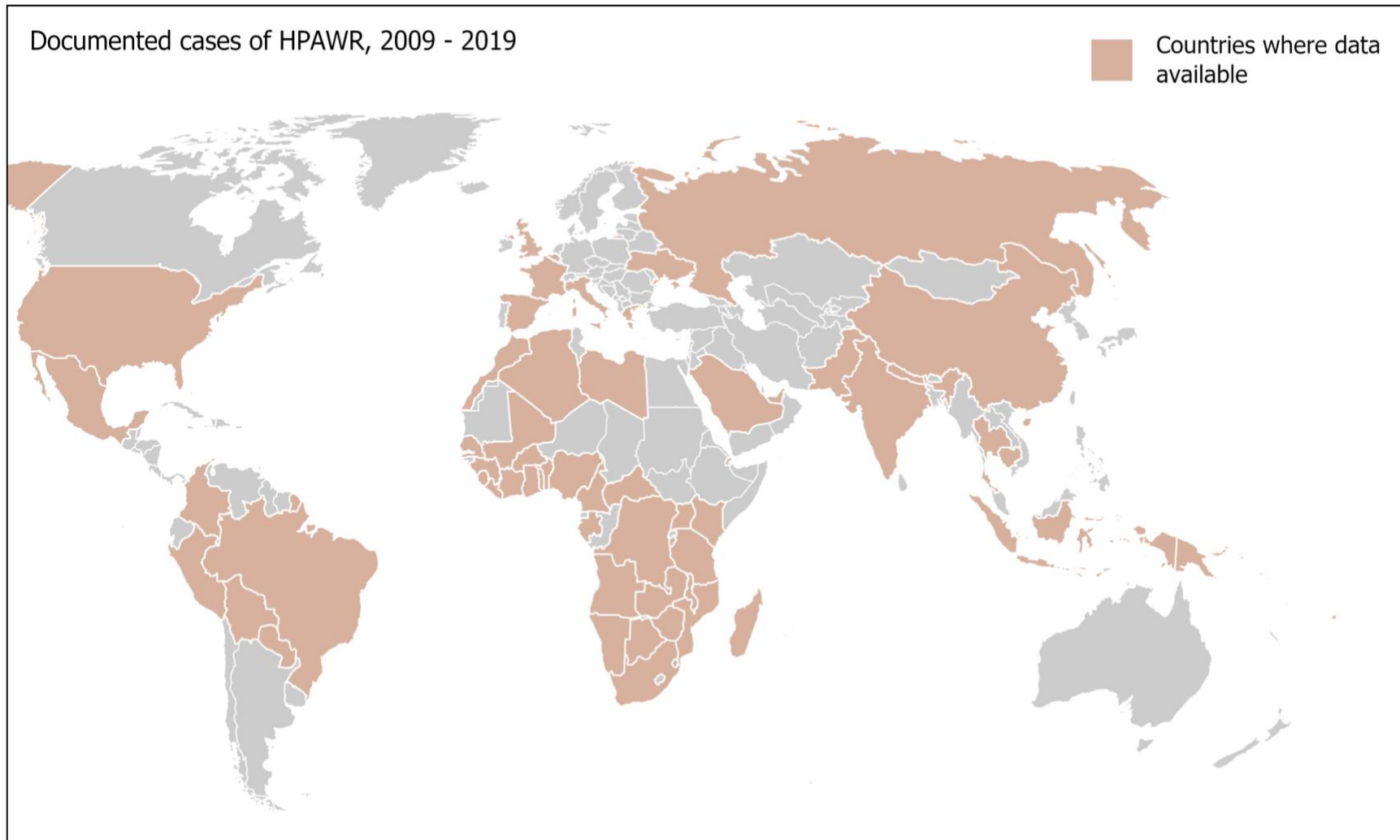
Press Freedoms	The extent to which cases are reported may be impacted by press freedoms.
