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Using Information Literacy to Control Harmful Traditional Practices among Nomadic Communities in Tana River County, Kenya

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Abstract

The existence of harmful traditional practices (HTPs) in different African Communities has been the norm. The practices have been the cause of untold suffering over the years particularly to children and women resulting in their low social economic status. While many strategies have been developed and executed to address this problem, information literacy has been advanced as an effective tool to curtail the entrenchment of HTPs. The reduction and eradication of HTPs in various parts of the world has in the recent past been anchored on promotion of literacy levels since ignorance has been the bedrock of HTPs and the subsequent underdevelopment in communities practicing it. Information literacy has been known to break the cultural barriers and ignorance that promotes HTPs. Literacy promotes behavioral and attitudinal changes hitherto unknown. It questions the traditional and cultural status quo unquestioned before. This paper discusses the various HTPs in Tana River County of Kenya and demonstrates how information literacy can contribute towards eradication of the HTPs in this county in particular and Kenya in general.

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1. Introduction

The United Nations Charter of 1945 was a great conversation promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms dealing focusing on world races, different sex languages and religions. This 1945 UN Charter was quickly followed by the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the UN General Assembly. This declaration has been the beacon of all human activities focusing on sex, rights, equality, liberty, security, education, literacy, life, prejudices, discriminations and other critical life issues affecting member state and citizens.

Despite the 1948 UN Declaration of Human rights and its adoption by different member states, discrimination based on race, sex religion and language still persist in the world. Traditional cultural practices based on gender perspectives have been prevalent particularly in Kenya and Africa as a whole. Several Kenyan communities are governed by cultural and traditional practices that are harmful to both men and women.



The question of HTPs has been critical in the United Nations form 1950. The questions arose due to the consideration of the long-term harmful effects of the practices to the communities. Though the UN has shown several efforts in fighting HTPs, the fight has been slow and at times unrecognized due to the deep penetration of the practice in some communities. It is difficult to police the practices because of the clandestine nature of the activities. The change in behavior and attitude in the fight against HTPs could be done through inculcating and promoting information literacy for any substantial change to occur.

The international community has become aware of the need to achieve equality between the sexes and of the fact that an equitable society cannot be attained if fundamental human rights of half of human society, i.e. women rights, continue to be denied and violated. The violations arise from gender inequality and discriminatory values, which lead to unequal power relations in communities and societies and to violence against women and girls. This therefore calls for creation of awareness regarding the harmful effects which can clearly be addressed through clearly designed information literacy programs that will strive to address the causes and effects to the society's wellbeing and find appropriate solutions, this is because Information literacy can be used to teach individuals how to find information and prepare them for lifelong learning so that they can "always find information needed for any task or decision at hand" (association of collage research libraries, 1989) this is important in the context of today's information society in which information is the most critical resource and basis for competition (Talero and Gaudette 1996).

There is no clear and universally agreed definition of Harmful Traditional Practices (HTPs). HTPs stem from value-based discrimination against particular groups of people, and they challenge the human rights of the people affected by them.

HTPs is the genesis of inequality in societies. Consequently, the power balance in communities favors men against children and women who have little say even what involves them. The domination of women by men is inevitable.

Regrettably, HTPs affect men and women, boys and girl. Unfortunately, girls and women are the most affected due to their vulnerability. As a gender issue, HTPs affect girls and women across all societies particularly the poor, uneducated, illiterate and uninformed. Other disadvantages such as disabilities make the effects of HTPs worse. HTPs are as varied as the cultures in which they occur, but the majority of HTPs are related to lack of awareness regarding the rights of women and girls.

1.1 An Overview of the Tana River County

Tana River County is one of the forty-seven (47) counties in Kenya. The county's total population was 240,075 based on the 2009 National Population and Housing Census (GoK, 2010), distributed on 47,414 households. The population density is 6.2 people per Km². Based on a growth rate of 3%, the projected 2012 population was 262,684; 131,140 male and 131,544 female and is projected to increase to 287,422 in 2015. Seventy seven percent of the populations live below the poverty line and the



employment rate in the county is 42.8 percent. The county has a labor force of 45.8 % of the total population, consisting of 46.9% male and 44.7 % female. Majority of the population lives below the poverty line.

