



Review Article on Harmful Traditional Practices

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ABSTRACT

There are particular forms of violence against women and girls which are defended on the basis of tradition, culture, religion or superstition by some community members. These are often known as 'harmful traditional practices. These are largely carried out without the consent of the girl/woman involved and thus constitute a violation of human rights as set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Harmful traditional practices constitute violence against women and girls, e.g. acid violence, breast flattening, cosmetic mutilation, dowry and bride price, early/forced marriage and marriage by abduction/rape, female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), 'honour' crimes, corrective rape, and female infanticide, ritual sexual slavery, virginity testing, practices related to initiation or menstruation, some widowhood rituals and accusations of witchcraft levied at older women.

Keywords: harmful, traditional practices, review article.

INTRODUCTION

There are particular forms of violence against women and girls which are defended on the basis of tradition, culture, religion or superstition by some community members ⁽¹⁾. These are often known as 'harmful traditional practices. These are largely carried out without the consent of the girl/woman involved and thus constitute a violation of human rights as set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Harmful traditional practices constitute violence against women and girls, e.g. acid violence, breast flattening, cosmetic mutilation, dowry and bride price, early/forced marriage and marriage by abduction/rape, female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), 'honour' crimes, corrective rape, and

female infanticide, ritual sexual slavery, virginity testing, practices related to initiation or menstruation, some widowhood rituals and accusations of witchcraft levied at older women ⁽²⁾. More than 125 million girls and women alive today have been cut in the 29 countries in Africa and Middle East where FGM is concentrated ⁽¹⁷⁾.

The aim of this study was to review the literature on various traditional harmful practices.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) is defined as a harmful traditional practice(3).It is the forcible removal of all or part of a girl's healthy genitalia. It occurs in 28 countries in Africa, some countries in the Middle East and

Asia, and in diaspora communities elsewhere. It can cause physical and psychological harm throughout the life of a cut woman. This includes haemorrhaging and shock at the time of the cut, problems with urination and menses, and obstetric complications⁽⁴⁾. Girls are usually cut before age 12. It is often a precursor to early/child marriage. FGM/C persists because it is a social norm, linked with marriage ability, which ensures that it continues, although the health consequences may be severe. Onuzulike⁽²⁰⁾ gave a detailed analysis of the four types as follows⁽¹⁹⁾:

Type I: In this type, the prepuce is cut off with or without the excision of the part of or the entire clitoris.

Type II: The hooded clitoris together with a part of or all of the labia minora (inner lip of the vulva) is cut-off.

Type III: Part of or all of the external genitalia are cut-off. Then the raw edge of the remaining part may or may not be sewn up together. In this process, the vaginal opening may be narrowed. This is described as infibulations.

Type IV: This is unclassified, but includes pricking, piercing or incising the clitoris and surrounding tissues, scraping of tissue surrounding the vaginal orifice (known as *angurya* or *yankee cuts* in Hausa)

"I was under horrible pain when they cut me. All these women around me telling me to bear it. How could I? I screamed for help but nobody saved me." said a girl from Djibouti⁽⁹⁾.

"Father, father please save me" cried a 6 year old girl under the knife when she saw that her mother had joined the crowd of women watching her mutilation⁽¹⁰⁾.

"If I tell you what happened to me during the initiation my stomach will be blotted and I will die" (A girl from Sierra Leone afraid to talk about the secret practice)⁽¹¹⁾.

Infection, tetanus, bleeding, tearing during child delivery keloid formation are some of the results. The belief in many African countries is that a non-excised girl will run loose from high sexual desire, hence cutting part of her body will reduce the

tendency to promiscuity and enhance her loyalty to the husband.