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### Caveats

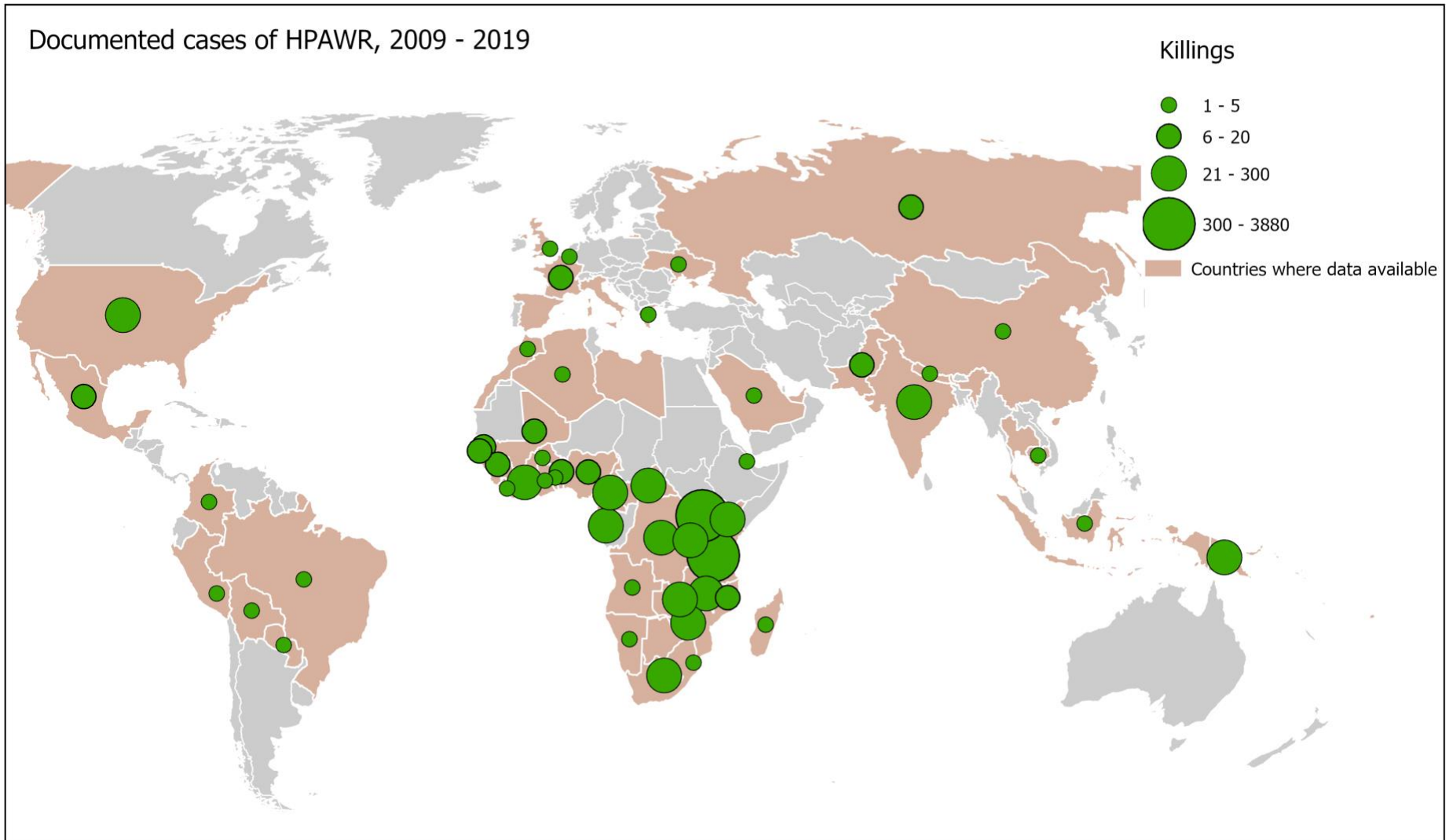
There are limitations on the data resulting from the following caveats

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 HPAWR 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.

