

What is the harm in ‘harmful traditional practices’?

Elisabet le Roux, Brenda E. Bartelink, & Selina Palm

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Key messages

- The term ‘harmful traditional practices’ (HTPs) is deeply problematic and often deleterious to attempts to address such practices in communities.
- The term creates resistance from communities which hinder attempts to modify or end the harmful nature of such practices; it leads to a simplistic vilification of culture; it enforces Western, colonialist discourse; it conceals or overlooks the gendered nature of practices and violence; and it strengthens biases against certain religions.
- The term should no longer be used in policy or programming, to be replaced with ‘violence against women’ or ‘gender-based violence’. This allows for context-appropriate programming and projects which acknowledge gender inequality and injustice as problems common to all societies (and not just non-Western ones). It also openly identifies the gendered nature of violent practices.

Introduction

In 2017, the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities undertook a study funded by the UK Government through UK aid, entitled “Working effectively with faith leaders to challenge harmful traditional practices”. This policy brief focuses on approaches reported successful in engaging faith leaders to address sensitive issues in their communities.

Traditional cultural practices reflect values and beliefs held by members of a community for periods often spanning generations. Every social grouping in the world has 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.

These harmful traditional practices include female genital mutilation (FGM); forced feeding of women; early marriage; the various taboos or practices which prevent women from controlling their own fertility; nutritional taboos and traditional birth practices; son preference and its implications for the status of the girl 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 practicing them (United Nations, 1995ⁱ)

How the study was done

A literature review, online survey, and five case studies were conductedⁱⁱ each study focusing on an organisation's work on harmful traditional practices (HTPs) and engagements with faith leaders. The literature review focused on a) HTP prevalence data; and b) HTPs within the context of faith and faith actors. The five case studies focused on Tearfund, Islamic Relief Worldwide, World Vision International, ABAAD, and Christian Aid, with an in-depth look at their work on four HTPs: female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), child and early marriage, honour-related violence, and son preference. The case studies used a combination of document review and in-depth interviews. A short online survey was also completed by 65 professionals to complement and broaden the information gathered through the case studies.

The term harmful traditional practice is counterproductive

1. Resistance from communities

Rarely or never is the term "harmful traditional practice" used in community-based work. It creates resistance and hinders the process of engaging people in local communities in challenging injustice and violence. The use of the term in programming positions the organisations as inherently critical of culture and religion, which runs counter to their attempts to work holistically and engage constructively with the religious and cultural dimensions of development.

And we really had a pushback from the traditional leaders from that community when they heard us talking to the number of 'harmful traditional practices'. And you know, they basically made an argument that there is no such thing as a harmful traditional practice: "What it is, is first of all you people from the outside, you are non-Tsonga people. You come in and you vilify our traditional practices because you don't understand them. So don't talk to us about harmful traditional practice." ... (W)e stopped using that terminology because we realised it was shutting doors for us instead of opening doors (Sandra, senior programme officer, based in Zimbabwe, June 23, 2017).ⁱⁱⁱ

2. Simplistic vilification of culture and tradition

The term identifies 'tradition' or 'culture' as the culprit – yet research shows that these harmful practises are driven by a number of intersecting factors, including religion, patriarchy, socio-economic circumstances, politics, and power relations.^{iv} Furthermore, it essentialises culture and tradition as singular and fixed (rather than plural, heterogeneous and fluid), which is inaccurate and counterproductive.

3. Enforces colonialist discourse

The use of the term 'traditional' leads to these harmful practices automatically being juxtaposed with the 'modern'. The underlying implication is that such practices will disappear once the society is modernised. Religion and secularism are similarly juxtaposed as part of the broader secular/faith binary within development discourses, with the modern, Western, secular individual seen as liberated, whereas the traditional, non-Western, religious individual is regarded as oppressed.^v

...the modern body is also very much envisaged as secular; the liberal emancipated and autonomous conception of body is posed against the religious body as coerced and oppressed (Longman & Bradley, 2015).^{vi}

The international development discourse on HTPs overwhelmingly focuses on non-Western HTPs; the vast majority of academic literature available on HTPs focuses on practices that are found in non-Western societies. This focus on non-Western HTPs remains dominant, despite critics identifying various practices within Western cultures as harmful, including cosmetic surgery, pornography, and beauty pageants.^{vii}

The term 'HTP' is criticised for its links with colonial discourses and Western imperialist agendas. These are not mere perceptions that need to be navigated, but serious critiques from the grassroots which are substantiated by historical, ethical and anthropological research.

I note you have tried hard to make it more palatable, but the term 'harmful traditional practices' is just too loaded. I can't swallow it myself, and I could not bring myself to try to use it with partners. If I thought we were going to look at binge drinking at hen nights and stag nights and adolescent over dieting, as well as FGM [then we could've taken part]... (Magda, theological advisor, England, May 5, 2017).

4. Hides gendered nature of practices and violence

The forms of violence that are most commonly described as HTPs predominantly affect women and girls, and are an expression of gender inequality and the lack of agency and decision-making over their own lives. Thus the term faces criticism for not being as inclusive as it suggests – what about cultural practices harmful to men, or children, or the planet? At the same time, the focus on women and girls is not properly acknowledged in the term itself, and hides the gendered nature of violence and of the practices discussed most often, such as FGM/C, child and early marriage, and honour-related violence.

