

A Critique of Some Harmful Cultural Practices Against Females in Selected African Countries: A Social Work Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The review focused on some harmful cultural practices against females in selected African countries. The methodology was a documentary study with data obtained from secondary sources. The theoretical perspective relied on three theories, social convention, anomie, and social learning theory. Findings: The review reported on some harmful cultural practices that violated the human rights of females. These are Female Genital Mutilation [FGM], flogging of child brides, widowhood sexual rites, child sexual initiation ceremonies, breast ironing, child marriages, and child slavery and the associated risks stated. The Social Work perspective identified adverse consequences of all the cultural practices relating to the physical, emotional, and psychological well-being of female survivors. The review condemned the use of females to sustain barbaric cultural rites that have lasted for centuries. Conclusion: The rejection of all harmful cultural practices and the education of male and female children to have a future to embrace new mind-sets of modernity that ends all barbaric cultural practices. Recommendations: There should be continuous sensitization against harmful cultural practices and the need to strengthen human rights for all. Also, the prosecutions of violators must be intensified to serve as deterrence.

Keywords: *Females, Harmful, Cultural practices, Pain, Suffering*

INTRODUCTION

Sub-Saharan Africa has a rich cultural heritage and cultural practices that have lasted for centuries. These traditions and cultures have evolved from the ancient epoch to the 21st Century. What may be unknown to non-Africans is that all ethnic groups have unique cultural traditions that consist of languages, belief systems such as different religions, arts e.g. music, artifice, paintings, symbols of carvings, and cultural attires representing the major ethnic groups. All these attributes bind the respective ethnic groups together without individualism a core attribute of the Western world (Idang, 2015). Irrespective of the social standing of individuals, they pledge allegiance to the different ethnic and cultural groups which they belong. In other words, there is an affinity to their ethnic or cultural origin of individuals from their respective places of origin (Offili & Omoro, 2017). That explains why there are ethnic and cultural associations in all urban areas where Nigerians reside. They meet monthly to deliberate on various issues that impact their members and support each other in times of distress or challenges of surviving urban life. Such meetings occur around other African countries and the Diaspora. Their meetings also deliberate on the challenges

of development in respective villages or ethnic communities in their respective countries of origin (Offili & Omoro, 2017). Irrespective of their social standing, they pledge allegiance to their places of origin where they have cultural and familial roots. This is evidenced by the attendance of burial ceremonies of relatives and friends' consolation in times of grief and celebration of cultural events during the festive season and new yam festivals (Mgbolu, 2023). Similarly, social interaction among members of respective communities cut across different social classes, religions, associations, etc. Irrespective of one's status or attainments, there is high regard and veneration of traditional chieftaincy institutions including respective cultural associations and events that are held in high esteem (Travel Tank News, 2024). Although it is waning due to urbanisation and modernisation, in the past decades, the extended family system was the centre of family cohesion and stability; such that the oldest family heads had a special place of significance as the surviving elders presided over meetings to deliberate and resolve internal disputes, and also commemorate the celebrations of events and arrange burial ceremonies of deceased relatives. The subheads of the nuclear family have a common bond to keep the near and distant families together. Family units have their relevance in the respective communities. On the macro front of cultural traditions, there exist exciting social entertainments and different cultural festivals involving traditional masquerades' folk dances organised annually to grace respective ceremonies and events planned in the villages and towns in age grades and other social groups.

However, a major dent in the African cultural way of life is the predominance of Harmful Cultural Practices [HCP]. The word harmful connotes something inimical to the well-being of an individual. Traditional practice is a phrase that describes a cultural rite of passage that is sacrosanct to a belief system that binds communities together. It can also be described as dangerous rituals in which members of ethnic groups participate. This study focuses on how African cultural practices ignore the right of females and minors to choose what is best suited to their bodies. That meant compelling innocent female minors and teenagers to undergo different barbaric initiation procedures without consent or understanding why they were compelled to participate. Similarly, illiterate adult females whose opinions and voices are deemed insignificant, unwillingly comply with widowhood rites that are inimical to their lives and emotional wellbeing. Let us delve into a few definitions of culture.

Culture has been defined in different ways by respective authors. A definition of culture that is worth reflecting on is "the complex whole of man's acquisition of knowledge, morals, beliefs, arts, customs, and technology, which are shared and transmitted from generation to generation" (Otite and Oginwo (2016: 86) as cited in Sibani, (2018). Sibani (2014:107 cited in Sibani, 2018: 58) posits that "culture is the entity that incorporates the totality of and is synonymous with the people's way of life, transmitted from age to age, generation to generation." An illustration below illuminates the discussion of culture.

The child just grows into and within the cultural heritage of his people. He imbibes it. Culture, in traditional society, is not taught; it is caught. The child observes, imbibes and mimics the action of his elders and siblings. He watches the naming ceremonies, religious services, marriage and all cultural rituals, funeral obsequies. He witnesses the coronation of a king or chief, the annual yam festival, the annual dance and acrobatic displays of guilds and age groups or his relations in the activities. The child in a traditional society cannot escape his cultural and physical environments (Fafunwa, 1974: 48 cited in Idang, 2015: 99.

