

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

AND HARMFUL TRADITIONAL
CULTURAL PRACTICES

AFRICAN WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION



AFRICAN WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION
against female genital mutilation

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VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND HARMFUL TRADITIONAL/CULTURAL PRACTICES

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„Violence against women and harmful traditional/cultural practices”

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Session 1 - Violence against women

Questions for discussions

- What is violence? Is it only physical?
- Can you name some forms of violence you see around you?
- What are the main causes for the violences?
- Who is responsible for the violences and who are the victims?
- How can the rights of women and children be protected and promoted?
- Do you know of any national and international laws and regulations protecting children and women?

Summary

- No women deserve a life full of violence.
- Women and girl-children regardless of race, colour, religion, or class face violence throughout their life.
- Women face physical, psychological, emotional, and verbal violences at the household and community level.
- There are national and international mechanisms (UN) in place but more action is required to implement it at the ground level.

Violence against women and girl children is the most common and harmful form of violence in society outside of a war situation. The victims suffer from physical or psychological violence starting from their childhood. It stems from their subordinate social status and their subjugation due to their gender. This is strongly enforced by tradition/culture. All the violences women face especially in the poor and developing countries originate from their economic and social status. The more obvious and widespread violences are observed in the non-industrialised countries. In the developed world the violences take different shapes.

The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (UN Resolution 48/104, Dec. 1993) gives the detail by what violence means.



Article 1. „The term, violence against women’ means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty whether occurring in public or private life.”

Article 2. „Violence against women shall be understood to encompass, but not limited to the following: physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family: wife-battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry related violence, marital rape, and female genital mutilation, and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal and violence related to exploitation”

One can give a lot of different examples how the life of women is being affected in each society. The degree and the type of the violence varies from country to country and from community to community. In the poor and developing countries the degree of violence is magnified by poverty, alleged justifications surrounding tradition and culture and religion. Economic disparity and unemployment aggravate the violence. Prohibition laws must be put into effect at the ground level.

Here are some obvious physical, sexual, psychological and emotional violence against women:

1. Violence in a **war and civil and ethnic conflict situations** women are displaced, tortured, raped and sexually violated and left shelter less, left to hunger and diseases, and miserable life in camps. In this situation children are also similarly violated and left to all forms of misery including hunger and diseases. They are the main victims and targets without any protection or alternative in a war situation. They are the ones without any option or means to free themselves from the situation. If they are lucky help may arrive but in most cases very late to remedy or reduce the physical or psychological damages.

2. Family and household level:

- Domestic and physical violence : hitting, slapping, kicking, threats, insults etc.
- Forced marriage or child marriage
- Female genital mutilation
- Bride wealth related violences
- Rape and abuse of children
- Financial abuse including inheritance (controlled by men)



3. Community level violence

- Honour killing (for the sake of family pride)
- Widow inheritance (in cases related to bride price)
- Sexual violence (gang rape)
- Human trafficking
- Commercial sexual exploitation (prostitution, sex tourism)

These different forms of violence are protected and maintained by one form or other traditional practises. All of the above listed violences have one thing in common – gender-based violences and mostly related to the institution of marriage. This is a clear sign of unequal power relation between men and women and the main victims are women and girl-children.

The degree of violence depends on a lot of factors. In the poor communities where poverty affects life and social relations, the violences identified at household and community level are widespread and deeply ingrained in the society. It is taken to be the norm, for example, wife beating showing that the husband has control over his wife. In areas where marriage is the only option for women, the violence related to marriage, sexual relations are also widespread. Since it is claimed that the violence has the backing of tradition and culture makes it a norm of the community and very difficult to challenge or change and stand up against the violence at the household as well as the community level. The prevention and elimination of domestic violence needs to look deep into the tradition and the real cause behind it – poverty, lack of education, unemployment and absence of opportunities and means.

Women have the right to be free from violence and no woman should be a victim of violence. Internationally there are legal instruments in place to protect the victims consisting of conventions, treaties, declarations and resolutions. Besides legislations and declarations, it is very important that the approach should focus on information, change mode of life and behaviour. People must be aware that violence does not benefit anyone. It has physical and psychological consequences.

Examples of broad approaches to tackle the problem of violence:

1. UN General Assembly Resolution 53/117, Feb. 1999

3 (c) Calls upon all states „To develop and implement national legislation and policies prohibiting traditional or customary practices affecting the health of women and girls, including female genital mutilation, inter alias, through appropriate measures against



those responsible, and to establish, if they have not done so, a concrete national mechanism for the implementation and monitoring of legislation, law enforcement and national policies."

3 (d) Calls upon all states *„To intensify efforts to raise awareness of and to mobilize international and national public opinion concerning the harmful effects of traditional or customary practices affecting the health of women and girls, including female genital mutilation, in particular through education, dissemination of information, training, the media, and local community meetings, in order to achieve the total elimination of these practices."*

2. European Parliament Resolution 2001

1. *Strongly condemns FGM as a violation of fundamental human rights.*
2. *Urges that the European Union and the Member States should work together for the sake of human rights, the integrity of the person, freedom of conscience and the right to health on the harmonization of existing legislation on the subject of FGM.*
3. *Confirms that FGM by its nature and consequences constitute a serious problem for a society as a whole; nevertheless, the measures adopted must involve communities and tally with their situation so that members of the communities or groups affected become convinced of the need to eradicate such practices.*

There are other resolutions passed by UN agencies and others:

- Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa 2003
- International Conventions and Resolutions Declaration on the Eliminations of Violence against Women 1993
- UN General Assembly Resolution 53/117 (1999)
- African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child
- Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women

In the African context many countries have legislations banning harmful practices in particular female genital mutilation. It has now become a global concern due to the migration of immigrants from risk countries of Africa.



In the West, America, Australia and Europe have legislations and decrees against violence and harmful practices (female genital mutilation): Australia, Austria, Sweden, Netherlands, Belgium, Norway, UK, Denmark, Germany, Italy, France and Spain, New Zealand, Cyprus and Canada. In some African countries and the West, the protection of women and children falls under the ministries concerned with children and women and covered by Criminal Codes.

