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ESSAYS

An Agenda for Harmful Cultural Practices and Girls' Empowerment

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Introduction

When I was Minister of Women, Children and Community Services in 2006, I visited Nsondole in Malawi's Zomba District for The Hunger Project-Malawi's HIV/AIDS community day. Fourteen young girls and boys had formed a club to speak up against sexual practices in their village. In my interaction with them, I met with two sisters—one nine years old and the other just four. The older sister was telling me about the sores on her skin. The year before, their aunt, who cared for the girls ever since their parents passed away, had hired a local man to "cleanse" her under a custom known as *kuchotsa fumbi*. A feature of initiation ceremonies in parts of Malawi, an older man is hired to have sex with a girl at the cusp of puberty, usually between 8 to 12 years old, to cleanse her of childhood and prevent infertility. In this child's situation, she was told the cleansing would guarantee her beautiful skin. Now with her sores, she did not understand why her skin was no longer smooth like that of her younger sister, who had yet to be cleansed.

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It occurred to me that not only had this child been raped, but she had also likely been infected with an STD.

I often get questions about what can be done to improve girls' education in Africa and to empower girls more broadly. I tell the story of this girl from Nsondole to highlight one unfortunate truth: a girl child who has been violated in the name of culture is not one capable of learning or competing on equal footing with boys in the classroom. Most importantly, ages 0 to 10 are when girls are most vulnerable to these traditions and mindsets that inform underinvestment in the girl child.

Harmful cultural practices and norms—even the seemingly non-violent ones that consign girls to bear the brunt of household labor—have consequences for nutrition, health, educational achievement, sexual abuse, and child marriage. Accordingly, it is critical to develop a research agenda that places girls aged 0 to 10 at the center of policy to address harmful practices. Both as an issue of gender-based violence and as an impediment to girls reaching their potential, we need greater commitments to country-level data, informed and enforced legislative action, and innovative methods to challenging and shifting socially shared definitions of girlhood.[1]

Why young girls?

We often discuss younger girls within a gender-neutral frame of children's rights and primary school education,[2] but in the context of harmful practices and norms, we cannot afford to wait until adolescence to parse through the gendered consequences for rights and equality.

There is a strong evidence base for prioritizing girls in development. Over the last 50 years, a quarter of economic growth in OECD countries has been a result of girls obtaining greater access to higher education, and for more than 200 countries, each additional year of education for women decreased child mortality by 9.5 percent.[3] In the last decade, Africa has made significant progress to lock in some of these returns to investment in girls. Across the continent, the gender

gap in primary school education has effectively closed, and in Sub-Saharan Africa, the number of unenrolled girls of primary school age decreased by 22 percent between 1990 and 2012.[4] In roughly the same time frame, maternal mortality dropped by 42 percent and women increasingly occupy cabinet positions, surpassing Europe's performance in some respects.[5] Still, there are many cultural practices and mindsets that continue to hamper progress, producing such discouraging statistics as the 40 million African women and girls married before age 15.[6]

Much of the current research and on-the-ground programs discussed in the policy realm target adolescent girls' wellbeing and empowerment by improving personal control of their education and sexual behavior. Interventions like conditional cash transfers to adolescent girls and their families have been shown to improve educational outcomes and reduce teen pregnancy and child marriage, especially when combined with vocational training and community education.[7, 8] The vast variety of such interventions signify a commitment by both policymakers and aid organizations to understand the issues at hand, develop an evidence base, and deploy resources to find the best solutions.

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Unfortunately, a similar level of commitment to younger girls—aged 0 to 10—and how they are affected by cultural practices and norms, is near absent. When girls are socialized in the framework of certain cultural practices to lower their eyes, to have sex, and learn to please men, their rights to education and personal dignity go out the window at an early age. This is a disadvantage boys do not have, and it is one that establishes inequality long before the girl child becomes an adolescent.

To counter the challenge of harmful practices and norms against young girls, while respecting cultural identities, African governments and their development partners must renew their commitments to young girls' wellbeing:

- **Invest**—in building an evidence base for harmful cultural practices.

- **Protect girls**—by instating laws and enforcing them where they do exist.
- **Shift mindsets and behaviors**—particularly in households, where young girls are most devalued.

Invest: Evidence and data

From Cameroon's breast ironing practice intended to delay sexual activity, to Ghana's *trokosi* tradition that enslaves young girls to local shrines as atonement, there are numerous practices—equally harmful to the bodies and psyches of girls—that remain unseen and undocumented.

Africa is a vast continent of many cultures, people, and ways of life. Cultural rights are strongly protected in our constitutions, especially given the legacy of colonization. These cultures safeguard our identities as Africans, but it is also true that some of these cultural practices hold the continent back by holding girls down. African women leaders and international partners have worked hard to bring various forms of harmful traditional practices to light, and many of the gains we have made so far in fighting practices like female genital mutilation and child marriage have been precisely due to their visibility.

For the practices that fail to make headlines and policy memos, a major reason is that they are extremely localized and rarely transcend district or country borders. Moreover, most take place within the frame of secretive initiation rites or in the privacy of the household, creating a conspiracy of silence between young girls and female community leaders who safeguard traditions. This makes any sort of scalable intervention particularly difficult, especially when there is no hard data on prevalence.