Other reasons given are as follows⁽¹⁵⁾. A woman is considered unclean if she is not circumcised. It is said that FGM decreases genital secretion and helps a woman to be neat. Other reason for FGM is to 'calm' a girl and make her decent. A girl who is not circumcised is believed to be unreserved (*Aynawta*), breaks utensils, be wasteful and becomes absent minded. Many believe circumcision is done to control the woman's reaction/emotions, to help her to be decent and reserved. Other reason is that the genitalia of uncircumcised women are believed to be unattractive and uninviting to a man for sexual intercourse. Therefore FGM is performed so that the genitalia look beautiful for the man who owns the girl. Other reason is that prayers made by uncircumcised women are believed to be unacceptable. Some people believe that FGM helps to shorten the duration of labor and the passage of the newborn child through the birth canal. There is a myth that says mutilated girls are fertile. Infertility may occur If a woman is not mutilated. Some also believe that if FGM is not done the clitoris will grow and dangle between the legs.

Early and forced marriage: is any marriage of a child under the age of 18⁽⁵⁾ without their consent and constitutes a violation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is most common in Africa and Southern Asia, and especially among the poorest, most rural communities. It causes pregnancy at an early age; meaning they are more likely to die in childbirth⁽⁶⁾.

I never liked my so-called husband because he was forcing me to do things I did not want to" said a young divorced girl who found herself in the capital city of Ethiopia. *"I run away from my family"*⁽¹²⁾.

Abduction is a well known traditional practice in parts of Ethiopia whereby girls are kidnapped and raped to be forcefully married⁽¹³⁾.

The reasons given for early marriage are as follows⁽¹⁵⁾:

-To ensure virginity. A girl who is not a virgin at her first marriage is considered unfit for family life and is a disgrace to the family. The groom will severely beat the bride, take away the entire dowry given to her and chase her out. The marriage is immediately dissolved. Therefore girls are forced to get married early so that the above mentioned consequences will not happen.

-To increase fertility. If a girl marries early she will produce many children which is considered as an asset for the family.

-To conform to societal norms. If a girl does not marry early in her life people call her "Komakerech" which literally means she is no longer wanted for marriage.

Devadasi, Deuki, Devaki. These are practice in India and Nepal among others countries whereby girls are offered to temples to provide full services including forced prostitution ⁽¹⁴⁾. Deukis and Devis cannot marry and they end up as mistresses, "kept wives" or prostitutes, condemned to illicit relationships. Families of the "high" Chethri caste in Nepal pledge daughters or other young girls to deities in temples seeking a favourable response to their prayers at the expense of condemning these Deukis or Devakis, as they are known, to servitude ⁽¹⁸⁾.

Jhuma: A similar cultural practice is observed among the Sherpas, a Tibeto-Burman ethnic group living in the north of the country. A baby girl is offered as a gift to god and is called a Jhuma. Her role is to perform religious functions and engage in daily work for the monastery throughout her life. She, too, is not allowed to marry but it appears that men seek sexual relations with Jhumas ⁽¹⁸⁾. In Nepal, women, generally elderly women or widows of lower social status have been branded as witches and been victims of violence ⁽¹⁸⁾.

Trokosi is a practice whereby young girls are given to fetish shrines to serve under threat as domestic and sexual slaves. Their crimes are simply being related to a family member who committed an offense often before the girls are even born (e.g. Nigeria, Ghana, and Benin) ⁽¹⁴⁾.

Violence or murder related to dowry payment, which happens when new brides are hurt or killed

by in-law because of dowry. Some sources have estimated that as many as 25 000 newly married women are killed or maimed each year as a result of dowry-related violence ⁽⁷⁾.

Son preference: Sex selection is a clear manifestation of deeply entrenched gender discrimination. It occurs in many parts of South, East and Central Asia. Such injustices must be addressed and resolved ⁽⁸⁾. Clinics in India and china are cited as practicing early sex detection to get rid of a baby girl.

"Honour" Crimes occur when a girl or woman is attacked or killed by or on behalf of a family member. It can be seen as a way of protecting family reputation or tradition. Some of the common ways in which honour is seen as damaged are:

- a. Defying parental authority, including refusal to enter into a forced marriage.
- b. Becoming 'westernised' e.g. refusing to wear traditional clothes.
- c. Women having, or suspected of having, sex/relationships before marriage.
- d. Women having, or suspected of having, relationships with others from different ethnic, cultural or religious groups.
- e. Using drugs or alcohol or smoking.
- f. 'Gossip' which is considered damaging to the status of an individual/family.