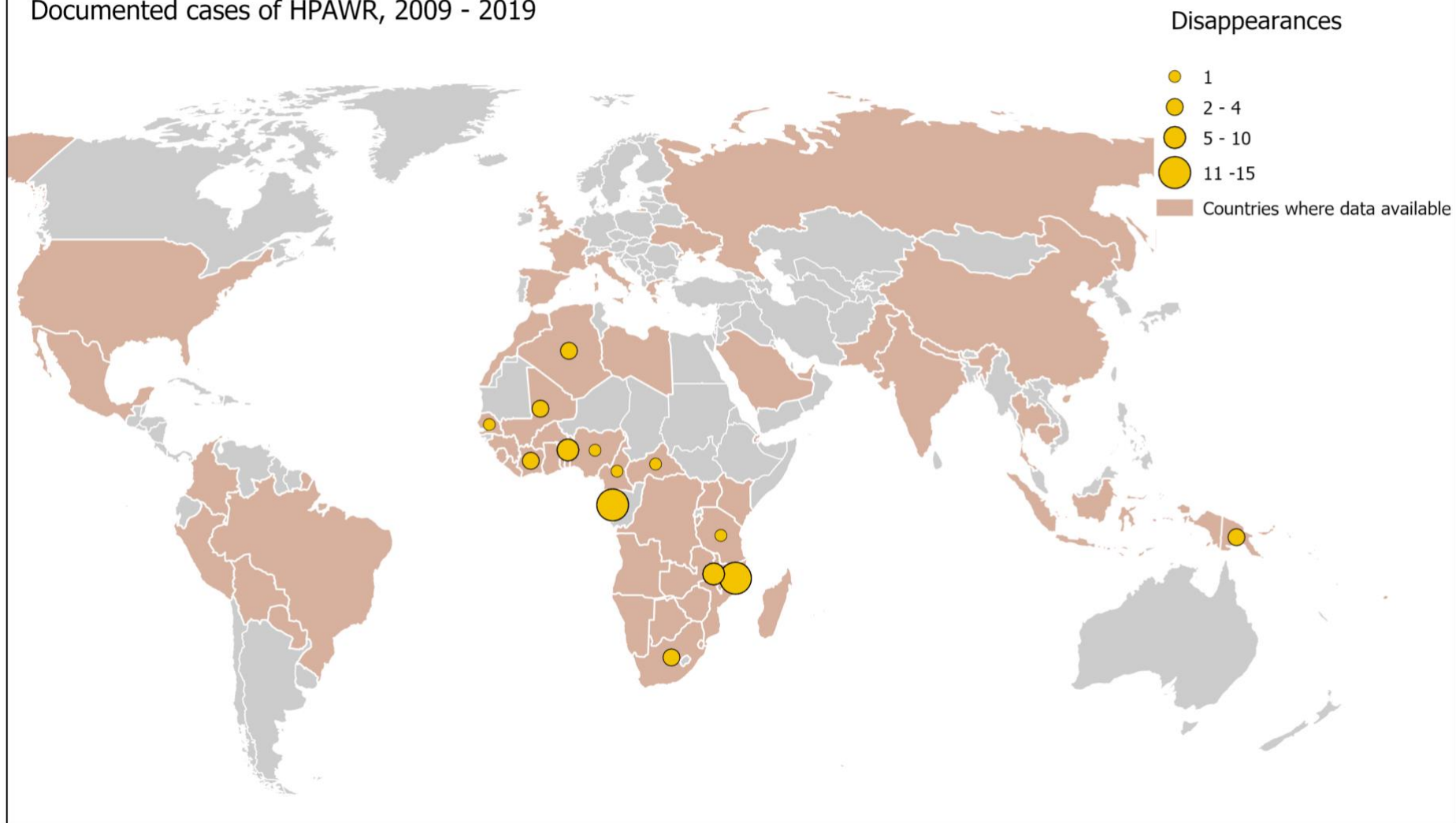
## APPENDIX: ALL DATA



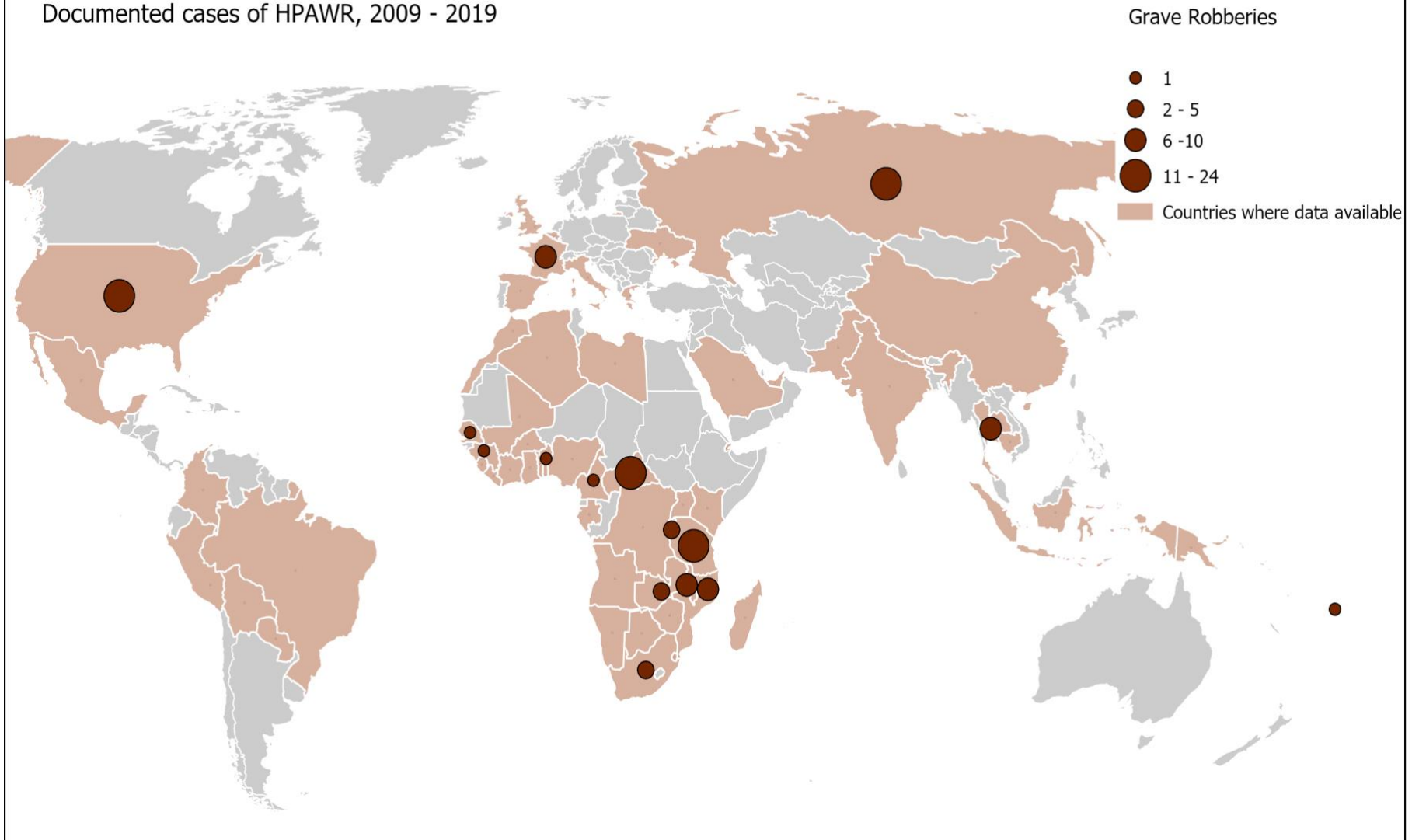