In the risk African countries legislations have been passed. Egypt (2008), Ethiopia (2004), Burkina Faso (1996), Ivory Coast (1998), Eritrea (2007), Djibouti (1995), Ghana (1994), Guinea (2000), Kenya (2001), Senegal (1999), South Africa (2005), Tanzania (1998), Uganda (2010) (UNICEF).



Session 2 - Tradition/culture

Questions for discussions

- What is tradition?
- Are all traditions/cultures good?
- Name some harmful practices?
- Why do harmful practices survive?
- What should be done to prevent and eliminate harmful practices?

Summary

- Culture/tradition is a learned behaviour and passes from generation to generation.
- It affects and determines behaviour and way of life and no one can exist outside of it.
- It is dynamic and not permanent.
- Values and norms change with time and human interactions.
- All traditions are not beneficial and the harmful ones affect the health and well being of individuals.

Like all definitions there are different interpretations and definitions of culture. A simple dictionary definition is „the totality of socially transmitted behaviour, patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions and all other products of human work and thought“.

UN agency, UNESCO, gives a more detailed definition.

„ ... Culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional feature of society or social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.“

This definition points out that all aspects of life are products of human work. Each community will have its distinctive differences based on its social relations, production level and growth. It is a manifestation of its social relations and response to life and nature. Based on these definitions, it can be concluded that culture consists of:



- What people think and believe. This consists of mental processes, beliefs, knowledge and values. It is based on belief systems and value systems. The belief aspect includes legends, stories, myths giving insight how one should feel, think and/or behave. It is strongly associated with religion and can overlap the system.

The value system differentiates right from wrong behaviours and feelings. They guide the rest of culture comprise ideas of importance in the life. Norms are expectations of how people should behave. It is a taboo to challenge norms. Each has systems of enforcing it – sanctions, isolation, excluding from social life and any community activities. Norms have the status of law. The elders are the main protectors and enforcers of norms.

- What they do and how do they organize themselves. Institutions are the structures of society within which values and norms are transmitted, for example, marriage.
- Material products they produce: written languages, governments, buildings, and other man-made things are products of culture. They reflect cultural patterns which are things that were made and used through cultural knowledge and skills.

So when we say that somebody is a Nigerian, a Senegalese, a Turkish or a German, what comes to our mind is not only a geographical entity but a series of entities such as traditional music, music instruments, food, customs, weddings, funerals, rituals, hair style, body decorations, etc. It is a mark, an identity that makes the individual a member of a community/society and different from others. This is a manifestation of the fact that each individual is the product of the particular culture in which he or she lives. That is why each defends his/her culture strongly. Even if it is harmful, it is fully supported. Challenge of tradition/culture comes after awareness and change of values and behaviours.

Properties of culture/tradition

- Culture is not permanently fixed on the contrary it changes dynamically over time and space. Human interaction is the main factor initiating cultural changes. Political, economic, and social changes speed up cultural changes. Even at household level change of income will lead to change of behaviour and norms. Education, information and awareness contribute to cultural changes and cultural assimilation.
- Culture/tradition is a social phenomenon. It is always determined by human interaction. Culture would not exist without human interaction and would make no sense without it. Without human interaction we would not have for example language,



music, rituals, etc. There will be no culture without people and people without culture.

- Culture is a learned behaviour not only in classrooms but throughout life. Inculcation of culture begins at a very young age. Culture is transmitted to the young by the parents, elders and community to follow traditional norms, values and behaviour. No one can live in a community without adopting the norms and values of the community which he lives in.
- It is symbolic with established systems of meaning, for example language. Some symbols may have different meanings in different societies, e.g. looking into the face while speaking to another: an African looks at his own feet or the floor out of respect, while the same behaviour may be interpreted as an indication of lying or being ashamed. It is a question of understanding reached by the community members.
- One is born into a culture and is shaped by it. Individuals have minimal chance of changing the culture that they were born in and cannot live outside it. Trying to leave outside it leaves one outside of the community – an outcast not wanted or accepted by the community and society. This is the main reason and bond that keeps people in line.
- Culture/tradition has no qualities of permanence or unchangeability. It grows and changes. It is adaptive. Human interaction through intermarriage, trade and tourism, change mode of leaving, technological growth (and now tourism) affect these characteristics of culture. These characteristics give hope that harmful practices can be prevented and eliminated with the right approach. It is a gradual change and cannot be enforced to change. The change cannot be expected to be completed within a defined timetable. One cannot say that the practice at such a time will be history.

Culture/tradition sets the value system and belief system. These determine one's interpretation of life, feel, think, behave and lead his life in the given community systems. Culture enforces value and belief systems. Individual actions must be within systems established by culture. Any diversion will lead to isolation. Accepting norms and living by it makes an individual a member of the community.

Culture is a medium of communication and identity and must be respected. This does not in any way mean that HTPs should be entertained and promoted. As long as any culture promotes practices that affect the health and well being of individuals (mostly women and



children) should be fought by all means seriously from all sides. However, on the other hand strong belief in tradition should not prevent changes that grow out of the changeability nature of culture.

Types of culture/tradition

Culture promotes practices leading to the health, well-being (psychologically, emotionally, physically) and social interaction of individual members in the community. However, all traditions do not fulfil all these expectations. There are some harmful practices which result in pain, harm, psychological trauma. The fight against practices affecting the well being of an individual is under way in different communities globally. Addressing the issue of harmful practices is no longer a taboo. In the past raising the issue of harmful practices was considered as an assault on culture/tradition and offending the protectors and practitioners. The fight against harmful practices is a process which goes along with the change of behaviour and norms which again depend on other factors, such as education, economic progress and social and cultural contacts.

There are two types of cultures: the beneficial and the harmful ones. The harmful traditional practices (HTP) become deep-rooted due to poverty, ignorance, and other social situations such as the role of the patriarchal society, lack of means and opportunities. HTPs are more widespread and deeply rooted in rural, poor, under privileged communities with no or poor access to education, information and the outside world.

Here the focus is on some of the harmful traditional practices in particular female genital mutilation (FGM) which according to WHO more than 3 million girls are estimated to be at risk for FGM annually and more than 200 million girls and women alive today have been subjected to the practice. It is not limited to a few risk countries (mainly Africa) but has become global because of population movement.