Sibani's (2018) definition seems aligned with this writer's perspective. Culture is how people do their things and manage their traditions, which they received from the generations before them. Culture is transmitted to unborn generations; unlike animals, humans are unique with a developed intellect and distinct idiosyncrasies that are ambitious to tackle the development of the physical

environment through research and development. It seems educated Nigerians everywhere desire to overcome the challenges of development including embracing modern scientific innovations which are progressive and dynamic. When ethnic groups in Africa are resistant to understanding the progressive and dynamic nature of culture, they sadly remain stuck in anachronistic traditions which are classified as harmful and are responsible for the high mortality rate of females in Africa (Rockey, 2023). Unfortunately, the adversities of these cultures appear to have overwhelmed patriotic and proud Afrocentric scholars and feminists to resist the continuation of many barbaric and harmful cultural practices that are inimical to females (Unah, 2017; Onuoha-Ogwe, 2024).

A harmful cultural practice such as female genital mutilation [FGM] involves a painful procedure of cutting or inserting a sharp object into the clitoris without anaesthesia. Such harmful cultural practices endanger the lives of those females who experienced the painful procedure which remains traumatic for life. The Maputo Protocol (2003) defines harmful practices as “all behaviour, attitudes, and practices which negatively affect the fundamental rights of women and girls, such as their right to life, health, dignity, education, and physical integrity.” All cultural practices that do not involve cutting off vital body organs may be physiologically impacting and still have clinical consequences such as breast ironing, sexual rites of passage, child marriages, and widowhood rites of different sorts (Dau, 2004; Maputo protocol, 2003). From social interactions, it is puzzling that educated and enlightened individuals often align with culturally depraved indigenes from countries where such inhumane practices are prevalent to perpetrate the above harmful cultural practices which are in contravention of human rights laws of Nigeria (Oluwadamilare & Babajide, 2022) and major international organisations like the UN, WHO, UNESCO, and ILO. Given the Maputo declaration, the tasks for policymakers in respective countries are to implement their extant laws and strongly prosecute promoters of these barbaric practices that are still on-going.

This review paper has a direction. After the introduction, the research problem, methodology, theoretical perspective, the limitation of the study, the literature review, the Social Work implications, discussion conclusion, and recommendations.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Although the prevalence of different harmful cultural practices is in the public space, not all harmful cultural practices in Sub-Saharan Africa and North East Africa have gotten significant attention as Female genital mutilation [FGM]. In addition, it is difficult to see publications about the implications of such harmful practices in Social Work journals. This is because most of these cultural traditions are in remote areas and are virtually unknown to the wider world where social workers practice. This review of harmful cultural practices intends to remind the public about some practices that are unrelated to FGM like child slavery for debts, breast ironing, flogging of potential spouses, horrible sexual rites of passage for underage teens, and sexual cleansing rites for widows to mention a few.

METHODOLOGY

It is impossible to chronicle all the different types of harmful cultural practices due to the remoteness of many villages. There is also a dearth of information about some cultural practices that are not known to researchers. It will always be a challenge to conduct research across over fifty countries of Africa due to the high-cost of transportation time and the logistics that this entails. Given that assertion, the review relied on publications on Google Scholar, online journals, textbooks, international organisation reports, and newspapers. Consequently, this study considers the documentary research method as the most suitable.

A documentary method is the study of primary and secondary sources of research on different phenomena. Payne and Payne (2004) as cited by Mogalakwe (2006: 2) describe the documentary method as the techniques used to categorise, investigate, interpret, and identify the limitations of physical sources, most commonly written documents whether in the private or public domain. The critical fact is documents are written by individual authors who conducted research and published findings for the benefit of the general public.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Three theoretical perspectives were identified in this study. These are the social convention theory, the anomie theory, and the social learning theory. The social convention theory was first initiated by Mackie (1996). Then Shelley-Duncan et al (2011) tested it on a large sample in Senegambia. They argued that FGM occurs if the entire society decides to mutilate or not to mutilate. The third theory impacts other harmful practices. The social learning theory of Bandura (1977) emphasizes the human behaviour of personalities that are influenced by the social and human environment, which are interconnected. They determine the exhibition of social and cultural habits of people in respective societies; to the extent that personal and environmental factors are all equal, interlocking determinants of each other in the perpetrating of cultural and social habits of individuals and groups. Seemingly, all harmful cultural practices are predicated on what people observe in their social and human environment from when they were young. These habits or practices have been replicated as adults for centuries and passed to the younger generations to replicate. Despite its harm, it is difficult to end harmful cultural practices in Africa due to the lack of punishment for perpetrators.

THE LIMITATION OF STUDY

This review is limited to harmful cultural practices against females' sexual organs in West and East African countries including Egypt and Sudan; in addition to selected countries in Southern Africa notably Malawi and Mozambique.

LITERATURE REVIEW

SOME HARMFUL CULTURAL PRACTICES IN AFRICA

FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION (FGM)