Documented cases of HPAWR, 2009 - 2019



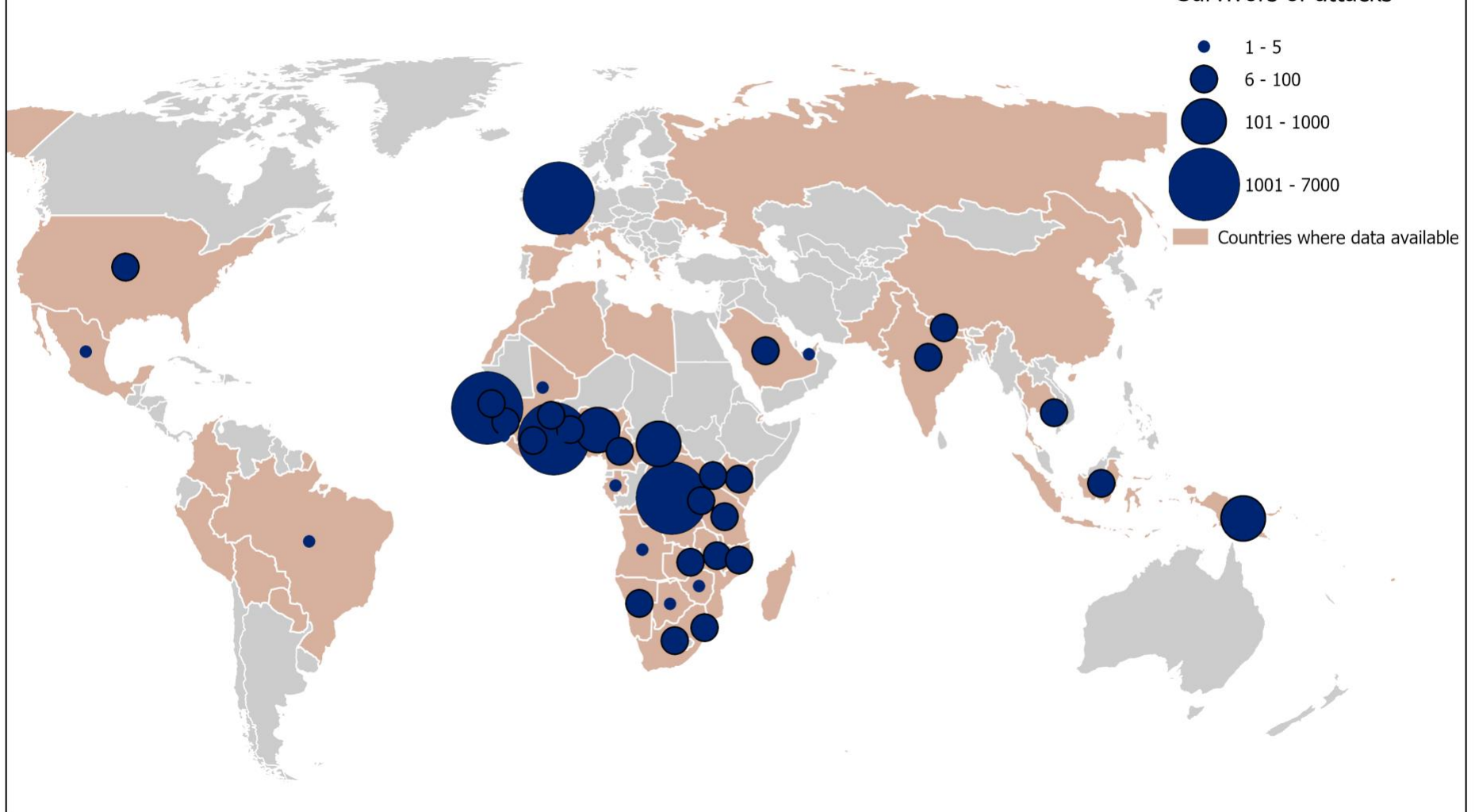
## Documented cases of HPAWR, 2009 - 2019



Documented cases of HPAWR, 2009 - 2019



Documented cases of HPAWR, 2009 - 2019





Documented cases of HPAWR, 2009 - 2019

