**Forum:** Human Rights Committee 2  
**Issue:** Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and the Girl Child  
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**Position:** Head Chair

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### Introduction

The term "traditional practices" generally is used to describe certain sets of actions, beliefs, and values that are conformed to a particular culture or a convention. While an individual’s tradition must be respected, there are harmful traditional practices that are performed on the body of women and the underaged girls without their consent, which is understandably against the Universal Declaration of Human rights. However, violating human rights is not the only concerning aspect of traditional practices. In fact, these traditional practices that are defended in the name of culture, religion or superstition among the community causes both physical and mental harm on the female body.

There are many factors as to why traditional practices still persist despite the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the UN council. Mainly, the existence of gender inequality among many societies causes a lack of awareness in the impropriety of these conventional practices. Hence, it leads to malpractices such as but not limited to female genital mutilation, dowry, early/forced marriage, early pregnancy, female infanticide, and ‘honor’ crimes. In fact, according to WHO, specifically regarding female genital mutilation, more than 100 million girls undergo female circumcision and 3 million are at risk every year.

In order to effectively solve the problems risen by traditional practices, both national and international efforts are required. In a general manner, comprehensive and profound education on both female and male populations will achieve parallel awareness that will ensure improved communication and partnership between them so that both can stand on equal grounds of human rights. However, each traditional practice carries distinct characteristics. Hence, in order to tackle each and every form of traditional practices, different solutions should be adjusted to different types of traditional practices rather than generalizing the solution.

Prohibiting these harmful traditional practices comes at a cost, though. If not tackled properly, there is a potential of negative social sanctions that will disadvantage the individual who will refuse the performance of traditional practices on their body. Therefore, in conclusion, it is crucial to consider the
underlying gender inequality, different characteristics of various forms of traditional practices, and the negative social sanction to ensure fundamental human rights that will prevent further physical and mental pains that women and girl child experience.

**Definition of Key Terms**

**Female Genital Mutilation**

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), which is also mistaken as female circumcision, is a ritual that is performed during the ages of 4 to 10, according to the WHO. FGM is usually conducted in regions such as Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Australia, and Latin America.

**Dowry**

The definition of the dowry varies from society to society and culture to culture. However, in a general context, dowry means a form of transaction that the bride’s family has to pay to the groom’s family in exchange for the cost of caring for the bride. However, in some scenarios, a girl or a woman is treated as the transaction instead of the goods or money that had to be paid to the groom's family.

**Early Marriage/Pregnancy**

Early marriage and early pregnancy are related to each other—often, early marriage results in early pregnancy. According to the statistics provided by the UNICEF, 4 out of every 10 girls in sub-Saharan Africa were married before the age of 18. Moreover, the WHO also records that annually 16 million girls from age 15 to 19 give birth to a baby.

**Female Infanticide**

Female infanticide is the action of intentionally killing newborn female infants. When female infanticide is discussed, it is often discussed with abortions that are intentionally directed at female infants.

**‘Honor’ Crimes**

‘Honor’ crimes refer to an incident when an individual’s murder is justified as an act to prevent family disgrace or community shame. Hence, if a woman is accused of premarital sex, marital infidelity or even when the woman herself is raped, she is subject to ‘honor’ crimes.

**Background Information**
Female Genital Mutilation

As discussed previously in the introduction and the keyword section, FGM is one type of various different traditional practices that aims to deform the female genital parts. The practice of FGM is defended by practising societies by claiming that FGM can enhance fertility, promote purity as well as prevent stillbirths. Despite the perceived benefits, FGM causes both critical physical and mental health issues.

Physical Health Problems

The female genital mutilation gives both short term and long term physical pain to the women or the girl children who undergo the surgical procedure. According to the World Health Organization, FGM is usually performed on the female body without anesthesia which subjects these female bodies to extreme pain. Moreover, the FGM is conducted under non-sterile conditions—in some scenarios, the same knife is used to operate the surgical process on the body consecutively or even an individuals' nails are used to carry out FGM. Not only these girls go through immense pain as a result, but also they risk potential infections such as tetanus, sepsis (infection through the bloodstream that causes sepsis shocks with high mortality rate), urinary retention due do deformation, and HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus). In extreme cases, if excessive blood loss occurs, death is inevitable.

Psychological Health Problems

FGM can result in potential mental health issues: PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) that will accompany flashbacks to the event. However, because facilities that can aid women with PTSD lack significantly in their number and knowledge about the psychological aftermath of FGM, these women suffer from PTSD throughout their life.

