

WHERE WE STAND**Harmful Traditional Practices****Where Things Stand...**

The UN Human Rights Committee recognises traditional cultural practices as “reflecting values and beliefs held by members of a community for periods often spanning generations”, some of which are harmful to women and girls. Despite their harmful nature and violation of current international human rights laws, such practices persist because they are often not challenged.

The harmful traditional practices are all consequences of the value placed on women and the girl child by certain societies. They persist in an environment where women and the girl child have unequal access to education, wealth, health and employment. The effects of these practices are significant and have a negative impact on the physical and mental health of women and girls, as well as psychosocial consequences on communities.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child 1990 asks States to ensure a healthy life for children free from abuse with the Committee requiring States to “take all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children.”

In 1990, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) discussed the issue of harmful traditional practices, in particular FGM. General Recommendation No. 14 adopted at that session, indicated recognition of work carried out by women's organisations in identifying and combating harmful traditional practices. The Committee recommended that Governments support those efforts and encourage politicians, professionals, and religious and community leaders at all levels, including the media and the arts, to cooperate in influencing attitudes towards the eradication of FGM. The Committee also called for the introduction of appropriate educational and training programmes and seminars based on research findings about the problems arising from FGM. A number of other practical suggestions were made for Governments to follow.

FGM

The CEDAW and the Committee on the Rights of the Child have clarified that these practices are harmful to the health of women and children and carry a high risk of death and disability. For instance, FGM can “lead to various immediate and long-term health consequences including severe pain, shock, infections and complications during childbirth (affecting both the mother and child), long-term gynaecological problems such as fistula, psychological effects and death.”

Child, Early and Forced Marriage

In November 2014, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution urging States “to enact, enforce and uphold laws and policies aimed at preventing and ending child, early and forced marriage and protecting those at risk, and to ensure that marriage is entered into only with the informed, free and full consent of the intending spouses.” Child marriages are “often accompanied by early and frequent pregnancies and childbirth, resulting in higher than average maternal morbidity and mortality rates.”

The Beijing Declaration in 1995 agreed Member States would work toward eliminating negative cultural attitudes and practices against girls.

The ICPD Summit in Nairobi November 2019 agreed to “Address sexual and gender-based violence and harmful practices, in particular child, early and forced marriages and female genital mutilation,

by committing to strive for [5.(a)] Zero sexual and gender-based violence and harmful practices, including zero child, early and forced marriage, as well as zero female genital mutilation.”

...And Where Things Need to Go

Fundamental Action

- Governments should adopt recommendations and resolutions of CEDAW, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other human rights which will make progress toward eliminating all harmful traditional practices.
- All Member States should ratify Article 4 of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women which calls upon States to “condemn violence against women and the State should not invoke any custom, tradition or religious consideration to avoid their obligations with respect to its elimination.”
- Member States should enact new legislation and review existing legislation to ensure that the rights of women and girls are respected, protected, and fulfilled, and resolve any conflict between formal and customary law to protect women and girls from these forms of violence.

Additional Action

- At all levels of government health policies are needed which recognise the dangers of the practice of FGM and early marriage for women and girls’ health.
- Education programmes should be provided which inform individuals, communities, and societies about the extensive and substantial harm caused by traditional practices.
- NGOs and CSOs should advocate for medical, social work, and law enforcement education curricula to include information on the consequences of harmful traditional practices, how to protect victims/survivors of harmful traditional practices, and how to prevent those practices from occurring in the future.

Where Soroptimist International Stands

Although many other harmful traditional practices continue, SI focuses on raising awareness of female genital mutilation and the need for the prevention of child marriage.

- SI upholds a human rights-based approach to policies and programmes aimed at ending harmful traditional practices, prioritising dignity and the right to life for women and girls.
- SI will work with partner organisations and communities including men and boys to raise awareness of the impact of traditional harmful practices.
- SI will work to empower young women through education programmes to understand their human rights in relation to all forms of harmful traditional practices.

Soroptimist International supports the implementation of the 2030 Agenda through its Federations, Unions, Regions, Clubs, by working on the ground with partner organisations and UN agencies to Educate, Empower and Enable women and girls everywhere.