Session 3 - Harmful traditional practices (HTP)

I Female Genital Mutilation

Female genital mutilation is the worst form of violence against babies, little girls, and women which is practised in the name of tradition and culture, religion and social relationships. It used to be known as female circumcision, excision and genital cutting. However, now a consensus has been reached to be named as female genital mutilation to indicate the degree of damage the operation brings.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other operations to the female genital organs whether for cultural, religious or other non-therapeutic reasons. The consequences of the mutilation are irreversible lasting the whole life time and some may be fatal. The harm becomes internalized with time. According to WHO more than 3 million girls are estimated to be at risk for FGM annually. It also estimates that more than 200 million girls and women alive today have been subjected to the practice in 30 countries. More than half of these live in Indonesia, Egypt and Ethiopia. 44 million are below the age of 15. (<https://www.who.int>).

Female genital mutilation is not easily manifested but comes out when the complications show themselves, for example, during child delivery or other complications requiring medical treatment. Considering the long term consequences on the well being of the victims and its irreversibility, mutilation expresses the real damage it causes on the health and well being of the victims.

The operation is done using special knives, scissors, razor blades, kitchen knives, and done under unhygienic conditions by excisors with little or no skills. The victims are infants a week old up to the age of puberty. These situations tend to magnify the suffering of the victim. In some cases, it may be fatal due to excessive bleeding, infection and other operational complications.

The origin of the practice is unknown and trace back to the distant past. It is assumed that it originated in ancient Egypt and Sudan. It is mostly practised in the African (about 28 countries) countries in the Sahara belt (see annex) lying between West Africa and East Africa (the Horn of Africa), pocket areas in Asia, Arabian Peninsula, Australia and Latin America. UNICEF suggests that FGM exists in places including Colombia, India, Malaysia, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (<http://data.unicef.org>) Prevalence varies from



ethnic to ethnic group and from region to region and the degree of enforcement of traditional practices. Immigrants from risk African countries have introduced it to Europe and America and Australia, Canada. The practitioners consider it to be a connecting bridge with their communities and their expression and up-keeping of their tradition. These people carry the operation in their own countries or their host country by inviting circumcisors from home, without doubt illegally.

The taboo of FGM has been broken and campaigns are under-way in different parts of the world where it exists. The campaign against FGM has focused on the practice as health issue, human rights issue and violence against women. In the 1970s the campaign was spearheaded by Fran P. Hosken with her „Hosken Report“; in the 1980s by the Inter-African Committee (IAC) throughout the 28 African risk countries, UN agencies (WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA), and NGOs working for the well being of women and children (very long list). UN is planning to eliminate FGM by 2030 as part of its Sustainable Development goal.

The deliberate cutting or removal of a female's external genitalia has different forms which range from the mild form of excision of the foreskin to infibulation, the most drastic and painful operation. WHO recognizes and divides the operation as follows:

Type I: known as clitoridectomy is the excision of the prepuce (foreskin), with or without excision of part or all of the clitoris. This is considered to be the mildest form. Also known as Sunna among the Muslims. The type of procedure also varies, mainly with ethnicity 90% of FGM cases include either Types I (mainly clitoridectomy), and II (excision).

Type II: excision of the clitoris is the most common form and involves the partial or total excision of the labia (inner) minora (small lips). In west Africa (Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, etc. the tendency is to remove flesh clitoridectomy and/or excision).

Type III: Infibulation. Is the removal of the clitoral hood, the clitoris, the labia minora, the labia majora, and the stitching of the vaginal opening leaving a small hole to permit flow of urine and menstrual blood. Defibulation takes place for child birth and before sex. Infibulation, which is the most severe form of FGM, is mostly practised in the north-eastern region of Africa (the Horn of Africa): Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan.

Type IV: Unclassified. Piercing of the clitoris, burning of the clitoris and surrounding areas, scraping or cutting the vagina, tightening or narrowing the vagina by using herbs or corrosive substances. Pricking piercing, incising.



II Marriage Related Harmful Traditional Practices

Besides FGM which is alleged to facilitate marriage, there are other marriages related to abuses under the cover of tradition. There are different types of marriage differing from community to community. It is within this aspect of life most of the violence takes place against young girls and women. These violence are not less disastrous than FGM and have similar consequences on the psychology and physical health of the victims. The ideal marriage is love marriage reached by the mutual understanding, consensus and compatibility of two adults who have reached the legal age to decide their own future. This is found mainly in urban areas where social arrangements, such as workplaces or school facilitates the situation outside the control of the immediate and extended family. The marriages that take place outside of the official one with mutually agreed contract between two partners usually begins and ends with violence. The women involved have to pay heavily in their physical and psychological life. The following are some examples that women find themselves in:

- Marriage by abduction
- Forced marriage
- Arranged marriages
- Child marriage
- Widow inheritance
- Polygamy
- Virginty test

Marriage by abduction or kidnapping: the bridegroom and his close friends kidnap the bride to be and take her to the bridegrooms place or secret hiding place. In some cases, this is an outcome of the bride's family refusal to recognize the bridegroom as a good suitor on the grounds of his income, family status, or ethnicity, etc. In this case violence is used to abuse and forcefully marry. This is the wrong way to start a married life which should be based on mutual agreement and understanding.

It is considered a violence against the woman because force is used, and she was not given the chance or the option to make her own decision. In some cases the bride can be an accomplice to the abduction especially if the parents are consistent on their decision of rejecting the partnership. Usually after the abduction after some time, the bridegroom sends elders to negotiate with the bride's parents on his behalf. Before peace returns and is accepted by his in-laws, the bridegroom may have to pay compensation. Meanwhile, if a child is born it will speed up the process of negotiation. After this sometimes long process He is the marriage is recognized and the bridegroom forgiven. The question is how long the marriage will last since it started with violence without mutual agreement with free will.



Time will not by itself create a peaceful situation as the marriage is one sided decision – the man. This is quite impossible in the West. Immigrants from risk countries have no possibility of kidnapping for marriage purposes. Besides there will be no family interference which results in the kidnapping.