Given the sensitivity and social taboos that shroud these practices, it is no surprise that traditional data collection methods fail to account for them. To develop an evidence base to inform interventions, we need innovative methods of capturing victims rendered invisible by silence. In Malawi for example, the Human Rights Commission embarked on a nationwide study of harmful cultural practices by region.[9] Through focus group discussions and face-to-face interviews with traditional and religious leaders, the study catalogued harmful practices and their nationwide incidence. This exercise later fed into the Malawi Law Commission's regional consultations with traditional leaders as it developed specific provisions in the Gender Equality Bill to respond to these practices. Armed with descriptive and quantitative evidence, the Law Commission was able to examine the motivation behind practices such as *kutchosa fumbi*, and consider a wide range of legal responses on a case by case basis—from statutory regulations to negotiating with traditional leaders to modify those practices that were not outrightly harmful.[10]

The idea of conducting an audit of this nature at the global level is an intimidating one, but I believe we can creatively repurpose existing initiatives to better account for harmful traditional practices and the girls they affect. The Population Council's Girl Roster toolkit is a good example of how traditional survey collection methods are being reinvented to better take account of adolescent girls' lives. Targeted toward in-field programs aimed at improving outcomes for girls, the tool trains program staff to go door-to-door within a specific geographic area to ask adults about the girls who live there, "including information about their schooling, marital and childbearing status, and living arrangements."[11, 12] In order to capture girls aged 0-10, the Girl Roster approach can be applied to in-field programs that engage in broader children's issues like nutrition and health. With careful training and sensitization, local staff of such programs can begin to ask mothers and adult women within communities about cultural traditions and the rationales behind them.

NGOs can also be important players in gathering sensitive data on harmful practices. Together for Girls is an outstanding model of such collaboration between NGOs and governments: it conducts national surveys and collects data to document violence against children, coordinates policy and program actions within each country, and advocates globally to increase public awareness. At the grassroot level, local advocacy groups and NGOs that form around problematic cultural practices will be key to building an evidence base, since they are often more informed about the prevalence and nuances of extremely localized traditions. Here, domestic governments and international partners can help build a cohesive network of such NGOs and advocacy groups, funding data collection and supporting a platform where this information can be collected and shared.

Protect: Laws matter

Laws have the power encourage positive cultural shifts in gender norms and practices. Yet in poor countries, legislation struggles for relevance in the face of entrenched cultural practices. The state's limited resources and scope often cedes influence to traditional rulers who safeguard cultures. Given this dynamic of power, the silence surrounding harmful cultural practices, and the belief that these customs are in the girl's best interest, legal bans are left with little carrying impact, especially in rural areas.[13]

Still, the significance of laws against harmful cultural practices is neither in their existence nor absence. Rather, the heaviest lift is in "domesticating" these laws to ensure that the playing field for young girls and young boys is even—before the girl reaches adolescence. To domesticate legal protection is to build coalitions with traditional leaders and practitioners of these harmful customs. Rather than defaulting to outright condemnation and criminalization, using the existing

power structures at the community level is a powerful way to gather buy-in and create effective monitoring systems for laws.

The heaviest lift is in "domesticating" laws against harmful cultural practices to ensure that the playing field for young girls and young boys is even.

When I took office as President in 2012, 675 Malawian women died per 100,000 live births. In the rural areas where we saw the highest incidence of maternal death, there were many myths and taboos surrounding pregnancy, which often kept women from seeking proper healthcare and opting to deliver in their homes without trained birth attendants. In addition to investing in clinical infrastructure, our biggest challenge was to change mindsets and norms surrounding childbirth. To do so, we mobilized more than 12,000 traditional village leaders to educate women, demystify pregnancy, and enforce the government's ban on home birth. Instead of criminalizing traditional birth attendants, we recruited them to act as community advisors for pregnant women and young girls. Even male chiefs, having been engaged in the policy agenda, championed maternal death reduction in their individual villages by using their influence to persuade women (and their husbands) to go to clinics to give birth. In twenty-four months, we reduced maternal death to 460 per 100,000 births—a 30 percent decline.

The two takeaways from our success with maternal death directly apply to harmful cultural practices against girls aged 0—10. First, effective laws spring from sustained political commitment. In Burkina Faso for example, the government's 1996 ban on female genital mutilation may have prevented more than 200,000 girls from being cut.[14] Here, the law was likely effective because it followed decades of advocacy work, nation-wide education campaigns, and a hotline for girls who were at risk or had experienced complications from being cut—all mechanisms that contributed to a shift in people's attitudes towards female genital mutilation.