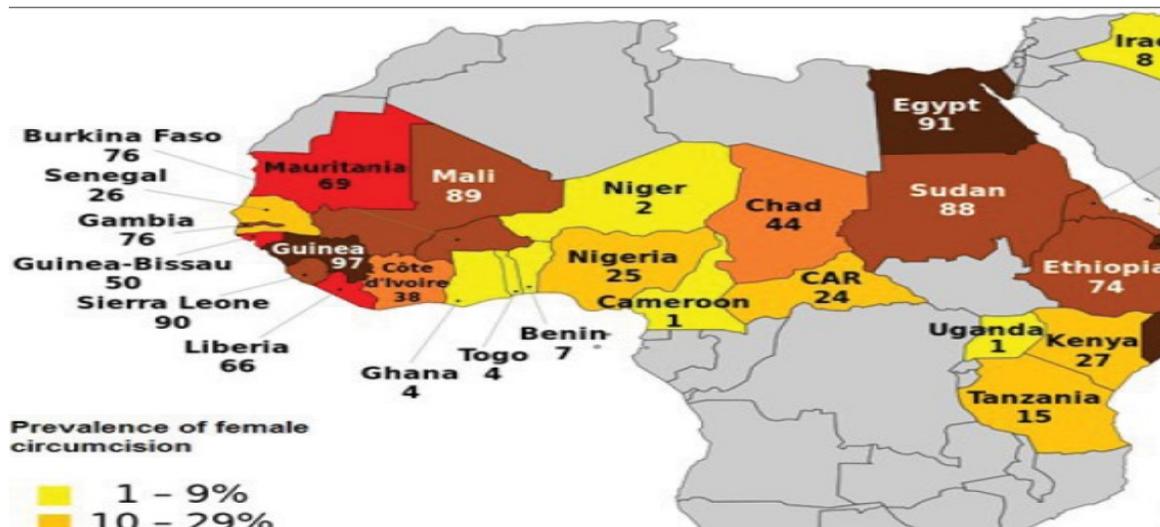
The most barbaric harmful cultural practice is female genital mutilation (Osam, 2023a; Rockey, 2023). Locally it is known as circumcision. Althaus (1997) reported that in the 2nd Century, a Greek Historian Agatha Chides of Cnidus discovered parents were mutilating their daughters in western Arabia which is contemporary Egypt. The practice has spread to Sudan, the East and West African nation-states for over 20 centuries where FGM has been forcefully perpetrated against underage and adult females. It was done to curb the sexual cravings of girls and also pacify their cultural requirements that are bonded by superstition and a strong traditional belief system. A few other tribes in Mali, Burkina Faso, and a few other countries in West Africa, and further afield in Malaysia and Indonesia falsely misinterpreted the Koran to claim FGM is a requirement in Islam. According to UNICEF (2016), over 230 million girls have been mutilated worldwide with over 20 million survivors in Nigeria which has the third highest level of FGM in the world (UNICEF, 2024). Somalia is the first followed by Guinea and other West African countries.

CLASSIFICATIONS OF FGM

According to the WHO (2024), Female Genital Mutilation is classified into 4 major types:

- Type 1: This is the partial or total removal of the clitoral glans (the external and visible part of the clitoris, which is a sensitive part of the female genitals), and/or the prepuce/clitoral hood (the fold of skin surrounding the clitoral glans).
- Type 2: This is the partial or total removal of the clitoral glans and the labia minora (the inner folds of the vulva), with or without removal of the labia majora (the outer folds of skin of the vulva).
- Type 3: Also known as infibulation, this is the narrowing of the vaginal opening through the creation of a covering seal. The seal is formed by cutting and repositioning the labia minora, or labia majora, sometimes through stitching, with or without removal of the clitoral prepuce/clitoral hood and glans.
- Type 4: This includes all other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes, e.g., pricking, piercing, incising, scraping, and cauterizing the genital area ”

Unfortunately, many tribal groups in North, West, and East Africa fail to understand the progressive and dynamic nature of culture as they remain stuck in anachronistic traditions of antiquity which are classified as harmful and are responsible for unnecessary deaths of young females (Rockey, 2023). Campaigns against FGM have emboldened some angry survivors to condemn its barbarism with vigour (UNICEF, 2022). Some survivors have formed local NGOs and partnered with counterparts in the Diaspora to sensitise the domestic and international public to the dangers of FGM (Ajayi, 2023; Unah, 2017). The continuous resistance against Western and international organisations like the UNO, UNESCO, UNICEF WHO, and many NGOs that are opposed to FGM is characterised by a lame excuse that these organisations are imperialist forces interfering with cultural practices that have lasted for over twenty centuries. Althaus (1997) cited narratives regarding the level of resistance from the Sudanese, Somali, Kenya, and Tanzanian tribes who were against the British colonial government's ban on FGM. In reaction, they were in a rush to circumcise their female children to avoid being sanctioned (Althaus, 1997). Anti-abolitionists claim Europeans also have harmful practices that are linked to different surgical operations that may have caused pain and fatality. The counterargument is that it cannot be compared to voluntary plastic surgery of respective body parts such as breast enhancement, mastopexy, and other bodily augmentation for only adults. FGM and other harmful cultural practices are imposed on little children and adults without anaesthesia. The map below indicates where FGM is practiced in Africa.



Source: Karaman (2021: 194)

To understand the barbaric spread of FGM, the affected countries represent over 90% of mutilations across the world. The region is the most underdeveloped and poverty-stricken with a high level of corruption. There is the failure of government at all levels, the slow pace of modernity, the absence of a developed infrastructure, baseless superstition that venerates deities, gods and ancestors, a high level of illiteracy and poverty, and low life expectancies across the regions. In addition, there is chaos in the social spaces as manifested by violent crimes, high levels of maladministration, hunger, and starvation dominating the countries coupled with high inflation and low levels of industrialisation even as their citizens flee to seek political asylum abroad due to bad governance. Such indices of retrogression could not be fortuitous once the indexes of developments are juxtaposed with the other parts of the developed world where barbaric practices are not in vogue. This characterisation of the region excludes Egypt.