Early girl child marriages are rampant which limits them to access to education and traditional cultural practices dominate the community's way of life. The major ethnic groups are the Pokomo. The key economic main stay is small scale farming. The other communities in Tana River County are the Orma and Wardey, who are majorly nomadic. The county is classified among the arid regions in Kenya due to its constant dry weather and little erratic rains throughout the year.

The county has witnessed frequent conflicts have occurred between farmers and nomadic peoples over access to water. This is a county that oscillates between two extreme conditions; hot dry weather occasioning lack of food and water for animals and people and flooding due to the low lands along Tana River basin against heavy rainfall from the highlands upstream (Kenya Inter Agency rapid Assessment, 2014)

2. Focus of the Study

The main purpose of this paper is to appraise the HTPs in Tana River County and propose possible remedies and solutions to the malady using information literacy. In particular, this paper seeks to:

- i) Describe the HTPs and their effects on the vulnerable women and girls in Tana River County.
- ii) Explain the role that can be played by Information Literacy in the reduction and eradication of HTPs in Tana River County.

3. Methodology

This research paper is based on content analysis of primary and secondary data as well as interviewing key informants and focus group discussion with community elders. Secondary data was gathered from reports availed in the Tana River county government website and demographic information reports. In addition, the researcher held brief interviews with two officers at the ministry of gender and social services of the County Government of Tana River who provided an overview of the status of literacy levels among the inhabitants and the effects of HTPs on gender and development in the county. Data received from different sources was cross-checked in order to not only corroborate the information but also to get a good understanding of initiatives taken regarding adoption and use of information literacy as a tool to reduce and eradicate HTPs among the inhabitants.

4. Harmful Traditional Practices and their Effects on Women and the Girl Child in Tana River County

As earlier explained, HTPs are destructive and discriminatory practices that violate and abuse human rights of affected persons particularly the vulnerable members of society such as women, girls and children. The key HTPs in Tana River County



include: i) female genital mutilation (FGM); ii) the age-old custom preference for sons and its implications on the status of the girl child; iii) recreation, property ownership and work opportunities; iv) early marriage and dowry; v) early pregnancy and nutritional taboos favoring the male gender. v) Discriminatory, restrictive and oppressive practices related to child delivery; and last but not least vi) violence meted out to women and girls under the guise of disciplining them.

The HTPs defy all national, regional and international laws regarding human rights and dignity of human beings. They persist in spite of the laws outlawing the practices and the existence of advocacy groups and religious admonitions. The following sections discuss in detail each of these HTPs and their effects on women and girls.

4.1 Female Genital Mutilation

Female genital mutilation (FGM), or female circumcision is one of the most retrogressive HTP in the county. It is an age-old practice which is perpetuated in many communities simply because it is customary. FGM forms an important part of the rites of passage ceremony for most nomadic communities such as the OrmaWardey and Malakote, marking the coming of age of the female child.

It is erroneously believed that the practice is a deterrent to early and uncontrolled sexual desires since it would contain and preserve the girl's chastity. It is a crude way of controlling sexual desires conducted in a rudimentary and unhygienic way. The mutilation is violence to the females since it exposes them to several health complications and challenges particularly during sexual intercourse and child birth. According to the International Human Rights laws, human beings including both men and women are entitled to "enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health", as stipulated in Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Though the genesis of FGM is not clear, the practice must have started several years before the advent of Christianity and Islam. The age at which the practice is carried out varies from area to area. Children from as early as seven to ten years and adolescents are likely to undergo the practice in Tana River County. Women who are married to the community members and have not gone through the practice in their youthful life are subjected to the practice during child birth in a horrendous and undignified manner.

The diagram below shows how the harm caused by FGM/C and child marriage is inter-linked. It shows that both practices can lead to profound damage to girls and women and can result in inter-generational poverty and disadvantage.