Second, for the most rural and vulnerable girls, laws can be a strong coalescing point for a wide range of actors to draw visibility toward and take action against harmful practices. *Trokosi* (wife of the gods) is a practice of child slavery in parts of Togo, Benin, and Ghana. Young girls, usually 6-10 years old,[15] are given indefinitely as slaves to a shrine for an offense committed by a family member. Ghana only abolished the centuries-old practice in 1998, though its 1992 Constitution and other international laws mandated the eradication of all practices of slavery.[16] In the first few years following the legal ban, the government did not make any arrests or prosecutions, nor did it

have a plan to rescue an estimated 4,000 *trokosi* slaves (not including their estimated 16,000 children) from 76 shrines.[17] Nonetheless, the law gave local advocacy groups and NGOs a tangible reference point to hold the government accountable and garner support from international partners.

One such NGO was International Needs Ghana (ING), which had worked for decades to raise public awareness and lobby the government to criminalize the practice. Following the legal ban in 1998, the United Nations Development Fund for Women donated to ING to support rescue, rehabilitation, and vocational training efforts.[18] With the financial backing, ING was able to continue its strategy of offering cash and material incentives to shrines in exchange for *trokosi* slaves. Today, there are less than 1,200 women and children enslaved in Ghana, though much work remains to be done.[19]

Shift: Mindsets in households

Long before the girl child goes to school, she is disadvantaged by traditional practices that diminish her potential for educational achievement and self-actualization. If we are to think of girls' empowerment and equality as an economic and social good, a shift in cultural mindsets and behaviors toward girls is essential for stimulating greater demand for said good. At the core of harmful cultural practices is a mindset that discriminates against and devalues girls. This mindset is one that begins from the day a girl is born and manifests most strongly in socialization at the household level—ultimately justifying harmful rituals and underinvestment in the girl child.

Households in which parents do not see daughters as inherently valuable and capable as sons do not invest equally in their education and empowerment: a study of out-of-school rates for girls in more than 200 countries over 40 years found that rather than household poverty, cultural norms were the stronger determinants of girls' under-enrollment in school.[20] Globally, a girl aged 5—9 spends 30 percent more of her time on household chores than a boy of the same age.[21] These examples of gender inequality imposed on young girls at the household level points to the need for interventions that stimulate parents' *demand* for their girl children's equality. In the instance of practices like child marriage, the economic impetus for marrying a daughter off rather than educating her is evident. And in tandem, the gender research and policy community have found innovative ways to incentivize families and girls to delay marriage.[22] However, the economic impetus for households is not always clear for many harmful practices that affect younger girls. There is no clear economic justification for why a 7-year-old girl should spend more of her time on chores. Neither is there one for why a 9-year-old girl should be subjected to sexual "cleansing."

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For data collection and legislation to make a difference in the curtailment of harmful cultural practices against young girls, we need to change the smallest discriminatory norms at a large scale. Such was the premise of USAID's Social Mobilization Campaign in Malawi, which was initially a rather small component of the Girls' Attainment in Basic Literacy and Education Program (GABLE).[23] In 1991, USAID designed SMC as a nation-wide effort to change parental and community attitudes about the importance of girls' education. Person-to-person and group outreach at the grassroots level, training to sensitive teachers, and 156 weekly radio programs complemented the government's policies on secondary school scholarship and fee waivers. SMC strongly engaged with parents, community leaders, students and education officials in identifying and modifying social attitudes and practices that constrained girls' achievement in basic education. Spanning eight years, SMC succeeded in transforming parents' attitudes towards girls, which in turned increased young girls' access, persistence and success in education.

SMC may have worked in Malawi, but we need research and innovation to find more effective, low-cost, and scalable approaches to shifting cultural mindsets and behaviors toward girls.

Discriminatory mindsets are hard to change, but we can make progress by investing in approaches that have been proven to work to bring long-lasting changes in parental and community behavior. SMC was a success in Malawi in part because USAID's partnership with the government was long-term and grounded in engagement with key local institutions that facilitated direct community sensitization. Elsewhere, governments will equally need to mainstream mindset and behavior change within wider gender development objectives. Already, progress in this direction appears to be underway through programs like Think Equal, a global initiative which builds and delivers "an equality studies curriculum" for education ministries around the world. Targeting children from age 3, the curriculum seeks to break down gender stereotypes and build girls' self-confidence, rights awareness, and agency. On January 1, 2017, 117 schools in 18 countries will start teaching the Think Equal Curriculum.

Conclusion

To build educational capital and skills for African girls, free uniforms, waived school fees, and workshopping alone are not enough to counter the driving damage of cultural practices and norms in the household. Whether it is *kuchotsa fumbi* or child marriage, the core barriers against educational achievement, empowerment, and equality are the mindsets and beliefs that cause devaluation and violence against girls at an early age.

We cannot neglect localized and contained practices because they only affect a few thousand girls, for that is how entire communities get left behind. At the national and international level, we need to reaffirm our commitment to girls aged 0 to 10 by adding data to stories, researching the best practices in behavior change efforts, and smoothing the conflict between cultural practices and human rights as enshrined in national constitutions and international law.

As a young child, my parents protected me from traditions they believed detrimental. At home, my father raised me and my sisters as he would raise sons—engaging and valuing our potential in a way deemed unusual in those times. I ended up in the State House.

We can secure an even stronger start for millions of girls by lifting the heavy physical, psychological, and social burdens of our traditions.

Endnotes

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