5. Biases around religion

When HTPs are linked with religion, literature shows the focus tends to be predominantly on Islam, with additional interest in Christianity. Furthermore, Islam and Christianity tend to be represented differently. At least partly a result of the concern with violent religious extremism and the growing Islamophobia within many Western countries, Islam is most extensively discussed as a source of legitimization of harmful practices, although it is usually not clear how Islam and a specific practice are related in a particular context. This problematizes Islam and Muslim cultures, and is particularly deleterious to Muslim women who tend to be treated as voiceless victims, rather than as agents, in these conversations.^{viii}

The roles of Christian leaders in overcoming HTPs is generally discussed more positively in literature. However, Christian efforts to eradicate certain HTPs should not be seen outside of the context of colonial agendas and their influence in postcolonial politics.^{ix} Christian dominance in the field of development in the postcolonial world has shaped intensive interactions and partnerships between Christian institutions/leaders and international development actors.^x Christian dominance in the field of development in the postcolonial world has shaped intensive interactions and partnerships between Christian institutions/leaders and international development actors.^{xi}

Conclusion

The terminology used to address the violence and injustice affecting women and girls must be rethought. The term ‘harmful traditional practices’ is hampering community-based response to these practices and potential partnerships with various organisations and movements, in particular those affiliated with religious groups. It is recommended that policy makers and organisations rather use the term ‘violence against women and girls’ or ‘gender-based violence’. Furthermore, a focus on underlying ideologies, such as ‘patriarchy’ or ‘harmful masculinities’, enables more productive engagement on various harmful practices in the form that they take within particular contexts – including in Western societies.

Recommendations

- Do not use the term ‘harmful traditional practices’, especially not when working in communities.
- If a specific practice is being addressed and needs to be identified, name the specific practice, using the terminology considered contextually appropriate.
- Policy, programming and projects should focus on challenging violence (e.g. VAWG or GBV) and gender inequality, rather than ‘HTPs’. This allows for context appropriate programming and projects that acknowledge gender inequality and injustice as being problems common to all societies (and not just non-Western ones). It also identifies the gendered nature of violence.

The literature review, survey report, five case study reports, and synthesis report can all be found at <http://gender-based-violence.jliflc.com/htp-study>

- i. UN Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). 1995. Fact Sheet No.23, Harmful Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children. <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/FactSheet23en.pdf> (Accessed October 5, 2017). This definition is used because it first drew international attention to the issue of HTPs.
- ii. The literature review, survey report, five case study reports, and synthesis report can all be found at <https://jliflc.com/>
- iii. Pseudonyms are used when referring to research participants.
- iv. Gemignani, R. & Wodon, Q. 2015. 'Child Marriage and Faith Affiliation in Sub-Saharan Africa: Stylized Facts and Heterogeneity'. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 13(3):41-47; Kogacioglu, D. 2004. 'The tradition effect: Framing honor crimes in Turkey'. *Differences: a journal of feminist cultural studies*, 15(2): 119-151; Kulczycki, A. & Windle, S. 2011. 'Honor Killings in the Middle East and North Africa'. *Violence Against Women*, 17(11): 1442-46; Kitti, A., Kumar, P. & Yodav, R. 2011. 'The Face of Honour Based Crimes: Global Concerns and Solutions'. *International Journal of Criminal Justice Studies*, 6:1.
- v. Longman, C. & Bradley, T. 2015. *Interrogating Harmful Cultural Practices: Gender, Culture and Coercion*. Farnham: Routledge; Winter, B., Thompson, D., & Jeffreys, S. 2002. The UN Approach to Harmful Traditional Practices. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 4(1): 72-94; Le Roux, E. & Loots, L. 2017. The unhealthy divide: how the secular-faith binary potentially limits GBV prevention and response. *Development in Practice*, 27(5): 733-744; Bartelink, B.E. 2016. *Cultural encounters of the sexular kind: Religious and secular dynamics in the development response to HIV/AIDS*. PhD thesis, University of Groningen.
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- vii. Jeffreys, S. 2015. *Beauty and Misogyny: Harmful Cultural Practices in the West*. 2nd Edition. London and New York: Routledge; Bradley, T. & Longman, C. 2015. *Harmful Cultural Practices: Towards a Research Frame*. In C. Longman & T. Bradley (eds.). *Interrogating Harmful Cultural Practices: Gender, Culture and Coercion*. Farnham: Routledge; Winter et al., 2002.
- viii. Abu-Lughod, 2016; Longman & Bradley, 2015.
- ix. Wanjiku-Kamashi, J. 2015. *Transcending Female Circumcision: A Call for Collective Unmasking*. In C. Longman & T. Bradley (eds.). *Interrogating Harmful Cultural Practices: Gender, Culture and Coercion*. Farnham: Routledge; Schafroth, V. 2009. 'Female Genital Mutilation in Africa - an Analysis of the Church's Response and Proposals for Change'. *Missiology* 37 (4): 527.
- x. Van der Veer, P. (ed). 1996. *Conversion to Modernities: The globalization of Christianity*. New York & London: Routledge; Van Harskamp, A. 2004. 'Introduction'. In Salemnink, O., Van Harskamp, A., & Giri, A.K. (eds.). *The Development of Religion/The Religion of Development*. Delft: Eburon; Pieterse, J.N. 2001. *Development Theory: Deconstructions/ Reconstructions*. London: Sage Publications;
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Elisabet le Roux, Stellenbosch University, eleroux@sun.ac.za

Brenda E. Bartelink, University of Groningen, b.e.bartelink@rug.nl

Selina Palm, Stellenbosch University, spalm@sun.ac.za

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