Forced marriages: takes place when the head of the household, the father, gives the hand of his daughter to one of his choice without consulting anyone, including the girl and mother. It is a one man decision. The girl has no say and right to question her father's decision. This type of marriage is totally against customary and official marriage which requires the approval of family elders who decide the compatibility of the marriage, putting into consideration the age differences, income and resources, etc. This type of marriage in most cases does not work. It ends up in divorce and the bride's flight to unknown areas to start new life as house a maid or a prostitute.

Arranged marriages: this is a marriage arranged by two families to bond the families friendship. In some cases even unborn infant may be theoretically promised in marriage. If the promise is fulfilled, assuming that one will be a boy and the other a girl, it will take place at a very young age, even under 15 years of age. Both partners may be too young to start a family and dependent on their parents for support and decision.

The responsibility of choosing and deciding the marriage is outside the concern and decision of the concerned partners. Basically, it is a family affair and the consent of the bride and bridegroom is not essential and required. It is commonly arranged by the parents and/or their agents when the marriage is seen primarily of uniting two families. Behind the so-called uniting two families there must be strong economic and/or political motives.

In addition to family unification, there is the assumption that young adults are too inexperienced to make a wise decision on their future married life. In some cases, they are the last to know, especially in the case of the bride. Such arrangements may follow certain rules of selection considering the extended family, religious community, economic class, ethnic, age, etc. Parents play an active role and are directly responsible for choosing or approving a partner for their child. Disobedience can result in being outcast from the family and disinherited. In cases of failed marriages, divorce can only be made with the approval of those elders who initially approved the marriage. Even at the end if the case has to go to court, it must go through the elders. The court may also direct it to the elders committee.

Child marriage: a young girl, too young to be married, too young to be a wife or be pregnant is given in marriage to an older person. A girl too young to be a mother, does not know what sex life means is put into difficult situation – physical and psychological. The main



factors putting a young girl in such a situation may be the parent's greed and economic advantage (bride price) and ensuring virginity at the time of marriage. Marriage under 18 years of age has its own consequences including, health problems (fistula), unwanted and unplanned pregnancy and vulnerability to violence, hopelessness and helplessness.

Widow inheritance (Levirate marriage): is case where a widow marries her brother-in-law. She is considered as a property belonging to the family. This kind of marriage has its own justifications. Basically, it is an economic reason in which the wealth and children of the deceased remain within the family. After all, they have paid the bride price to the widow's parents in good time.

Polygamy: it is case when one man is married to more than one wife. It is only Islam that allows man to marry up to four wives and the conditions for such marriage are so strict many do not attempt it. One cannot satisfy all equally materially, emotionally and sexual satisfaction. The financial expenses strongly discourage such kind of unions. Customary and traditional marriages do not limit the number of wives a man can marry. Christianity allows only one wife.

Virginity test: virginity is considered of prime importance and it is indispensable at the time of first marriage. Proof of a bride's virginity on the first night of marriage is the sign of her faithfulness and control of her sexual emotions, and an honour for the parents for proper upbringing. The opposite is a disgrace to her parents and herself. In the case of the man, it is no point of discussion.

III Other HTPs

- Honour killing
- Physical violence
- Female infanticide
- Male child preference
- Rape and abuse of children (molestation)
- Lip plates
- Rape
- Sexual violence (gang rape)
- Forced feeding of pregnant mothers
- Stalking
- Incest



Honour killing: honour is manifested in nearly all areas of life: economic, social and moral. Victims of honour killing are assumed to have stepped outside of the social norms bringing shame and disgrace to the family. Situations which bring shame and dishonour includes a woman having interaction with men, flirting outside one's religion, pregnancy before marriage, losing virginity before marriage, premarital sex. The task is undertaken by a close family member, such as the brother.

Physical battering: a women is put under control by the husband or partner through physical violence, beating, threats, and isolation. This is a global problem and in some cases the violence ends in death. Poor income and alcoholism aggravate the problem in urban areas.

Incest: sexual abuse of children by any male member of the family. The victims are physically forced or coerced. Some end up being pregnant. Psychologically, they feel betrayed by their protectors. Cases come to surface after it is too late. It is like a father becoming a grandfather to his own child.

The other HTPs are self explanatory.



Session 4 - Alleged justifications for harmful traditional practices (specially FGM)

Questions for discussions

- What are the harmful traditional practices?
- Who are the defenders of the practices and why?
- Why do HTPs have strong hold in the community?
- Does education make a difference?
- If one knew the consequences would he/she go through it?
- What is the role of elders, community leaders and religious leaders?

Summary

- It is believed to increase marriageability.
- It is assumed to ensure premarital virginity and marital fidelity and woman's libido.
- FGM is associated with femininity and modesty.
- Makes girl clean and beautiful.
- All the justifications are refutable and none fulfil alleged expectations.

Since culture sets a community's values and norms, numerous justifications or rationalizations are wrongly used to endorse and maintain HTPs. The following are some of the attributes associated with FGM. One has to ask oneself how far these justifications are achievable. Do they meet the alleged expectations? If one looks deep into each justification, one can easily refute each point and show that it should not be defended under any circumstance, especially now that the taboo surrounding HTPs like FGM has been broken.

FGM as an initiation rite: (sociological). It was performed at puberty on girls 12 to 14 years old, or just before the onset of menstruation and just before marriage. It stands for a transition in age status from girlhood to womanhood and to marriageable age. It is a signal for a girl's readiness for marriage and availability. The initiation plays a big role in marriage. The defence of the initiation rite as an example from Kenya:



„In the matrimonial relation, the rite of passage is the deciding factor. No proper Gikuyu would dream of marrying a girl who has not been circumcised, and vice versa. It is a taboo for a Gikuyu man or woman to have sexual relations with someone who has not undergone the operation.“ (President Kenyatta, Kenya)

Before initiation the girls are kept in seclusion for a period of time and given instructions on morality, tribal laws, social codes, being a good and caring wife and good mother. Group initiations create a sort of club to which only circumcised ones are accepted. In short, FGM is considered to be a necessary part of training a girl for adulthood and marriage. In reality adulthood and marriage can be achieved without undergoing the operation or free from the physical and psychological consequences.