REASONS FOR FGM

Religious factor

In the West African sub-region, circumcision is forced on children and teenage girls below the age of consent. Further afield young females were forcefully mutilated due to their parents' allegiance to the Islamic religion. The chief Imams insist on the mutilation of girls as these males have no idea of the painful trauma this process entails. In the Gambia, the influence of Imams is so strong that the Gambian parliament has put a bill to lift the ban on FGM (Rukanga, 2024). Despite their positions, there is no command from the Koran to mutilate girls (Birge & Serin, 2019). A Muslim medical doctor elaborately clarified his position by asserting that female genital mutilation has no medical benefits. Instead, there exist adverse short- and long-term consequences for females (Karaman, 2021).

Upholding traditional cultural norms and Identity

In many rural settlements including urban societies, ancestral practices are founded on traditional cultures practiced and sustained by aged mothers and chiefs (Osam, 2023a). This can be traced from ancient era to contemporary times. For decades in Nigeria, close cousins and non-relatives

were mutilated without seeking their consent. Despite medical advice and extant laws against harmful practices, the lack of robust implementation meant the voices of depraved eldest grandparents often held sway. That is why FGM and other cultural rituals have been sustained for centuries even without any benefit.

In Ikom Local Government Area of Cross Rivers State of Nigeria comprising Ikom urban Okuni, Ofutop, Etung, Bakor, Akparabong, Balep/Opu clans and Bakor ethnic groups, the mutilation of females was highly cherished as a cultural rite of passage when young girls are less than 15 years. Female genital mutilation attracted a huge ceremony and jamboree of sorts as people were invited to celebrate the survival of pain as survivors were carried shoulder-high and applauded by cheering crowds (Osam, 2023a). Such celebrations are replicated elsewhere in West and East African countries. Just like in Nigeria, in other West and East African countries, mutilation is a cultural identity. The different tribes in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania mutilate females as a cultural identity (Llamas, 2017). Some tribes even boast about their mutilated status (TNH, 2005).

From a sociocultural perspective, this is a summary justifying FGM, the protection and proof of virginity as a prerequisite for daughters to be presented to marriage. The sustenance of purity and cleaning of females entering the institution of marriage, preventing extreme sexual pleasure in women, protecting women against various disorders such as hysteria or masturbation, preventing mental disorders such as depression, insanity, and kleptomania. The lowering of sexual desire restrains young women from promiscuity, preventing infertility and ensuring a high social status that is respected in their communities (Karaman, 2021: 194)

None of these arguments are proven to be medically correct or true. One wonders the correlation between FGM and major disorders including mental health and stealing. Osam (2023a) critiqued the rationale associated with all forms of circumcision or FGM and identified three major consequences notably physical, emotional and psychological trauma that is life-long trauma for survivors. The research debunked all the myths identified as the rationale for FGM and identified the following consequences of this barbaric practice: the instability of some marriages due to difficult orgasms, domestic battery on uncooperative spouses, painful coitus, dry vagina, sexual frustration and sexual deprivation and lifelong medical effects. His manuscript argued that the procedure was torture in the guise of adhering to an atavistic cultural practice that killed 44,440 females annually (Rockey, 2023).

Apart from adverse consequences that have earlier been identified, there is also the lowering of the sexual function of mutilated women as found in Dura et al (2023); Owojuyigbe, et al (2017). Laleh et al (2022), Adelekan, et al (2022), Oyefarat, 2014; Mahmoud (2016), and Esho et al, 2017). Their respective studies contradicted Ahmadu and Shweder's (2009) and Catania et al (2007) reports that disputed the lack of sexual dysfunction among mutilated females.

SOME OTHER HARMFUL CULTURAL PRACTICES AGAINST FEMALES IN SELECTED AFRICAN COUNTRIES

Besides FGM and child marriages, not much is known about other harmful cultural practices in Sub-Saharan Africa. Let us consider a few.

Severe flogging to get a husband

Hamar or Ukuli Bula of the Omo River valley of South West Ethiopia is a minority tribe 400 kilometres from Addis Ababa in the hills of Ethiopia. The flogging of females is preceded by a vital ceremony that is very popular. It is known as the jumping of the bull. Young men who are potential

suitors are invited to attempt jumping the bull. If they are successful, they are promised a life partner. A prior arrangement is made for ladies to publicly profess their love for respective bridegrooms who are physically present in the jumping the bull ceremony, the young ladies are lined up against the men who are their future husbands.

Relatives of the damsels are given strong canes to severely whip their sisters or cousins as the case may be. The flogging is so intense that female maidens beg relatives to flog harder. This is done to the point of deep injuries on their lacerated backs. The injuries are a reminder of the scars ladies sustain because of their love for their fiancé. During the flogging sessions, they do not cry. The more injuries on their backs, the better because the scars are a permanent reminder of what female brides go through to be married; if the marriage were to have problems, the respective relatives that were invited to flog the damsels would look at the scars and marks inflicted during the flogging sessions and offer assistance before they return to their matrimonial homes (Gedecho & Guangul, 2016). A concerted effort has been made to end this brutal practice but it has been resisted (Fiseha, 2021).

Osam (2023b) analysed the severe consequences of corporal punishment on young pupils and teenagers in schools and respective houses in Nigeria. He identified three different impacts of flogging. These are physical psychological and emotional impacts with attendant injuries on the bodies. However, in this context, physical and emotional aspects are emphasized. The scars and marks on the body result in bleeding; the lacerated cuts are susceptible to different types of infections on the body. The lacerations sustained may impair blood flow due to damage to the veins and arteries. The emotional effect of such flogging is the disappointment of not getting the desired assistance which may be beyond the relative's ability. It may adversely impact their emotions to be sad with the regret that the flogging was in vain.