Early Marriage/Early Pregnancy

Early marriage and early pregnancy are intimately related to each other: early marriage results in early pregnancy among girls who are just going through the adolescence stage. Despite the fact that both early marriage and early pregnancy limits girls from achieving their sexual autonomy, only early pregnancy has apparent health problems; however, this is not to say that one practice is more harmful than the other, and that early marriage does not yield health concerns.

There are several factors that cause an early marriage to persist in some societies.

Controlled Sexuality
Societies’ belief that the sexuality of a girl should be controlled, prompts families to force their daughters into early marriage. Societies that carry a regressive stance towards premarital sex often link it as defaming and harming the honor of their own family. Hence, in an attempt to prevent sexual intercourse before marriage, early marriage is an option that parents’ chose for their daughters. Moreover, in some communities, a girl claiming her sexual autonomy is viewed as a disgrace to her family, making early marriage a very lucrative choice. When these girls are married, their sexual autonomy is passed from their parents to their husbands, undermining the importance of consent to sex. Statistically speaking, girls who are married at an age younger than 18 are more likely to experience intimate partner violence and forced sexual intercourse than those who marry at a much later age. Even after the marriage, girls do not have their right to claim their own body.

**Poverty**

Poverty plays a big role in encouraging early marriage. Poverty in different phrasing, means limited resources for all family members. If a girl is married at an early age, there is one less mouth to feed for the family, one more burden removed. Furthermore, limited finance often puts a priority on educating the sons in the family over educating the girls. The lack of education hinders girls from acquiring vocational choices or jobs. Hence, financially, girls become dependent on marriage, losing their potential to be independent of the male body of the house. As a consequence, even if a girl experiences domestic violence after marriage, she has no alternative other than to still be reliant on the male body. She is subject to domestic violence no matter how intense it progresses.

**Practice of Dowry**

Dowry is another factor that allows the practice of early marriage. Because dowry is a form of transaction that the bride’s parents have to pay to the groom’s family, the bride’s family carries a lot of burden in the marriage process. So what acts as a standard when deciding how much the bride’s family should pay? A girl’s age. In many customs, the girl’s age can be a concerning factor for the groom’s family. If a girl is ‘too old’ for marriage, her age poses questions of why she is still not married, if her virginity is kept, and if she will be biddable to the new family. In order to guarantee these factors, if the bride is older than the usual marriage age, the bride’s family has to pay much more than if a girl would marry at an early age. As a result, in societies that early marriage is still practiced, families arrange the marriage as early as possible.

**Health Risks of Early Pregnancy**
Early pregnancy results in both health complications for the baby and the mother. According to the World Health Organization, adolescent pregnancies increases the mortality rate of the baby born. Unfortunately, not only the infant mortality increases, the mortality of the mother increases as well. In LEDC countries (Less Economically Developed Countries), 99% of the maternal death is due to early pregnancy in girls and women of 15 to 49. Aside from a high mortality rate, girls whose sexuality is conformed by the male body of the house are often subject to coerced abortion (abortion cases would be discussed in detail in the section below about female infanticide). The World Health Organization informs that annually around 3.9 million girls undergo unprotected abortion that causes everlasting health problems. Early pregnancy itself has direct health complications such as eclampsia (seizures which ensued from birth or happening during pregnancy), puerperal endometritis (uterine infection), and systemic infections that had been reported to be more common among girls of age 10-19 than women 20-24.

Female Infanticide

Female Infanticide refers to cases where female infants are killed right after birth due to their unwanted status in the family. A community that is regressive towards women often put priorities or advantages on sons over daughters. In Asia generally, female infanticide stems from the custom belief that sons are more valuable as they ‘lead’ the family generations after generations by adopting their father’s name. On the contrary, if a girl is married and gives birth to a baby, the child born adopts the name of her husband which therefore makes the birth of a girl to be less beneficial than the birth of a boy.

In certain cases, a female baby is not even given a chance to be born—female foeticide. Female foeticide refers to when an evaluation of the sex of the fetus is done to identify whether it is a female or male and is aborted if it is identified to be a female. What more aggravates this unethical phenomenon of female foeticide is enhanced scientific methods to figure out the ‘correct timing’ of abortion (before an abortion is not possible) through amniocentesis and ultrasound tests. Amniocentesis is a method where the amniotic fluid is extracted through a hollow needle to screen developing fetus and ultrasound tests are methods that draw the image of the fetus by reflecting high frequencies against the embryonic fetus. Especially in parts of South and Southeast Asia, abortion is conducted by an unprofessional surgeon under unsanitary conditions which leads to high mortality of the mother.