FGM and marriage opportunities: marriage is not an option but a must for survival for most women in Africa and other poor countries. Marriage and reproduction are the only guarantee for women to gain economic security and social status. In risk countries a woman is denied the prospect of marriage without undergoing FGM. An unmarried woman is an outcast in the society and a burden on her family not only financially but also their honour. A woman without children or an unmarried women have a very difficult life and a devastated old age in the absence of family or community help. Therefore, FGM is more likely to be carried out to increase the opportunity for marriage and guarantee security.

FGM and virginity: in Africa and developing world marriage does not come easily without its sacrifice. Virginity which is the base for marriageability must be maintained at the time of the wedding and the lack of it has damaging social consequences to the individual as well as to the parents. A girl is expected to bring honour to her family through preservation of her virginity. A virgin girl is a pride to her parents and family. Even though honour killing is not a norm in Africa, unlike the Middle Eastern countries, a girl not a virgin on her wedding day will have a miserable life in the community because she is expected to arrive at the marriage bed untouched. In some cases, those who fail the expectations of the community may be forced to flee from their community. This is one reason why FGM is assumed to be a means of ensuring virginity.

FGM and women's sexuality: women are presumed to be weak in areas of emotion and, therefore, must be controlled through diminishing their desire for sex. The removal of the sensitive clitoris is assumed to reduce desire and promotes fidelity and avoid temptations. Uncircumcised women are assumed to be over sexy. „FGM is believed to protect a women against her over sexed nature, saving her from temptation, suspicion and disgrace while preserving her chastity“ (MRG 1992/93). The reduced desire even during married life is expected to ensure faithfulness of the woman to her husband. This seems to be the core of all



justifications.

FGM may reduce feelings and pleasure but it cannot reduce desire and does not guarantee chastity. Note the relatively high number of prostitutes in risk countries. Proper upbringing can be one of the many counter justifications.

FGM and gender identity: the removal of the clitoris, which is assumed and believed to be male parts, makes a woman feminine. The clitoris must be removed to eliminate any indications of maleness. In addition, clitoris is considered to be ugly. There are also other misconceptions and totally wrong justifications. For example, the clitoris and labia are seen as dangerous and poisonous and must be removed for health reasons, such as it will kill the baby during birth, the mother's milk will be poisonous and the husband will become impotent.

FGM and cleanliness and beauty: an uncircumcised woman is considered dirty and polluted and is ostracised within her own family and community. It is believed that secretions produced by the glands in the clitoris are foul smelling and unhygienic. It is assumed that the removal of the clitoris keeps the vagina clean.

FGM and Fertility: FGM practitioners stress that FGM enhances fertility and prevents maternal and infant mortality. They claim that the secretions produced by the glands of the genitalia kills the sperm deposited in the vagina. This is totally against the reality. FGM causes infant and maternal mortality, especially in Type III – infibulation.

FGM and religion: there is a strong misperception of the role of religion in maintaining and intensifying FGM. No religion be it Christianity or Islam advocates or promotes FGM. The Holy Bible and the Quran never mention or encourage the practice of FGM. The practice of FGM pre-dates both Islam and Christianity and is cross-religious and practised by the followers of Islam, Christianity, animists and other traditional religions. It is not practised by all Muslims. It has to do more with culture rather than religion.

Strengthening and Reinforcing Factors

The above listed justifications are some of the main misconceptions on which the practice of FGM is based and survives. In societies where illiteracy and poverty prevail, where women believe that FGM is universal, where the social pressure is rigid, where marriage is the sole guarantee for women to have security, the justifications for FGM are the reality of life for women in the risk countries. These justifications are perpetuated by:



- The absence of a clear and strong stand on the issue from the religious aspect of the problem has resulted in religious misperception and misinterpretation. The silence of the religious leaders appears to be supporting the practice whereas the Holy Scriptures give no support to it. Religious leaders have not until recently recognized it as a harmful practice and /or discouraged its practice. Besides cultural justifications, religious rationalization come second reason for the practice.
- Social pressures are imposed on individuals through family and community members leading to ostracization and exclusion from community life and activities. The community has its own enforcement mechanisms. Fear of being cast out and sense of belongingness heads the list of why one has to conform to the norms set by the community. (See Annex I: An account given by a young woman from Mali who tells how she tried in vain to escape „opening by the knife“ on the eve of her wedding.) In some communities FGM turns to be a norm because of the social pressure to conform.
- Marriage is the only option for most women for a normal life in the poor and developing countries. Women are faced with no other option for living outside of marriage. It is the only option that will provide them security, economic guarantee and respect. This requires undergoing the operation for the marriage and getting bride wealth for the parents.
- The payment of bride price contributes to maintain and promote FGM as well as child marriage. Bride price holds the key to marriage by enforcing circumcision and virginity, as well as promoting polygamy in many communities.
- Lack of information, education on reproductive health and sexuality, lack of knowledge about their rights, and ignorance of the long-term health consequences.
- The failure of law enforcers to implement legislations and decrees criminalizing the harmful practices and prosecute offenders.

Economic aspect

- Payment of bride price to the family of the bride is a precondition for the marriage and the amount mostly in kind depends on the woman fulfilling the traditional norms of the community, FGM being one. The family see it as an honour to have the



bride price, as it is believed the bride has fulfilled all that is expected from her. The payment of bride price can be associated with widow inheritance to make sure the price paid remains in the family.

- The circumcisers also known as traditional birth attendants promote and prolong the practice because it provides them with a regular income and social status in the community. It is a means of their income. As long as FGM is not eliminated excisors will be around. They will make sure it stays around for a good time unless they find a better paying job.



Session 5 - Consequences

FGM has no benefits but harm and pain

Questions for discussions

- What are the consequences of HTPs?
- Does it affect health?
- Does it fulfil its alleged benefits?
- What are the short and long term consequences?

Summary

- FGM has immediate and long term consequences which may be fatal during child delivery.
- FGM and other HTPs affect physical and mental health.
- HTPs affect the psychology and emotion of the victims, in particular women.