Child marriages and untimely deaths

Child marriage is considered a union between an underage girl and an elderly man. This form of marriage has been as old as when humanity was created. Across most African tribes, young children from the age of 12 are forcefully married out to elderly men. Nigeria is home to the largest number of child brides in Africa, with 23 million girls and women who are married in childhood, (UNICEF 2024; Save the Children (2023). Without minding their physical emotional and psychological impact, poverty has compelled many parents to give out their young daughters to marry men that may be 30 or 40 years older; a man fit to be her daddy or even granddad in some rare circumstances. In Nigeria, the illiteracy of parents, endemic poverty, religion, and cultural inclinations are the core drivers of child marriages (Osakinle & Tayo-Olajubutu, 2017). In northern Nigeria where school systems are failing and alternatives to school are few, roughly 80% of girls marry before the age of 18 (Save the Children 2021). It is so serious that the rates of deaths are alarming. Reports indicate 26 child brides die every day due to complications of child marriages (Save the Children, 2021). According to the same source, the continent of Africa reportedly has the highest rate of child marriage in the world. West and Central Africa account for nearly half (9,600) of all estimated child marriage-related deaths globally, or 26 deaths a day. The regional teenage maternal mortality rate is four times higher than anywhere else in the world.

According to Bledsoe & Cohen (1993), a lot of these deaths emanate from the following maternal health complications such as eclampsia, sepsis, obstructed and prolonged labour, fistula, haemorrhage, and abortion. There are additional consequences of child marriages. These are domestic battery, if she refuses sexual intercourse with her husband or refuses to do a difficult house task. There is added pressure for early pregnancy which has its physiological consequences such as stillbirth of children, the risk of sexually transmitted diseases notably HIV, Hepatitis,

herpes, gonorrhoea, syphilis, and the silent killer human papillomavirus [HPV] which leads to different types of cancers (National Cancer Institute, 2024; Nour, 2006). Due to illiteracy, many girls were not vaccinated against HPV (Global Health, 2024), as parents resisted pleas for vaccination (Kindzika, 2020).

Due to its significance and how damaging this practice of child marriage has become, respective African governments ought to clamp down on this harmful cultural practice that is gradually ravaging communities in northern Nigeria. Reports assert that ten states in far Northern Nigeria have over 80% of child marriages; such marriages are organised before the age of 16. At such young ages, their vital organs are fragile, and their emotional ability to understand the complexity of marital relationships is low as they are too young to be productive (Hlambo, Hlongwa, & Msathali (2019). The social consequences are dire. These are social ostracism, rejection by parents, and relatives' inability to continue in school due to rejection by the husband. There is an inability to learn a skill or work, so endemic poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy become an experience that endangers such child brides.

Sexual rite of passage for underage girls

Some African communities have weird reasons to continue with cultural practices that are harmful and inappropriate even to those from other parts of Africa. Due to supernatural beliefs, inappropriate practices that endanger the lives of underage girls are perceived as normal (Warria, 2018). Some Malawian tribes in Eastern and Southern parts of the country have been practicing sexual rituals for centuries. These are Chiradzulu district, Chikwawa, Nsanje, and Salima Districts. Gleaning from the elaborate publication of the Malawi Human Rights Commission (2006), the entire document consists of over one hundred harmful cultural practices against females that are biased. To illustrate how inappropriate the culture targets females, in some tribes, girls as young as six years old are prepared for future sexual encounters. A boiled egg is forcefully inserted in their vagina to break the hymen (Banda & Kunkeyani, 2015). Then about six years later after the first menstrual cycle, there is a second initiation ceremony lasting 14 days. A ritual purification ceremony known in local parlance as “kusasa fumbi” (literary brushing off the dust) is regularly performed in the identified villages. After the girls observe their first menses, they report to their parents. The parents arrange with other family members to be sent to a camp to start the rite of passage. It is located far in the interior led by elderly women.

A cultural ritual is an aspect of training by elderly women to satisfy their future husbands in bed. According to Banda, & Kunkeyani (2015), for two weeks or more, these young girls are tutored about their menstrual health, hygiene, family values, and instructions on being future housewives. One of the instructions is the repeated practice of twisting the waist to practically repeat such a scene in the course of real sexual intercourse. After the oral instructions, next is the practical sexual rite of passage which has been pre-arranged for these underage teenagers whose ages are from 12 to 15 years. To facilitate the initiation process, mothers hire and pay middle-aged men known as “hyenas” to have sexual intercourse with underage girls without demanding HIV-free status results (Park, 2014). The ten hyenas paid to have sex for fees of 4-7 dollars do not use protective condoms. An HIV-positive ‘hyena’ kept his HIV status secret before he reportedly had sexual intercourse with 104 underage girls. After his confession, the Malawian President ordered his arrest and prosecution. He was jailed for two years (BBC Correspondent, 2016; CNN, 2014; Correspondent 2016).

Sexual rite of passage for widows

Sexual cleansing is a superstitious belief that pronounces spiritual retribution against widows who refuse to be sexually cleansed. This tradition targets widows across East and Southern African countries. It is the superstitious belief that after the death of a husband, a woman is perceived to be ritually unclean, contaminated by the bad omen of his passing. The spirit of the dead man is assumed to inhabit the widow's body and around the environment in which he once resided, hence the need for sexual cleansing. Consequently, she must be cleansed through unprotected sexual intercourse with the brother of the dead man or a hired man if the deceased man had no brother or refused to participate. The unprotected sex sessions enable the widow to be free to remarry and to be accepted in the community. Sexual rites of passage are actively practiced in the Nkore ethnic group in Uganda (Mabumba et al, 2007), Aushi in Zambia, Zimbabwe, eastern and southern regions of Malawi, central and southern parts of Mozambique (Cruz, 2022), and the Luo tribe of Kenya (Munala et al, 2022). The focus is on the sexual cleansing rite of Luo of Kenya and central and southern parts of Mozambique.