‘Honor’ Crimes

Honor crimes involve the murder of a girl or woman if she is found to be violating the customs of a certain society. For example, in a patriarchal society, the sexuality of a girl or woman is controlled by her father or her husband or even male relatives. Hence, when a woman loses her virginity before marriage, it can be a reason for her to be killed by the male bodies of the house. In extreme cases, simply refusing
to enter an early marriage or unwanted sex can justify the murder of a female. Moreover, having sexual intercourse outside of marriage can be a reason for ‘honor’ crimes even if the case of a rape case.

Statistically, cases of ‘honor’ killings are underreported. However, the United Nations Population Fund reports that annually 5000 cases of ‘honor’ killings happen worldwide such as in parts of the middle east and South Asia with India and Pakistan accounting for about half of the ‘honor’ killings worldwide.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

World Health Organization

The World Health Organization (WHO) is one of the main United Nations related organizations that plays a great role in identifying the health complications of the traditional practices affecting the wellbeing of a woman or a girl child. In fact, the first action to study traditional practices, especially FGM (female genital mutilation), started with the World Health Organization in 1958 (ECOSOC, the economic and social council invited WHO to conduct a study). World Health Organization has published varieties of reports of studies conducted on various types of traditional practices, including the root causes of each and individual traditional practices, along with the complications that follow the customary beliefs. Especially in cases where complex medical terms or health complications occur, the World Health Organization, as a leading organization in public health, can provide appropriate measures of handling the negative health consequences through professionals well acquainted with the mechanisms of the physical injury. Furthermore, the significance of the World Health Organization in this particular issue is evinced through the seminars conducted by the World Health Organization, such as the one in 1979 in Khartoum, Sudan by the Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, a precursory seminar that awoke campaigns against harmful traditional practices. In such ways, the World Health Organization plays a big role in attempting to prevent harmful traditional practices being conducted on women or young girls.

United Nations Children’s Funds (UNICEF)

The United Nations Children’s Fund is a branch of the United Nations that specifically focuses on the issues related to the violation of children’s rights and investing in efforts to prevent these types of violations so that the children can reach their full potential. In the particular issue of traditional practices affecting the wellbeing of an underaged girl, UNICEF plays a significant role; many traditional practices, especially early marriage, is caused by gender inequality and the lack of education it fosters. Hence, through advocacy programs that ensure gender equality, UNICEF can emphasize the importance of education for the girl child that will prevent dependency on traditional practices. UNICEF has already implemented these types of programs such as in the fields of education, health, and water supply in an effort to emphasize the importance of female participation in a community. Moreover, as an organization
that specifically outlines the importance of ensuring the children’s rights, UNICEF is and can mark a milestone in eradicating the traditional practices downcasted on the girl child.

**Bangladesh**

In the preliminary report and the final report of the Special Rapporteur on Traditional Practices affecting the Health of Women and Children, of the governments who were requested to respond to the Secretary General on the issue of harmful traditional practices, Bangladesh openly admitted the existence of harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation, dowry, early marriages and etc. Due to the fact that many governments did not acknowledge the existence of harmful traditional practices, Bangladesh acknowledging the presence of gender inequality can be recognized as a starting effort in eliminating the harmful conventional activities done on women or the girl child. The difficulties in preventing these harmful traditional practices is that many countries heavily involved with these activities did not adopt legislation that strictly bans the practice. However, Bangladesh adopted laws that strictly bans the following customs such as dowry (Dowry Prohibition Act, 1980) and early marriage (Child Marriage Restraint Act Amendment Ordinance, 1984). Bangladesh’s such initiatives can serve as a model for other countries in which traditional practices affecting the health of a woman or a girl child.

**Timeline of Events**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Description of Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Ecosoc invited the World Health Organization to conduct first ever study on Female Genital Mutilation and report the results to the Commission on the status of Women.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>Female Genital Mutilation issue is discussed at the seminar held in Addis Ababa for the region of Africa about the participation of women in public life.</td>
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<tr>
<td>July, 1961</td>
<td>ECOSOC publishes a resolution 821 II (XXXII) to invite the World Health Organization to study medical aspects of the conventional surgical processes such as Female Genital Mutilation, abortion and etc.</td>
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<td>1979</td>
<td>The World Health Organization holds a seminar in the regional office for the Eastern Mediterranean in Khartoum, Sudan, which marks the start of campaigns fighting the harmful traditional practice.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>A Non Governmental Organization named the Inter—African Committee on Traditional Practices (IAC) is formed to protect the women and the child against traditional practices affecting their health.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>A preliminary report is submitted by the Special Rapporteur on the issue of harmful traditional practices.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>A Final report is submitted by the Special Rapporteur on the issue of harmful traditional practices.</td>
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traditional practices.

1993
The World Health Organization publishes the WHA46.18 resolution that urges member states to monitor and evaluate the efforts of ensuring maternal and child health through comprehensive family planning.

