

Forum: General Assembly Third Committee

Issue: Ending all practices and traditions that may impair physical, mental, and sexual health of women and children such as forced, child, and early marriage, prostitution, and child pornography

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Introduction

Traditional cultural practices reflect values and beliefs held by a community for periods often spanning generations. Every social grouping in the world has a sequence of very specific traditional cultural practices and beliefs, some of which are beneficial to all members, while others are harmful to a specific group, such as women and children. These harmful traditional practices include female genital mutilation; forced feeding of women; early marriage; the taboo on birth control; nutritional taboos and traditional birth practices; gender preference and its implications for the status of the child; female infanticide; early pregnancy; and dowry price. Despite their harmful nature and their violation of international human rights laws, such practices persist because they are not questioned and take on an aura of morality in the eyes of those practising them.

Unfortunately, there are still many traditions and practices that may impair physical, mental and sexual health of women and children. These practices have no therapeutic value but are rather for cultural, traditional or, as an example religious motives and are harmful to the concerning victim. Since these practices could change a person's and his/her surrounding's life in an irreversible way, measures should be taken.

Since these traditions are rooted deeply into man's society they have been hard to eliminate. Therefore any measures should be focused on abolishing these practices on local, regional, national and international level. Even though this triple mobilization has already been put up by various nations.

Shame and stigma are two of the key words in this case. Many women are afraid to open up about the rituals they have been put through. This is indeed because of shame and because of the taboo inside the victim's community. Luckily, organisations like the Inter African Committee on traditional practices affecting the health of women and children (IAC) are front liners on this issue. The Mission of IAC is the promotion of gender equality and contribution to the improvement of the health status, social, economic, political, human rights and quality of life of African women and children through the elimination of harmful traditional practices. Since this issue is very delicate, measures should be taken with caution.



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Definition of Key Terms

Sexual Violence

Sexual violence is defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as: “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work.”

IAC (Inter African Committee on traditional practices affecting the health of women and children)

IAC is an international and African regional umbrella body that has been working on policy programmes and actions to eliminate Harmful Traditional Practices in the African Region and worldwide.

FGM (female genital mutilation)

The ritual cutting or removal of some or all of the external female genitalia. The practice is found in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, and within communities from countries in which FGM is common. UNICEF estimated in 2016 that 200 million women living today in 30 countries 27 African countries, Indonesia, Iraqi Kurdistan and Yemen have undergone the procedures.

Background information

First of all, it is very important to recognise that there are many different types of tradition that may impair any sort of harm to women and children. Traditions vary from birth- to widowhood rites and happen at any point in a girls life. Often the victim's community doesn't realise the physical and mental harm the tradition impairs, because of its common nature in the victim's environment. Because it is hard to imagine the variety of traditions, follows a list of a couple of the countless rites:

Widowhood rites: If a husband is deceased the concerning woman is immediately held the main suspect. She is forced to prove her innocence, and she must undergo extremely distressing rites, such as drinking the water used to wash the dead body. She is denied sleep, food and appropriate care.

Sororate and Levirate: Sororate is a situation whereby a deceased wife is replaced by her younger sister. Levirate is a practice which consists of marrying a widow to the brother of her deceased husband. These two harmful traditional practices are as widespread as early marriages/forced marriages, and have serious consequences touching on partners' procreation since the cause of the deaths are not taken into account.

Trokosi: This is a practice which consists of giving away young girls to gods or fetishes without sacrificing them on the altar. The girls are surrendered to fetish temples to live there and be used as domestic and sexual slaves. They are being made to pay for crimes which are said to have been committed by a member of the girl's family or for some social wrongdoing generations before the birth of the girl.

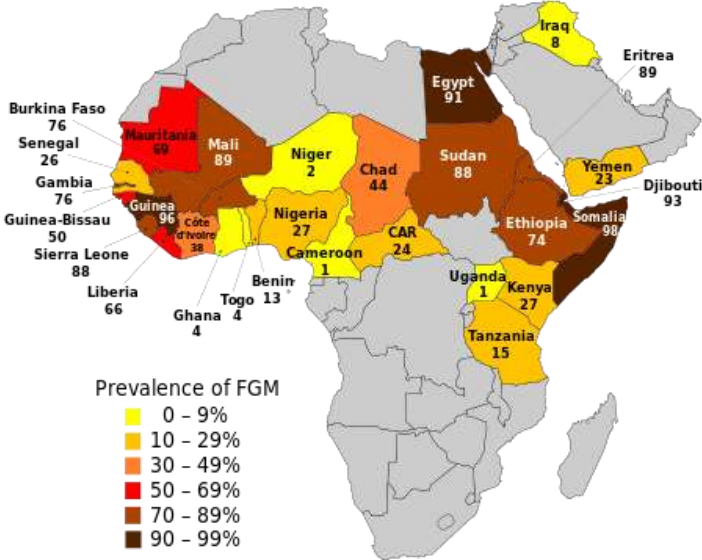
There is need to acknowledge that the link between Harmful Traditional Practices and Peoples’ cultures is strong and delicate, and that simple deliberation and blind enforcement of legislation lead too often to undesired outcomes or to results running contrary to expectations. More often than not, as some overlook the universal nature of human rights, they readily establish an antinomy between Western inspired laws and traditional practices which are rooted in the depths of communities around the world. The big number and the variety of Harmful Traditional Practices make it difficult to take each country on board in the development and enactment of encompassing legislation. For this reason, when talking about legislation, we need to pinpoint all forms of legislation and regulation that can help to protect women.

Major countries and organisations involved

IAC This organisation has been making local, regional, national and international policies concerning traditions that may impair the sexual, physical or mental health of women and children in Africa and knows how to reach out to victims in secluded communities.

UNICEF helps women and children cope with their experiences and brings them back into society. They make policies just like IAC to support the victims and abolish the concerning traditions.

Somalia has the highest percentage of FGM victims with a total of 98% of its female inhabitants and is guilty of performing multiple rites the UN is frowning upon, such as child marriage and prostitution.



Ethiopia is the country with the most traditions frowned upon by the United Nations. With traditions like Trokosi, Neck stretching, FGM, Widowhood Rites and other bizarre phenomena this country’s government is working hard on bettering their place in the global community by making policies. Unfortunately, they still experience trouble enforcing those policies, because of Ethiopia’s hard to reach rural grounds.

Previous attempts to solve the issue

ANNEX, a successful program in the 90's. Giving aid to women and children in regions needed, helping victims and abolishing traditions. Unfortunately, ANNEX had problems with reaching the rural outdoors.

The 21st session of the HRC in 2012, tried to bring understanding to various rituals by creating a clear view on them for Western nations, unfortunately, that did not work.

Furthermore, UNICEF and IAC are busy with making policies, however, none of those policies have ever proven successful.

Timeline

1958-Action on traditional practices affecting the health of women and children was first taken in 1958 ECOSOC invited the WHO to undertake a study of the persistence of customs subjecting girls to ritual operations and to communicate the results of the study to the Commission on the Status of Women.

1960-The issue was debated at the Seminar on the Participation of Women in Public Life, held in Addis Ababa for the African region

1979-The WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean in Khartoum marked a milestone in the campaign against harmful traditional practices, setting the pace and direction for international and national plans of action.

9 March 1988- The Commission on Human Rights requested the Sub-Commission to consider measures to be taken at the national and international levels to eliminate the practices in question and to report to the Commission on the subject of harmful traditions.

26 August 1994-The creation of ANNEX by the commission of Human Rights



Trokosi children in Ghana (Source: MGAFCICA.com)

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