As can be deduced from the above illustration, the effects of female genital mutilation have short-term and long-term implications. Hemorrhage, infection and severe pain are the immediate consequences. Other challenges identified include severe infertility caused by various infections attracted at the mutilation stage, obstructed and difficult child birth as well unexplained and unfathomable psychological challenges. All these



challenges are in addition to poor medical facilities and untrained medical and birth attendants.

Despite the atrocities caused to women, the perpetrators are women. It is a clandestine affair conducted by ill prepared and trained illiterate women. The girls' mother and grandmothers play a crucial role in the FGM practice. The practice involves exchange of gifts between the 'doctors' and the victims. The gifts and payments are given before and after the exercise.

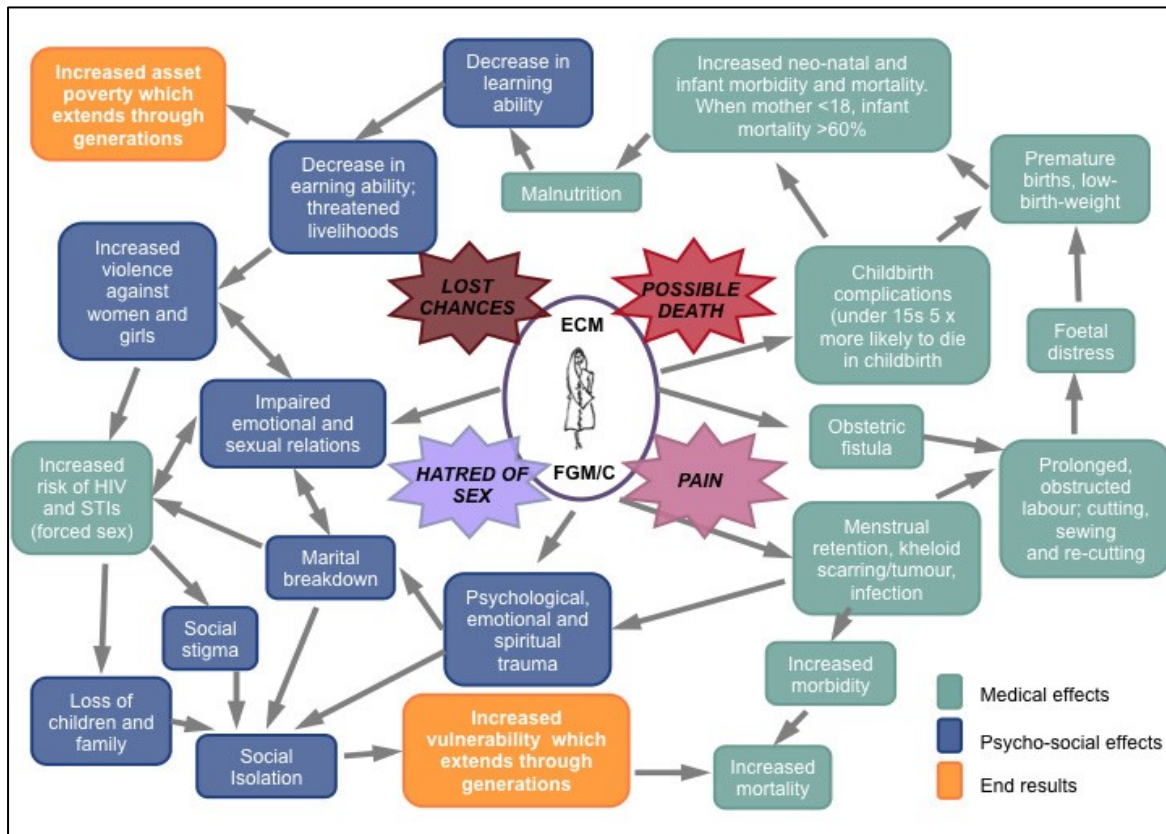


Figure: 2.1 Harmful Effects of Female Genital Mutilation

Adapted from Crawford, S., 2013, Towards Ending FGM/C in Africa and Beyond: DFID study

Despite the “skills” of the attendants, the practice is unhygienic and unprofessional. They use crude and unsterilized tools. They use rudimentary tools such as pocket and kitchen knives, razor-blades, pieces of glass and even sharp fingernails. These tools are applied repeatedly on several girls without much consideration of the health risks posed.

