

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Harmful Practices impacting Persons with Albinism: Accusations of Witchcraft and Ritual Attacks (“HPAWR”)

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What is HPAWR, and who is harmed by it?

Harmful practices arising from accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks cause serious violations of human rights in numerous countries around the world. While data is hard to source, at least 22,000 victims, across 50 countries and 6 regions, have been documented over a ten-year period.¹

Victims suffer harm ranging from discrimination, stigmatization, disinheritance, banishment from families and communities, to extreme violence, such as beatings, burnings, sexual abuse, cutting of body parts and amputation of limbs, grave desecrations, torture, killings and exploitation in the context of human trafficking.

HPAWR manifests in various forms, of which two are particularly relevant in the context of COVID-19.

- (1) **Accusations:** the belief that an individual has supernatural power that enables them to cause harm or damage to persons or things, often leads to accusations of witchcraft. This often results in attacks on the accused individual and their family, forced exorcism rituals (often violent) or banishment/stigmatisation.
- (2) **Ritual (and violent) attacks:** the belief that the body parts of designated groups of people possess (supernatural) qualities that can facilitate the acquisition of fortune or cure sickness leads to violent attacks and ritual killings. These cases extend to ritual rape and grave desecration for the purpose of stealing and trafficking remains of a targeted person, often including persons with albinism.

¹ 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

Women, children, older persons, and persons with disabilities, in particular those with albinism, are highly vulnerable to both forms of HPAWR, and no gender or class of person is exempt.

What has been the national and international response to HPAWR to date?

Despite the seriousness of these human rights violations, there has rarely been any 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.

At the international level, while there have been statements made condemning these practices in the context of [other forms of human rights abuses](#), there has not been any specific statement and resolution condemning these practices. It is therefore critically important to work toward the adoption of a specific statement and resolution on this phenomena, and even more so in the context of COVID-19.

Why are there concerns about a rise in HPAWR in the context of COVID-19?

The existing knowledge based around HPAWR suggests a likelihood of a significant increase in cases of abuse due to both the direct and indirect impacts of COVID-19 as set out in Table 1. This is supported by the recent call by the Metropolitan Police in London, UK.² The links between HPAWR and [previous pandemics such as HIV/AIDS](#)³ and the [recent Ebola outbreaks](#) have been well [documented](#). The links between periods of uncertainty, fear and suffering and HPAWR have also been extensively documented across many regions of the world and many time periods, including [medieval Europe, 17th century America, parts of the Pacific, South America, and Africa, among others](#). During such periods, many people look for someone or something to blame, or a way to feel safe, and this may include witch hunting, scapegoating and other forms of HPAWR.

To date, only a few cases demonstrating this link between HPAWR and COVID-19 have been reported due to the extreme secrecy that surrounds these types of practices. However, these cases are evidence of the hypothesised links between COVID-19 and HPAWR presented in this document.

- On 27th May in Haiti a girl died after being given turtle blood to drink by a witchdoctor to cure coronavirus.⁴
- On 30 May 2020 in India a Hindu priest beheaded a man in a human sacrifice at a temple in a bid to end the coronavirus pandemic in India.⁵
- On 11th June, residents in Kwale County, Kenya, raised concerns that witchcraft was “killing their business”.⁶

² See - <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-witchcraft-exorcisms-children-possession-police-london-faith-a9494211.html>

³ See also

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237745178_An_Epidemic_of_Witchcraft_The_Implications_of_AIDS_for_the_Post-Apartheid_State; <https://search-proquest-com.virtual.anu.edu.au/docview/1503117486?pq-origsite=summon>

⁴ See - <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/five-month-old-baby-dies-22097002>

⁵ See - <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/11744780/hindu-priest-beheads-man-human-sacrifice-indian-temple-coronavirus/>

⁶ See - <https://www.the-star.co.ke/counties/coast/2020-06-11-matuga-residents-say-witchcraft-killing-business/>

Table 1: Direct and Indirect Impacts of Covid-19 on HPAWRA

<p style="text-align: center;">DIRECT Impacts of Covid-19 on HPAWRA</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">INDIRECT Impacts of Covid-19 on HPAWRA</p>
<p>The increased numbers of illness and death, from COVID-19, leads to the assumption that a witch or wizard must be using witchcraft to cause the misfortune.</p>	<p>Lockdown measures lead to economic pressures (including food, housing and income insecurity), which lead to increased susceptibility in communities to sorcery narratives and violence.</p>
<p>Some community leaders, such as religious leaders, spiritual healers, traditional healers, diviners etc. claim that they know cures to fix the misfortune. This leads to an increase in ritual attacks, such as: ritual rape, mutilations, organ harvesting.</p>	<p>Fear, confusion, uncertainty and insecurity arise through the increase in illness and deaths facing a community; creating increased susceptibility in communities to sorcery narratives.</p>
<p>Stigmatisation of vulnerable peoples who are blamed for causing the misfortune (e.g. illness and deaths caused by COVID-19). New narratives are formed that combine existing prejudices with new ones related to COVID-19, increasing the vulnerability of already vulnerable individuals and groups.</p>	<p>The increase in deaths and sickness from COVID-19 places unprecedented strains upon health care systems, triggering even more accusations given the increased episodes of misfortune.</p>
	<p>Law and order officials engaged in COVID-19 responses and less able to prevent/respond to harmful practices related to witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks due to their other commitments such as policing lockdown.</p>

The Way Forward

It is crucial that the UN Human Rights Council, together with other international, regional and national human rights mechanisms produce clear and compelling statements condemning HPAWR, and adopt a subsequent resolution on the issue. These types of human rights abuses multiply in contexts of fear and uncertainty. A statement from leading human rights institutions, particularly on behalf of the victims and their families, will provide a source of authority and legitimacy for law enforcers, advocacy and support groups who struggle against these insidious abuses around the world. Such support, which targets the most vulnerable and marginalised, is vital in seeking to prevent a further wave of misery and suffering resulting from COVID-19.