Sexual rites in the Luo tribe of Kenya

According to Munala et al (2022), Sexual cleansing is a cultural practice of social evolution marked by three stages; separation, transition, and incorporation. The overarching aim of sexual cleansing is to reintegrate the widow back into the community and to mark the transition from being removed from social life to acceptance into communal life and possible marriage if a suitor emerges. The Luo tribe has a strict sexual rite of passage for widows as it is believed that it will prevent disasters of great magnitude such as sudden deaths in the family. The women are compelled to have sexual intercourse as a means of retaining their house, protecting their children, interacting with others in the community, and gaining temporary jobs on farms. If she declines to be cleansed, there are consequences. She will be ostracised and denied communal rights of not visiting anyone or mingling. The lady would not get farm work as the community would deride and mock her as she may face physical violence from her in-laws (Munala et al, 2022). Assuming she agrees to participate after a few sex sessions that are unprotected, the widow's hair is shaved in public to indicate her cleansing then the husband can be interred. The departed spirit wouldn't harm anyone in the family. This tradition has been entrenched even before colonialism as it unfairly targets females as men are exempted from a similar ritual.

Sexual cleansing rites in central and southern Mozambique

A similar cultural ritual in central and southern Mozambique involves sexual intercourse called "pita kufa." The culture is unkind to widows who decline to be sexually cleansed after the death of their husbands. A common illness like malaria or waterborne disease that was the cause of death is attributed to superstition. The death of a husband meant disrespect, abuse, ostracism, and inability to visit relatives or in-laws as no man will marry a widow who was not sexually cleansed. Sexual cleansing protects the woman, and children's household and opens opportunities for communal bonding. As required, the brother of the dead man must have sex with her. If the deceased has no brother a cousin can be called to have sex. Cruz et al (2022) described the seriousness of the cleansing acts. The strict compliance of this ritual is supervised to ensure its effectiveness and ward off illnesses and deaths among community members and the family of the widow. The intensity of the compliance to cleanse the widow is described

In general, sexual relations are maintained for three consecutive days, often two or three times a day. Under the internal logic of this ritual, the cleansing/purification sexual act is not practiced with condoms because it is the “hot” sexual fluids and the “hot frictions” that are assumed to neutralize the impurity involved in the death of the husband (Cruz et al, 2018: 2).

The scary consequence of the sexual rite of passage is the high prevalence of HIV and other Sexual Transmission Infections STIs in all the regions in Mozambique, Kenya, Zambia, and Zimbabwe where it is popularly practiced and ensuing high deaths.

Sexual gratification for intimate visitors in Namibia

The Ovahimba tribe is a nomadic community in the north of Namibia. Their cultural heritage seems unchanging due to its long history rooted in anachronistic traditions. Realistically, changes in cultural attitudes are hardly noticed in their way of life. The tribe is very hospitable. The aspect of tradition that is not dying out is the permission of their husbands to allow their wives to have sex with a visiting intimate friend or relative. That act signifies a great show of affection by offering their spouses to have sex with their friends or relatives while the man sleeps in another room or outside. Such practice is also called “Okujepisaomukazendu” in their native parlance (Karuumobe, 2013). The intriguing fact about this tribe is they have barbaric initiation rites to mark the phase of growth of young girls. This includes female genital mutilation and for girls and circumcision for boys.

Due to criticism about the risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, a Kunene chief decried such complaints as interference in the culture of his people. He urged them to sustain their cultural heritage by giving their wives to close friends or relatives (2013). Sharing a wife with a visitor is indeed accepted as an act of kindness. It eliminates jealousy (Karuumobe, 2013). In the event of pregnancy, children that were born in such circumstances are claimed by the host of the house. Similarly, the woman also can give her friend to the husband for the night but this is not very common.

Debts marriages

Bechebe community is at the foot of the famous Obudu Cattle Ranch in Cross Rivers State Nigeria. According to Odey and Sanya (2018), debts owed to rich individuals are paid by giving out underage daughters for marriage to elderly men. Rather than allowing these girls to reach the age of an adult then choose a career, and make decisions regarding a future partner, they are given away. The outcome is domestic battery and enslavement. Since there is no emotional attachment or love associated with the forceful marriage, the child bride is put to work on a farm, she may be severely beaten for infractions. She cannot enrol in school or pursue a career. Her children are also slaves. In the event of sudden death, the in-laws must replace her with another child. It is a despicable practice that missionaries have tried to stop for decades, yet Obanliku LGA boasts of prominent politicians.

Breast Ironing

Breast ironing or breast flattening is predominantly done in Cameroon where over 25-50% of girls aged 9-15 have experienced it (Pearsell, 2017). It is also done in Benin, Ivory Coast, Chad, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Togo, Zimbabwe, and Guinea-Conakry (African Health Organisation n.d.). There is

no medical benefit to this practice that is meant to delay the development of breasts and delay child marriage. The aim is to prevent sexual predators and even rapists from touching girls and to avoid child marriages and early sexual contact with boys.