The wound is then treated by applying mixtures of local herbs, earth, cow-dung, ash or butter, depending on the skills of the traditional doctor. If the child dies from complications, the traditional doctor is not held responsible; rather, the death is attributed to evil spirits or fate.

In Tana River County, most women believe that, they have to undergo the operation in order to be clean and also be prepared for marriage since female circumcision is a



precondition for marriage and payment of dowry. Female circumcision is one of the ways of establishing belongingness and identity as a marriageable woman. This is the time the girl is taught on the values of marriage and how to maintain a family as a good wife and mother.

4.2 Preference for Sons and its Implications on Girl Child

The preference for sons against girls has had serious implications on the status of the girl child. This is a scenario which can only be improved through promotion of literacy. The benefits having a girl child are the same as those of a boy child.

One of the principle types of discrimination prevalent in Tana River County especially among the nomadic communities is the son preference. This practice has far-reaching implications for women.

The boy child is accorded preferential treatment than the girl child. This preferential treatment makes the community to deny the girl child equal health, education, recreational and economic opportunities. While the boy has the right and opportunity to choose a partner, the girl has to contend with the community and parents' choices. This heavily violates the United Nation's Convention Articles 2, 6, 12, 19, 24, 27 and 28 on the Rights of Children.

The preference for the boy child automatically disadvantages the girl child from birth. It is the determinant of the parental care and love to be extended to the girl child and the concomitant investment in the girl.

The Tana River County communities are basically patriarchal. The family tree line is believed to be carried on by the sons. This means that the communities go into extreme effort to preserve the family lineage through the sons. This is why families go into great effort to have as many sons as possible through polygamy.

In some cases, conflicts have arisen over the inability to have sons which has prompted divorce. Among all the communities in the county, sons are expected to perform their parent's burial rites for parents. The belief is that performance of burial rites by sons allows the parents to rest in peace. Ironically, this is a belief that is perpetuated by the community and religious leaders.

Sons are viewed as the beacons of hope. They perform religious rites, uphold the community values systems, and preserve community land, wealth and security. This is why men the community invests heavily on the boy child education.

The emphasis on the boy child contravenes the United Nation's Convention Articles 28 and 29 on the Rights of the Children which states that "all children have the right to education". The content of such education should endeavor to develop the personality of the child particularly their mental, physical abilities and talents.

According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the expansion and promotion of educational opportunities over the past several decades has positively and greatly affected girls progress in Kenya. However, the expansion of the



educational opportunities has also promoted the boy child. It is good to note that the free primary education has not been a deliberate policy to reduce gender disparities experienced in access to educational opportunities.

4.3 Recreation, Property Ownership and Work Opportunities

Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is an emphasis of the recognition of a child and the value and importance of rest, leisure and other recreational activities needed by children. Unfortunately, this is not the case among the nomadic communities in Tana River. While the boy is left to go to school and get education and tend to the cattle, the girl child is left to take care of the home. The girl child has to behave like a woman or the mother she is supposed to do from a very early age. This is in contravention of the UN convention of the rights of children.

The girls' activities oscillate around the house and compound. This means that the girl child has the least exposure unlike the boy child who has holistic exposure. Lack of exposure puts the girl child to great exploitation. As a young girl, they have little time to play. Play, recreation and leisure help to build the emotional, psychological and mental wellbeing of the child. Lack of play, recreation and exposure is a serious problem to the full development of any child. This challenge is compounded further by lack of education.

Such developmental challenges on the children become basis for discrimination and exploitation in later years. The only exposure they have is to grow, undergo FGM, get married and have a family and children as a faithful and wife to the husband. This is all about service to man who owns women and children, land, cattle and all economic activities. With no education and exposure at all, the woman has to fully depend on man who is the alpha and omega. The woman is economically disempowered, though she has to till the land which they can never own, feed the family and milk the cows.