Forced feeding comprises forced over-feeding of girls and women for the main purpose of gaining weight. Forced feeding is associated forced marriage. This practice compromises the girl's health because it makes the girls susceptible to obesity which subsequently may lead to metabolic disorders such as diabetes, hypertension and so on ⁽¹⁶⁾.

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. Infectious and transmittable diseases such as STIs and HIV/AIDS are thus propagated in the concerned families with disastrous consequences ⁽¹⁶⁾.

Another harmful traditional practice is *widowhood rites*. After the death of the husband, his widow is

suspected to have been the cause of his death. She is then forced by tradition into a process of proving her innocence, and she must undergo extremely distressing rites, such as drinking the water used to wash the dead body and sleeping with the corpse for a specified number of days. The victim is denied sleep, food and appropriate care⁽¹⁶⁾.

The most humiliating of all the violent cultural practices meted out to widows⁽¹⁹⁾ was the scraping of their hair with broken bottles by Umuada (first born daughters within the extended family system), which usually left them with injuries on their skulls.

An statement of a widow⁽¹⁹⁾:

Widowhood is not something any woman would pray for. It is a terrible thing; it is a terrible stigma. The first shocker of my life after my husband's death was from my in-laws. When it happened, people were going to look for their relations, their children's children in the barracks. But my own in-laws went to Lagos to look for property to inherit. It was shocking to me. Thereafter, many things happened. I was taken to the highest authority in my place where I was told that women are not supposed to inherit property. Widowhood is like leprosy, I tell you. Even wives of your husband's friends will begin to suspect you. I do not know that as a widow, one has automatically become a prostitute that people would begin to suspect.

Acid throwing⁽¹⁸⁾ is found predominantly in Bangladesh and Pakistan. Burning with acid is used to punish women for a range of actions from their rejection of marriage proposals and the dishonour of rape to delayed preparation of a meal and a land dispute.

A fatwa⁽¹⁸⁾ is a punishment meted out to women by the shalish, or local body of male leaders, which makes rules for behavior in the community which it seeks to justify by Islamic religious traditions and by Imams based on their personal interpretation of Islam.

The virginity test is a custom prevalent among many people in Sri Lanka in the Sinhala community across all social classes, means the

showing of blood by a bride upon the first act of intercourse as proof of her virginity. The mother-in-law plays the key role in the examination of a white cloth placed on the bed used by the newlyweds on their wedding night. If there is blood on the cloth when it is examined the next morning, the girl has passed the "test" of virginity. If she does not pass, she is publicly humiliated at the celebration that is held when she comes home to the residence of her in-laws. She could even face the anger of in-laws⁽¹⁸⁾.

Burns et al.⁽²¹⁾ submitted that every day, women are slapped, kicked, beaten, humiliated, threatened, sexually abused and even murdered by their partners.

CONCLUSION

Educational programs that are culturally sensitive and of religious importance seem to be the best hope of eradicating the practice of FGM. Educating and informing the people on the harmful effects on early marriage using different media channels including radio, TV, discussions, workshops, public debates, newspapers etc should be done. Educating parents and the community on the importance of gender equality, education and empowerment of women and the negative effects of early marriage should be done. Legislative measures should be enforced for the legal age of marriage for girls and boys and the legal measures to be taken if early marriage is practiced. Establishing pressure groups in communities, schools, etc that would educate the public and fight against early marriage. Women should be realized that they are fundamentally equal in personality and dignity with men. Education plays a vital role in the favourable attitude of the sexes towards each other. There is need for the government and religious leaders not only to inspire individuals to a higher educational qualification, but also to make conditions conducive for women to be educated if possible, at no cost. Laws should be there to protect women from these violent and obnoxious cultural practices.

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