SOCIAL WORK PERSPECTIVE ON HARMFUL CULTURAL PRACTICES

The Social Work Code of Ethics is against all harmful cultural practices like FGM, forceful tooth removal, flogging of brides, lip plates, and all other practices that potentially expose females to sexually transmitted diseases. This is because “The social work profession promotes social change, problem-solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being, adding that, principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to Social Work” (Code of Ethics of Social Work, 2008).

From its inception in the 19th Century by Jane Addams, Bertha Reynolds, and Mary Richmond, Social Work has been noted to advocate for the poor and vulnerable in all societies (Langford & Keaton 2022). Seemingly, injustice against the poor and social deprivation against the most vulnerable is the core focus of Social Work. Through advocacy and volunteerism to meet the needs of numerous clients, critical issues are addressed towards restoring the fundamental human rights of the poor to have human dignity. The mission of the Social Work profession is rooted in a set of core values that ought to be internalised by social workers in words and in action which is in the aims. These are service to humanity, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence in the course of professional practice.

This core value of respecting cultural diversity was tested when the challenge of harmful cultural practices notably FGM became a topic of debate. Pioneered by Western feminists’ social workers against accepting cultural values that inflict pain and harm on vulnerable females, the argument was pitted against Afrocentric females who view feminists’ condemnation of FGM as representatives of imperialism bent on condemning cultural values that are indigenous to Africa’s tradition (Van- Bevel, 2023). Ahmadu (2018) and her pro-FGM associates hid under the canopy of the relativity theory, which suggests that the cultural values of traditional societies cannot be inferior to Western cultural values (Daniel, 2013). In other words, they claim FGM is a highly venerated cultural value that ought to be respected, preserved and accorded equal treatment to Western cultural values (Ahmadu, 2018). According to Burston, (2017) in different international conferences associations of social workers condemned in its strongest terms the continuation of barbaric cultural practices that subject the girl child and other adults of any gender to harmful rituals. Anti-FGM campaigners on the grounds in West and Central Africa where FGM is very rife advised anti-FGM advocates to specifically focus on the health consequences of FGM and not the human rights violations against the girl child and other females. This is because cultural rituals in Africa do not consider human rights violations of the girl child, adult male and females (Omezue-Nnali, et al, (2022). It is a strong criticism against African ritual rites that are anathema to human rights.

THE IMPACT OF HARMFUL CULTURAL PRACTICE: A SOCIAL WORK PERSPECTIVE

Physical

All practices against females impact the human body due to pain and injury. Sexual rite of passage on underage girls and widows qualifies as a harmful cultural practice due to the myriads of sexual infections that are incurable. These are HIV/AIDS, Herpes; Hepatitis B and human papillae virus

that lead to different cancers. Sexual cleansing is statutory rape due to cultural imposition on widows to have sex with a stranger or an in-law without condoms or a prior HIV test. Similarly, all other bizarre rituals to celebrate puberty against underage girls amount to a violation of the fundamental human rights of females. The impact is much more devastating physically because they may be pregnant and die in childbirth and also have fistula due to their young ages. There are other physical consequences of FGM which is damage to genitalia, pain during sex, lack of interest in coitus, and difficulties in achieving orgasm (Osam, 2023a).

Emotional

Sexual violations and violence have devastating emotional consequences due to pain that evokes sadness and dejection due to the loss of value and self-esteem (Cruz et al, 2018). The consequences of enforced sexual rites of passage portray oppression discrimination and disdain for females in all East and Southern African countries where sexual cleansing is required solely for females and not for males who lost their wives. The effect of dropping out of school due to early pregnancy, the inability to inherit property, and the discrimination that they endure add to the emotional trauma of yielding to widowhood practices and contracting sexual infections.

Psychological

Researchers have linked FGM to post-traumatic stress disorder (Tammari & Manesi, 2023). The memory of grabbing and cutting a sensitive part of the human body as fragile as the genitalia and the ensuing bleeding hardly fades away. More so the reflection of the instruments and sharp objects can be traumatising. The negative memories of the trauma have proven to be life-long with coldness and disinterest in coitus.

DISCUSSION

In most African communities where FGM is practiced, the clitoris is perceived as a misnomer, an oddity of sorts in the physiology of females, hence aggressive plans to mutilate and curb the excessive sexual pleasure (Althaus, 1997). Without understanding the health consequences, which have made life for mutilated females so terrible and disabling against attaining sexual pleasure, imaginary myths have been falsely created to misinform the public especially those culturally inclined to support barbaric practices. The misinformation and mendaciousness are appalling. They assert that the clitoris grows daily and is seen as the leading cause of prostitution and the driver of immorality; so, its excision will ultimately lead to chastity. They erroneously claim a clitoris is like a small penis which is odd for females. It is excised to maintain the female gender and fulfil the marriageability criteria of men (Personal communication with elderly women in Ikom CRS Nigeria, 2018). With its excision, there is total control of the body.