This unequal and unparalleled background facing the boy and girl child in their developmental years is the basis of all inequalities found in Tana River County. Women have fewer employment opportunities since they are already disadvantaged by lack of education. Shockingly, the few women who earn have no rights over their earnings. Their earnings belong to the husband who is the head of the family and owner of all economic activities in the family.

The situation is worse for single unmarried or divorced women. They are seen as women under the spell of curses and bad omen. They cannot inherit land, the single most important unit of economic development. Women are supposed to submit to men whether husbands, brothers and nephews. These are the owners of property; land, cattle, sheep and goats.

4.4 Early Marriage and Value of Dowry

Another major challenge facing girl child and women in Tana River County is the premium put on marriage and dowry. Men look forward to marrying off their young daughters. This is because the girls are seen as a source of wealth though instant



payment of dowry in form of cattle, sheep and goats. This is the reason why girls as old as twelve years are married off regardless of their wishes and the age of the men marrying them. The issue of the expected bride price is key in these organized marriages as well as marrying them off while they are “uncontaminated” sexually.

Young girls are unlikely to have had sexual intercourse. They have had little exposure and their only contact is at home. Unfortunately, the second exposure apart from home becomes the exposure of suddenly having to live with a man who at times is much senior to her. This is the serious contention she has to live with; she was denied play, leisure and recreation at home and now when she is still a child, she has to submit to far much senior man as a wife and a mother. She is suddenly thrown into a painful marital bed with undeveloped womanhood and healing from a brutal FGM. No time enough to heal or to develop emotional and psychological attachment. She is expected to develop emotional and intelligence as she goes along.

In one swift decision of early marriage, the girl child is thrown into the abyss of ignorance, illiteracy, disinheritance and emotional stress as she pleases the community in child bearing and submission to the community laws and expectations without any regard of her tender age and subsequent health and developmental issues.

4.5 Early Pregnancy, Nutritional Taboos and Practices Related to Child Delivery

According to UNICEF, the allowable age for child bearing is eighteen years for girls and women. The eighteen years expectation prepares the girl to develop physically, emotionally and mentally. Unfortunately, this is a rare practice in Tana River County. The norm is to marry them off and acquire the much-needed bride price with little regard to the girls’ self-awareness and dignity.

Tana River has one of the highest cases of pre mature and under-weight births occasioning high child mortality rate. This is in addition to the high risks exposed to the child mothers carrying the pregnancies and difficult laborious births.

The county government has unsuccessfully tried to raise the legal age for marriageable girls in the interest of protecting the girl child. Unfortunately, traditions and culture take priority in matters of the boy and the girl. There has not been any significant effort to enforce the law.

The nutritional and dietary expectations of pregnant women and mothers are rarely observed. The poverty levels are an impediment to good nutrition and dietary habits. This food situation is made worse by the harsh dry weather. Since most of the girls get married before they finish primary school, the young mothers are rarely aware and have little knowledge of nutritional expectations. They rely on the basic and rudimentary nutritional knowledge from the community which tilts towards unfavorably against the girls and women. The existence of many taboos touching on food and women is a major challenge towards receiving adequate nutrition and diet for women.



4.6 Violence Against Women and Girls

Though the Commission on Human Rights in the 1994/95 resolution outlawed violence against women, communities in Tana River preside over cases of against women in the guise of discipline for the women. Domestic violence and rape are non-issues particularly in marriage. They are common practices and rarely mentioned since they are part of the norms.

In most cases, women suffer silently under the weight of the customary laws and expectations. They have little access to their rights and even if they knew their rights, the reporting mechanism is a weak structure presided by men who are the custodians of the customary laws and arbitrators. Naturally, women are intimidated and therefore, have little recourse for justice.

5. The role of Information Literacy in the Eradication of Harmful Traditional Practices in Tana River County

The importance of the concept of information literacy has been recognized by several researchers and different definitions of information literacy in various contexts have been put forward. For this paper three definition of information literacy will be adopted.