FGM is an unhygienic operation done with unhygienic tools in an unhygienic atmosphere by medically unqualified circumciser, mainly old ladies whose eyesights and qualifications are in question. Considering the tools used and the condition of the operation such as the use of force to pin down the victim for the operation one can conclude easily that the operation has a lot of consequences on the health of the operated individual. The practice of FGM has no health benefits and there are no medical and social justifications. It can be similarly said about the other HTPs such as abduction, arranged or child marriages. Each has its own physical and emotional consequences. (see Session 3.2)

The interference on the very sensitive genitalia parts – labia majora, labia minora, the clitoris and the perpuce - which are associated with the protection of the internal organs – the vagina and urthea – which lead to the womb and urinary bladder, have grave consequences on health. Its impact is not reverse able and is lifelong suffering. These are very sensitive parts of the body with very specific tasks. Any interference to modify their tasks by operation or similar actions will have severe consequences physically and psychologically. According to World Health Organization (<https://www.who.int>), the complications that arise from the operation can be divided into immediate and long term complications. These again depend on the types of the operation, with Type III – infibulation – being the most destructive.



Immediate and Short Term Consequences

Considering the facts that the operation consists of removing sensitive parts of the genitalia with the use of very unhygienic tools and the response of the victim(resistance) some of the immediate physical consequences are:

- Pain and stress creating shock from bleeding.
- Excessive bleeding by the cutting of the blood vessels. It can lead to death if not controlled in time by professional health workers.
- Bladder and urinary tract infection caused by urinary retention and tissue swelling.
- Infection, blood poisoning, tetanus caused by use of unhygienic tools. It may lead to death if not timely treated.
- Damage to other organs.
- Severe pain during and after operation, especially in Type III, and takes long healing time. The frequency of the operation complicates it further.

Long Term Complications and Consequences

- Chronic infections of the bladder and the vagina. This is a serious problem in type III operation – infibulation. The build up of urine and blood can cause inflammation of the urinary tract and sexual organs.
- Extremely painful menstruation, abdominal pains swelling of the stomach.
- Pain during intercourse especially in Type III where defibulation takes place right before intercourse.
- Absence of satisfaction – discomfort and trauma.
- Very difficult and painful child delivery.
- During delivery in difficult situations the vagina wall may be torn leading to fistulas creating chronic incontinence.
- Reproductive issues: Problems of childbirth which include difficult delivery, excessive bleeding are complicated because of the removal of the elastic tissues. The scar tissues require cutting for delivery. It can cause death of both mother and infant.
- In Type III repeated opening and closing procedures increase both immediate and long term problems physically and emotionally.



Psychological and Emotional Consequences

The consequences in this category exist but have not been researched deeply and are less known as a consequence of harmful practices. If one accepts that the harmful practice has long lasting effects on the physical and mental health – chronic pain, depression, anxiety. One can see the following indicators of psychological or emotional abuses.

- Withdrawal or change in the psychological state of the person
- Insomnia
- Low self-esteem
- Depression
- Uncooperative and aggressive behaviour
- Signs of distress: tearfulness, anger (<http://www.scie.org.uk>)

These indicators may be present not only on FGM victims, but other harmful practices such as early marriage, arranged marriage and marriage by abduction, child marriage. Experience flashback makes the pain deeper.

Sexual Consequences

The main purpose of FGM is to kill the sexual life of women denying her sexual satisfaction. This is the main reason why the sensitive part of the genitalia is removed for non-medical reason. The removed parts have the major responsibility for sexual satisfaction. FGM victims have no satisfaction (orgasm) because the sensitive part of the genitalia has been removed and replaced by scar. Besides the sexual fulfilment originating from clitoral orgasm does not exist because of the operation. In Type III sex is very painful right after the opening of the infibulation. In cases such as arranged marriage and marriage by abduction, where love does not have a role to play in the life of two partners, the bad relations may lead to frigidity.



Session 6 - Creation of violence free society

Prevention and elimination of harmful traditional practices

Questions for discussions

- How can communities abandon harmful practices?
- What should be done?
- Is legislation enough by itself?
- What should be the role of religious and community leaders?
- What should governments and NGOs do in their campaigns?

Summary

- Harmful practices can be prevented and eliminated.
- Practising communities need to decide to abandon any practice that affects their health and wellbeing.
- Need of change of values and norms and behaviours.
- Creation of awareness about the consequences – pain and harm.
- Abandoning harmful practices will deny immigrants their bridge to their communities.
- Elimination requires giving women better options.

In order to create a violence free society, one must identify the harmful or unacceptable practices, their justifications and consequences. No one denies the role of traditions and cultures in a society. One should respect his own and other cultures. As the saying goes ,when you are in Rome act like the Romans'. Globally, we have reached the stage where asking or discussing about culture is no longer a taboo. The challenge we have is addressing harmful practices especially those that claim to have the sponsorship of tradition and culture and religion. Beneficial traditions as an identity of a society should be praised and promoted and adopted. The war is against the harmful ones. The question is what should be done. The ongoing campaigns are going in the right direction and some countries have shown a decline in the practice of FGM. However, there needs a lot to be done to fully prevent and eliminate it. The rate of decline must be above the population growth rate or else it will be going in a circle.



Identifying the real reason of the HTPs will help create strategies to confront the problem and find the appropriate solutions which should lead to change of norms and behaviours. Each of the justifications forwarded to give root and life to the practices should be thoroughly researched and refuted. Finding out the real reason will be an indication of what should be implemented. Ongoing campaigns must be widespread and not limited to creating awareness limited to women – the victims. It must be a holistic approach meaning that the campaigns besides creating awareness should include giving women options such as education, employment to make them stand on their feet making them free to make their own decisions, such as whom to marry, when to marry, etc. The following are some points that may help the campaigns against HTPs.

1. Women find themselves as victims of HTPs because of the inherent patriarchal society, lack of self-independence, reliance on men for economic, social confidence and income and old age insecurity. It is important that the women's status in life, poverty and restricted options and opportunities must be addressed and solved. These will create changes of norms, values and behaviours. Therefore, the campaigns by NGOs and governments and all other involved in addressing these problems should work to ease the life of women by giving them opportunities of education, jobs and security. Government development and social projects should make it their responsibility to include the question of women and their status in all their economic and social undertakings, such as schooling, employment, etc.
2. Awareness creation, education, information on harmful practices specially its life-long health consequences should be presented in clear, simple language. It should be done by those who have the trust and closeness by the members as the subject is very sensitive. It is not easy to convince some individuals on matters that deal with tradition and culture especially where ignorance prevails. Awareness by itself will not bring immediate and drastic change. It will be overtime depending other factors and the change in the life of women, including education, employment, etc.
3. Criminalization of harmful practices has a lot of benefits. The laws send a clear message that the practice is not normal and acceptable. It also encourages those who wish to abandon to do the right decision and deter those who fear prosecution. Existing legislative measures are good on paper but seldom enforced, rare prosecution. Each community member should be aware about the particular legislation and must be convinced of its need and benefit. This is the full responsibility of law enforcers but must be done along with other stake holders and other interventions leading to change of values and norms. The law must be carefully implemented or else it will send it underground to be done secretly.