1994
An International conference is held on the topic of reproductive health and its correlation with human rights to urge member states to recognize the importance of public awareness about gender equality achieved through public education.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 10 December 1948
- Traditional Practices Affecting the health of women and the girl child, 24th July 2001 (E/DEC/2001/280)

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

Previous attempts to tackle the issue of traditional practices affecting women and the girl child has been mainly through seminars. These seminars provided opportunities for government officials, United Nations agencies and non governmental organizations to share and exchange the gathered information about different types of traditional practices. Most notably, the seminar conducted at Burkina Faso in 1991 aimed to solve problems of traditional practices specific in the African region whereas the seminar that took place in Columbo, Sri Lanka in 1994 aimed to handle problems in the Asian region. Both of these seminars urged the professionals to recommend ways to amend the problem in three different scopes: national government, international community, and non governmental organizations. Both of these seminars are successful in a way that it both stimulated activists to engage more often with research on the traditional practices and plan campaigns or programs that can help women and girl child from the harmful operations.

Possible Solutions

Solutions to eliminating the harmful traditional practices vary among them as a result of their different root causes and different health outcomes; Individual approaches to eliminate each and every traditional practice is required. However, it is true that all traditional practices require a fundamental
education in raising the awareness of the impropriety of these traditional practices. First of all, it is crucial to understand what incentivizes these communities to practice certain sets of traditional practices. For example, the practice of FGM in the region of Africa can play a different purpose than FGM practices in Southern Asian localities. In a campaign to raise awareness, the key to increasing the degree of acceptance in the community towards preventing these traditional practices is to emphasize the negative health outcomes instead of emphasizing the violations of human rights. This is not to claim that emphasizing the violation of human rights is of no importance. However, whereas negative health outcomes show a direct cause and effect relationship among the practitioners, violating the human rights, in the worst case scenario, can be minor of their concern. Moreover, in an educational campaign, focusing on a specific body of people for education can increase the efficacy of the advocation. In a patriarchal society, because the male body of the house primarily makes decisions, targeting these male body can be effective in preventing the practice of traditional practices.

Specifically focusing on preventing early marriages, the initial step is to educate the girls who are directly subject to early marriage. Helping them understand their own basic human rights but simultaneously providing a support system that can guide them to finding their own economical source is imperative. Even if these girls recognize they are entitled to universal declaration of human rights, with the absence of independence source of earning, girls will remain to be chained to the practice of early marriage by being not provided of alternate economical sources other than marrying when they are underaged. Helping them find their own source of earning involves the most crucial step: ensuring fair and equal education. This education does not refer to education of both men and women about human rights but about education one can receive at school or a public institution. With educational opportunities comes vocational opportunities that can help girls to be non-reliant on marriages for economical purposes. Tackling the problem of early marriages can also prevent incidences of early pregnancy by preventing early or unwanted sexual intercourse. Therefore, saving underaged girls from the malpractice of early marriage is pivotal.

Solutions to the malpractices of traditional practices also includes helping the women and the girls who have already undergone certain malpractices. Specifically speaking, women or girls who have already recieved FGM requires special attention just before and during labor as it might cause an opening of the scars leading to blood loss. Moreover, as the genitals are differently shaped, different risks will accompany the women or a girl during her labor. Hence, implementing a system that can aid these women during labor procedures is imperative. Targeting helping those undergone early marriage involve implementing a system that can provide refugee in case of unwanted sexual intercourse or domestic violence on women. Moreover, constructing a system for their independence earning plays an important role when it comes to helping who already married at a young age as it also breaks the bondage between economical source and maintaining marital relationship.
Bibliography


“Strategies to Eliminate Harmful Traditional Practices, Including Female Genital Mutilation.” Strategies to Eliminate Harmful Traditional Practices, Including Female Genital Mutilation, The New Zealand Digital Library, www.nzdl.org/gsdl?e=d-00000-00---off-0aedl--00-0----0-10-0---0---0direct-10---4--------0-1I--11-en-50---20-about---00-0-1-00-0-4----0-0-11-10-0utfZz-8-10&cl=CL1.4&d=HASH01065621328d0a5a4429c641.11.6.7>=1.


Appendix or Appendices


_The United Nations Digital library provides a direct link to resolutions or report related to traditional practices._

II.  https://www.who.int/ (World Health Organization International)

_The World Health Organization contains many research reports on individual types of harmful traditional practices which provides insight into specific root causes, statistics and guidance to solutions. The World Health Organization health reports can also clarify sophisticated medical jargons for delegates._

III.  https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/ (Girls Not Brides)

_Charity that works on international level specifically to prevent early marriage. Girls not Brides currently initiates programmes, which can inspire delegates a framework of solutions to underage marriage._