These are unfounded myths. Survivors from states where FGM is predominant often head off for prostitution in major metropolitan cities of Nigeria where their FGM status and adverse consequences were disclosed to journalists. A few other females are trafficked to some EU countries like Italy, Belgium, and Germany to continue with prostitution (Correspondent VOA, 2019). Unfortunately, a few educated females who support FGM do this against all medical research findings even as they disregard individual narratives of the traumatic and harrowing experience of pain from survivors (Osam, 2023a). Ahmadu and Swheder (2009) assert that female circumcision FGM is not harmful and does not impede the sexual function of females. Another group of supporters claims mutilation trains young women to understand the value of perseverance

and endurance of pain. Such pain prepares them for major tasks and future challenges in life (Dau, 2023). All over Africa where FGM is rife, they identified the clitoris as a driver of promiscuity in females so mutilation was the panacea to drastically reduce pleasure which realistically restrained contact with other men (Mahmoud (2016). Despite the adverse consequences of FGM, Egyptian women vowed to continue to mutilate their daughters (Mahmoud, 2016). In the same vein Nigerian women in Lagos also promised to continue cutting their baby's clitoris so that they will not become prostitutes (BBC Nigerian Pidgin English, 2022). Their wrong perception has made the elimination of FGM an uphill task.

Theories are very pertinent in this study. The social conventional theory was first initiated by Mackie (1996). She asserted that in the context of extreme resource inequality, FGM emerged as a means of securing a better marriage by signalling fidelity, and subsequently spread to become a prerequisite for marriage for all women. Change is predicted to result from coordinated abandonment in intermarrying groups to preserve a marriage market for uncircumcised girls. While this theory may fit with many researchers, there is an extended view of FGM. Shelly-Duncan et al (2011) conducted elaborate research and also published a lengthy outcome after testing the theory on survivors of FGM in Senegal and Gambia. Also, Fors et al (2021) followed up with a study that tested the social convention theory on a large group of participants. They argued that compliance with FGM depends on the level of community acceptance of female genital cutting. The theory suggests that parents whose private opinions or choices may not be in favour of female genital mutilation end up allowing their young girls to be mutilated if the entire society mutilates females as a conventional norm. Similarly, parents whose private preferences were in favour of mutilation may not submit their female children for mutilation if the conventional norm is that society has ceased mutilating the young ones.

In the literature review, the theory of deviance and anomy was identified regarding the myth of promiscuity of mutilated females. Oyefara's (2014) research disproved the myths of promiscuity of uncut girls when he researched the sexual behaviour of uncut and mutilated ladies in Oworonshoki area of Lagos state Nigeria. He identified more mutilated married women who had extramarital affairs than married uncut women. Apparently "the major myth discovered in the study about FGM is the fact that it does not prevent sexual promiscuity but rather promotes it". The paradox defies the 70% of respondents in his sample who identified curbing promiscuity as the core reason for FGM. The same rationale is given for ritual and medical FGM worldwide. The paradox can also be situated in the theory of social deviance in situations when married mutilated females went beyond the social norms and sought different sexual partners to engage in extramarital sex to gain sexual satisfaction. This theory has proven to the contrary that FGM does not restrain lust or extramarital affairs. In contrast, uncircumcised females were not found to have extramarital affairs. Given this finding, it is relevant to make clear the fact that contrary to the expectation about mutilated females, this is the only study that argues that FGM practice increases promiscuity and may even be a cause for prostitution because a circumcised woman finds it hard to gain orgasm so she will defy norms to require multiple sex partners.

Bandura's (1977) theory is vital in all harmful practices in this study. According to him, "behaviour is caused, or determined, by dispositional and environmental factors, the behaviour itself is not a factor in how that behaviour comes about". This theory explains the prevalence of harmful cultural practices and their continuation. Bandura's theory states that children observe what happens in their social and human environment. They grow up to replicate trends that were observed when they were young. Onah et al (2023) confirmed Bandura's theory. In this instance, cultural practices that have been on going through centuries of practice and acculturation were passed down from the old generation to the contemporary generation. This explains why other harmful cultural practices have been sustained for centuries. If they had defied Bandura's social

norms theory, all these practices that are responsible for the unnecessary pain and death of females would have been avoided. The position of social workers is obvious. We condemn all practices that enhance barbaric cultural practices that violate their fundamental human rights of females.

CONCLUSION

Harmful cultural practices [HCP] are aspects of cultures that have defied historical epochs, ignored technological and scientific innovation; and even ignored the warnings from medical experts and international organisations at the forefront of advocacy for its eradication. African families and ethnic groups must reform and embrace modernity by rejecting all harmful cultural practices. In addition, embrace the education of boys and girls to have a future. There has been no research that has validated the perceived benefits of harmful cultural practices. All the research studies have shown the lack of consent and prior information about the harm that will occur if the child's rights are violated. This manuscript condemns the position of cultural and medical anthropologists who support the sustenance of harmful cultural practices under the guise of relativity theory. The harm done to young females and women is irreversible. Similarly, for cultural societies in Malawi, Kenya, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique still in support of sexual rites of passage for widows and young girls, no research evidence shows adverse spiritual consequences or bad omen for women who refuse to be sexually cleansed. The consequences that were reported involved physical retribution by aggrieved in-laws and relatives bent on enforcing cleansing to ward off bad omen. The trauma of young girls and women has to end to restore their dignity and fundamental human rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made in the paper:

- Since there are different tiers of administrations across Africa, sensitisation and continuous education should be done across the continent.
- The risks and dangers of harmful cultural practices should be written on billboards and also advertised on social electronic and print media.
- All West and East African countries including Egypt and Sudan that practice harmful rituals ought to be accountable for violating extant laws.
- Information regarding deaths and sexual disability of mutilated people should be shown in films and videos. The traditional rulers must be briefed to help campaign and put a stop to FGM in their respective communities.
- Prosecution of violators of harmful practices should be enforced to serve as deterrence to would-be offenders. There should be a total ban on cultural acts against minors or vulnerable teenagers and adults.

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