4. FGM and other HTPs campaigns have made women the target of their campaigns. If one considers the role of men in the practice, one can see their contribution directly such as in the case of marriage, or by keeping silent about the problem. They forget that the health and well being of women also affect them indirectly, for example maternal and infant mortality. If campaigns are to be fruitful the awareness target should be men rather than the victims women. Men should be the target of the campaign as husbands, fathers, household heads, brothers. If men are aware that the justifications lying behind the practices do not at all fulfil the expectations men can and should abandon and condemn the practice. For example, if they were to stop paying the bride price parents would have no justification to mutilate their young girls, in some cases infants. Men should be included in the campaign actively.
5. The role of religious leaders in FGM prevention and elimination strategies is indispensable. One of the main justifications forwarded by the practitioners is that it is sponsored by religion – Islam and Christianity, and others. Religious leaders have been silent giving the assumption that the practice is right. This is the very wrong belief. Both dominant religions have nothing to do with harmful practices. Religious leaders have the responsibility of clarifying the situations based on the scriptures and see to its implementation. Thereby exposing the false claims of the justifications.
6. Any activity targeted at changing values and behaviour must include community leaders in the planning and implementation. Their acceptances by the community, and the fact that their word is like a law, a successful campaign will be easily implemented. Everything must be done to convince the leaders to join the campaign. Let them set the example.
7. Awareness creation should include the refutation of the alleged justifications for the practices. It must be shown at the grass root level that the justifications put forward by the practitioners and all those involved do not fulfil the expected achievements, for example, FGM has nothing to do with fertility or virginity. All the justifications are based on wrong assumptions. These have to be made clear besides focusing on the obvious consequences.
8. In the wake of HTP, there are a lot of victims of emotional/psychological abuses. These victims should be provided with therapy and other similar treatments. Many are suffering silently.



Annex I

An account given by a young woman from Mali who tells how she tried in vain to escape „opening by the knife“ on the eve of her wedding.

„I don't remember anything of my excision or infibulation which were done to me when I was very young. It was only when I was 20, just before my marriage, that I became aware of my condition. I grew up in a closed society, where sex and sexuality were taboo subjects.

When I became conscious of my excision and infibulation, I was overcome with a feeling of revulsion. What should I do, I asked myself. For me, there was no question of letting myself be „opened“ with a knife on the day of my marriage as is the custom for all women who both are excised and infibulated.

Then the idea came to me of getting myself operated in a hospital. First, I went to doctors and then to midwives, but each time I met with blank refusal. I thought it must be a sort of social consensus. Every single one was against my being operated upon. Every man and woman whom I asked for a hospital operation treated me like a strange animal.

One doctor didn't hesitate to say to me: „You want to live of debauchery, and for that you are asking my complicity?“ I nearly got thrown out of his consulting room.

From day to day I lived with my anger and my revolt. I saw to what extent social pressure can be powerful. The day of my marriage approached. The chances of escaping this „opening by the knife“ were diminishing. At last, on the eve of my wedding, I had to face my ill fortune and submit to it.“

Source: MRG International Report, „Female Genital Mutilation: Proposal for Change“ 1992

