

What steps must we take to eliminate harmful traditional practices?

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What is at stake in this essay is the existence of harmful traditional practices. Such practices necessarily involve the violation of human-rights. Harmful traditional practices are prescribed as cultural or religious norms, or obligations. However, the reality is that religion and culture are used as *justifications* for such practices. As members of the Youth Advisory Board of Savera, a charity that aims to eliminate harmful practices, we are actively responding to this major global problem. In this essay, we will argue that steps *must* be taken to eliminate harmful practices. We will respond to three harmful practices. What is at stake in the first section of this essay is eliminating ‘honour’-based abuse (HBA). The concern of the subsequent section is eradicating forced marriage. The third and final section will concentrate on expunging female genital mutilation (FGM). To avoid any confusion, we must clarify what such practices signify. HBA is constituted of an ideology that the *punishment*, including the *killing*, of subjects— who are said to have brought ‘shame’ upon their family or community— can itself alleviate this ‘shame’ and re-establish the signification of the so-called ‘honour’ of the family or community. Men are subject to HBA, for reasons such as homosexuality. Women are abused or murdered for reasons including talking to an unrelated man, disobeying a husband/father and having been raped. All of which, under this ideology of HBA, signify ‘shame’. Forced marriages presuppose the lack of consent of subjects— including children— who are to be married. To understand the issue of forced marriage, you would have to put yourselves in the shoes of someone who is a victim of the practice: *A family member sits you down to inform you that your family have decided who you will be marrying. You refuse to do so, and they start threatening you and telling you what a disgrace you are. They do not consider your feelings.* We ask, how would you feel? Trapped? Stripped of your human-rights? Not understood? The World Health Organisation defines FGM as ‘a collective term for [...] procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injuries to the female genitalia for cultural or any other non-therapeutic reasons’.¹ FGM creates extensive physical, sexual, and psychological complications, some of which are life-threatening. Savera Youth posits that reading this essay is the first step towards the elimination of these harmful practices. However, this

¹ Haseena Lockhat, *Female Genital Mutilation* (Hampshire: Middlesex University Press, 2004) p8.

alone cannot solve such problems. We urge the implementation of the steps that constitute the subsequent sections in order to *bring into effect* the solutions that this essay poses.

Although there is a lack of reporting of HBA, through conducting research, Savera Youth encountered stories from survivors who had the courage to share their stories. The taboo of HBA makes it difficult to abolish this issue, but hearing survivors like Payzee Mahmood speak out helps to personify this issue and disturb this taboo. Those who have experienced HBA should be encouraged to share their stories. This can be facilitated by building safe-spaces and raising awareness through youth groups and activism. Professionals may have a fear of offending the cultures of minority groups and may not ask the correct questions, which can undermine the protection of the individual. Victims of 'honour' crimes often face additional barriers, such as the need for interpreters, having no access to public funds and lacking trusted networks to which they can turn. Savera Youth believes that an effective way to remove such barriers is by enlisting the support of specialist services, to offer culturally sensitive support to those at risk and to provide training opportunities to frontline staff, who are able to help prevent HBA. Supported by specialists, activists should operate workshops within practicing communities in order to not only challenge beliefs that certain matters— such as women being raped— signify 'shame', but to also activate *new* responses amongst these communities to matters that they regard as 'shameful', so they can maintain the 'honour' that is important to them, without this presupposing the killing or abuse of subjects.

Many of us are still stuck in a state of mind where we believe that 'someone else will save the day' and, maybe, as we are not actually part of the problem, we are exonerated from speaking up to help those in need. However, if we are not the first to do something about it, how can we possibly expect others to do so? As young people, we have a duty to challenge issues. Savera Youth has become aware of how the projects we take part in can leave a mark on people, how our passion to be part of the change motivates more people to do the same. We developed a short, interactive film to illustrate the implications of forced marriages, and how, through seeking help from appropriate centres and charities, this issue can be prevented. The film also highlighted that forced marriages do not only affect one culture and that awareness of the signs of this practice can help to protect vulnerable subjects within our society. The film

was made by young people for young people, allowing them to follow the story of the main character through Instagram. Within modern society, power instruments that should be used to help eliminate forced marriage are the internet and social media. Savera Youth is working to establish digital platforms to discuss forced marriage with people across the nation, and our online campaigns are able to have a more extensive outreach. If more youth groups across the nation did the same, we could intensify the exposure of this issue, collectively demonstrate to communities our intolerance of this practice, change attitudes, and reduce the number of cases until forced marriage is eradicated. Additionally, if youth groups promoted anti-forced marriage campaigns in schools and universities, this would raise awareness of where affected students can access help and support and, coming from another young person, these campaigns would be more likely to remain impressed into their minds.

Even if legislation made FGM illegal globally, if people's attitudes towards FGM do not change, the issue would still continue, particularly because of the reality that the female genitalia can be concealed from prosecutors. We believe that, in order to effectively eliminate FGM, legislative change must be supplemented with the additional step: speaking out to raise awareness of— and educating everybody from different backgrounds and age groups— in order to activate a change in attitudes. This can be implemented into the school curriculum and by sharing information on social media. Many people, including our generation, believe that their religion teaches them that girls should undergo FGM: but religion and culture are used as excuses to mutilate girls and women. FGM originated as a technique to obstruct female sexual pleasure and to repress girls and women to ensure the ascendancy of patriarchy. Girls should be taught the rights as a child, so they know they have a right to decide what happens to their body, and that anyone who mutilates their genitalia, at any age, is violating their human rights. Through youth action projects, such as exhibitions and performances, we can challenge the patriarchal ideologies that sustain the existence of FGM.

It is important that older generations also understand the health complications and reality of FGM. Additionally, we need to raise awareness of the reality and implications of FGM within practising communities. This can be done with the help of religious leaders— who can galvanise young activists and influence communities— and through collaborating with grassroots organisations, who are able to

communicate with FGM-practising groups in their own languages. Supporting the action of anti-FGM campaigners belonging to communities that mutilate girls and women will help overturn FGM. An example of the effectiveness of one young girl's voice is Nice Leng'ete, who, as young as eight-years-old, convinced many Massai members to abandon the practice in particular communities across Kenya and Tanzania.

Collectively, these sections have initiated steps that, *if acted upon*, constitute solutions to the three harmful practices. Young people must collaborate with adults, share knowledge, and utilise modern technology to raise awareness about harmful practices and inform vulnerable subjects where help can be found. Savera clarifies that, although the 'links and distinctions between harmful practices can be unclear', a 'common attribute of such practices is that they are related to women's sexuality and [...] male domination.'² This is the 'link' that is at stake throughout this essay. While forced marriage and HBA applies to male and female subjects, the constituent sections of this essay collectively signify the large investment of harmful practices in shaming and repressing women. We need to remember that, in the three cases of concern in this essay, it is not religion or culture we are challenging, but a disturbing patriarchal and repressive *ideology which affects both men and women*.

² <<https://www.saverauk.co.uk/information-and-advice/resources/fact-sheets/harmful-practices/>>.

Bibliography

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