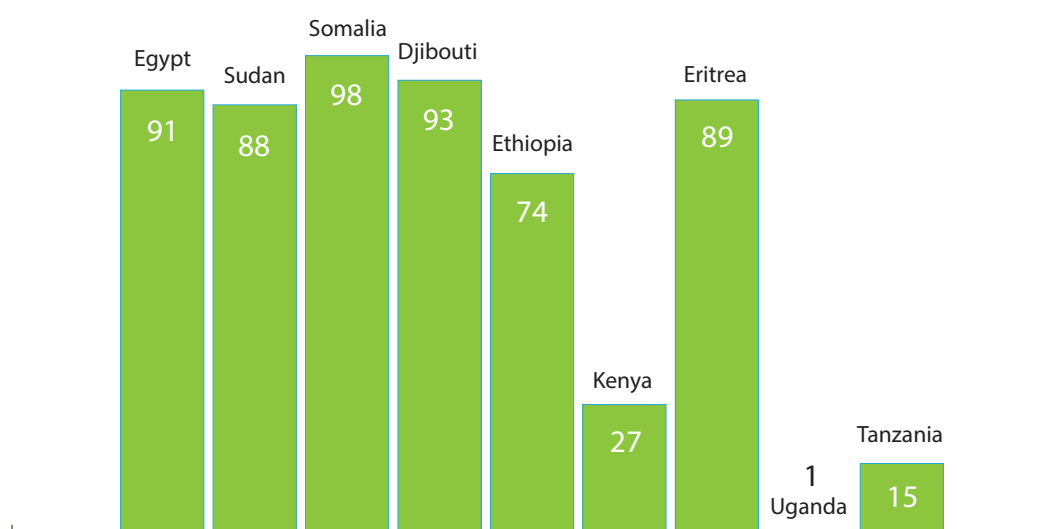


Annex II

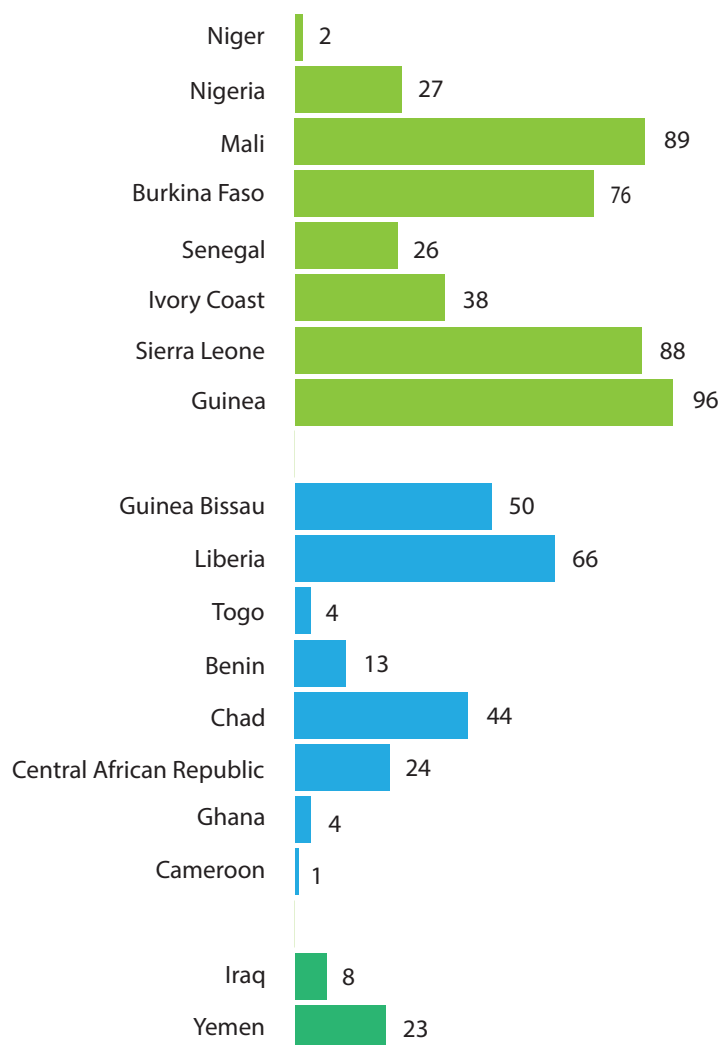
Percentage of girls and women aged 15 to 49 years who have undergone FGM, by country

The practice is mainly concentrated in the western, eastern and north-eastern regions of Africa, in some countries in the middle east and Asia as well as among migrants from these areas. Therefore, FGM is a global concern.

East Africa



West and Central Africa and Others



Source: UNICEF 2013 in <http://www.who.int>



Annex III

Uganda - The prohibition of female genital mutilation

ACT 2010

Part II The offence of female genital mutilation

1. Offence of female genital mutilation

A person who carries out female genital mutilation commits an offence and is liable on conviction to imprisonment not exceeding **ten years**.

2. Aggravated female genital mutilation

1. A person who commits the offence of aggravated female genital mutilation where –

- a) death occurs as a result of female genital mutilation;
- b) the offender is a parent, guardian or person having authority or control over the victim;
- c) the victim suffers disability;
- d) the victim is infected with HIV as a result of the act of female genital mutilation; or
- e) female genital mutilation is done by a health worker

2. A person who commits the offence of aggravated female genital mutilation is liable on conviction to **life imprisonment**.

3. Carrying out female genital mutilation on oneself

A person who carries out female genital mutilation on herself commits an offence and is liable on conviction to imprisonment **not exceeding ten years**.

4. Attempt to carry out female genital mutilation

A person who attempts to carry out female genital mutilation commits an offence and is liable on conviction to imprisonment **not exceeding five years**.

5. Procuring, aiding, abetting, etc. female genital mutilation

A person who procures, counsels, aids, abets, induces, coerces, threatens or under false pretence carries out female genital mutilation commits an offence and is liable on conviction to imprisonments **not exceeding five years**.



6. Participation in events leading to female genital mutilation

A person who participates in any event leading to female genital mutilation commits an offence and is liable on conviction to imprisonment **not exceeding five years**.

7. Parents, guardians, husband or a person having authority or control

Where the offender in section 5, 6 or 7 is a parent, guardian, husband or a person having authority or control over the victim, the offender is liable on conviction to imprisonment **not exceeding eight years**.

8. Culture and religion not a defence to female genital mutilation

Any culture, custom, ritual, tradition, religion or any other non-therapeutic reason shall not be a defence under this act.

9. Protection of females who have not undergone female genital mutilation

A person who discriminates against or stigmatizes female who has not undergone female genital mutilation from engaging or participating in any economic, political, social or other activities in the community commits an offence and is liable on conviction to imprisonment **not exceeding five years**.

10. Protection of persons whose wives, daughters or relatives have not undergone female genital mutilation

A person who discriminates against or stigmatizes another person whose wife, daughter or relative has not undergone female genital mutilation from engaging or participating in any economic, political, social or other activities in the community commits an offence and is liable on conviction to imprisonment **not exceeding five years**.

Source: <https://ulii.org>legislation>act>



Annex IV

United Kingdom - Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003 (a replacement of the 1985 Act)

1. Offence of female genital mutilation

A person is guilty of an offence if he excises, infibulates or otherwise mutilates the whole or any part of a girl's labia majora, labia minor or clitoris.

2. Offence of assisting a girl to mutilate her own genitalia

A person is guilty of an offence if he aids, abets, counsels or procures a girl to excise, infibulate or otherwise mutilate the whole or any part of her own labia majora, labia minor or clitoris.

3. Offence of assisting a non-UK person to mutilate overseas a girl's genitalia

A person is guilty of an offence if he aids, abets, counsels or procures a person who is not a United Kingdom national or permanent United Kingdom resident to do a relevant act of female genital mutilation outside the United Kingdom.

4. Extension of Sections 1 to 3 to extra-territorial acts

Sections 1 to 3 extend to any act done outside the United Kingdom by a United Kingdom national or permanent United Kingdom resident.

5. Penalties for offences

A person guilty of an offence under this Act is liable:

- a) on conviction on indictment, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 14 years or a fine (or both).
- b) on summary conviction, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months or a fine not exceeding the statutory maximum (or both).

Source: Queen's printer of Acts of Parliament 2003



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Google

Female Genital Mutilation

Abduction/kidnapping

Forced Marriage

Arranged Marriage

Child marriage

Widow Inheritance

Polygamy

Honour Killing

Physical Battering

Emotional Abuse

Rape

Sexual Violence

Stalking