The first one is from The American Library Association (ALA): the ability of recognizing the time people need, ability to search for information and effectively evaluating information to suit the needs of the users (Carpenter, 1989, as cited in Plotnick, 1999).

The second one is Doyle's (1992) definition which focuses on recognition of the diverse sources of information literacy. Information literacy includes the accessibility and evaluative abilities of the different information at people's disposal.

The third is adapted from Bruce (2003). According to Bruce, information literacy basically deals with accessibility, evaluative, user ability and organizational abilities in learning and problem solving particularly in the contexts applicable in formal and informal learning either at work, home and educational environments.

All these definitions point to one common aspect that; information literate people will undoubtedly make 'informed decisions. This is the general expectation. HTPs persist where ignorance and illiteracy are paramount.

The level of competitiveness in modern society requires increased information literacy skills for daily decision making. Education is the background of informed citizenry on the dos and wants. It is the ability to evaluate, assess, critique and accept values depending on their worthiness and not cultural consideration (Bruce, 2003). Education is not just about reading and writing. It is about adaptability, flexibility, acceptability and modernity particularly in the contemporary world. This is what information promotes.

For many generations, Harmful Traditional Practices have existed in Tana River county, causing untold suffering mostly to women and girls and affecting the social and economic development of the society. While many strategies have been developed to address the problems, it is disheartening to note that the problems still



continue to be practiced and this persistence has been attributed to lack of information literacy skills to address the complications attributed to the harmful Traditional practices for the reason that that the society is not informed and is therefore unable to find solutions to its problems.

However, according to the gender and development officer in the county, it has been realized that through well designed information literacy programs such as adult education programs, gender sensitization barazas, use of the mass media, lobbying for gender emancipation in development programs and creation of awareness on the constitution

While there are no hard and fast rules for eradicating these practices, information literacy is therefore the only tool capable of addressing wanton HTPs in any particular context.

Through well-designed adult education programs, parents will be enabled to appreciate and gain insight into the harmful effects of traditional practices and therefore prepared to ensure that many girls complete primary school. Provision of information literacy on antenatal care and education on nutrition, pregnant women will have access to nutrition and healthcare information and therefore reject some cultural practices, such as nutritional taboos, ensure that pregnant women are not deprived of essential nutrients, and as a result eradicate nutritional deficiencies. Poor health can be improved by a more balanced diet and nutrition literacy.

For a people who are deeply entrenched in their customary laws, it is difficult to transform them overnight. Culture change is gradual. It requires an overhaul of the mind, behavior and attitude. It behooves in the whole community to change particularly the opinion leaders such as community elders. Unfortunately, they are usually a big hindrance since they act as the gate keepers of the community values. The least they would wish is erosion of their customary given privileges and powers. This is crux of the matter as the Tana River communities work towards reducing and eradicating HTPs.

Reduction and eventual elimination of HTPs requires a huge shift in how people think about themselves, about girls and women, about how men and women form relationships with each other, about who has power in families, communities and society, and how that power is used. This goes beyond changing particular beliefs and behaviors within communities and societies: it is about fundamental social change.

In addressing FGM issues it is important that the provision of health care should be appropriate and sensitive to the needs of the affected women and girls. Health promotion work through women's health services should be developed by providing appropriate information materials and actively contributing to outreach work and awareness through information literacy programs that sensitize the community on the implications of the practice. Creating awareness on the need to offer equal education opportunities to both children can therefore only be achieved through creation of awareness in order for the community to appreciate the value of education to both



genders. However, it is important to accept that the support and promotion of social change based on perceived rights is a complex and difficult task. It requires a lot of efforts from the community leaders and members.

There is need to constantly assess, evaluate, interrogate and investigate values and avenues that could easily lead to elimination, reduction and eradication of HTPs in Tana River County and the country at large. The development of financial literacy and entrepreneurship skills would equip women with relevant knowledge to engage in business for poverty eradication.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Most women in Tana River County have undergone through HTPs for many years. They have gone through difficult years of discrimination, violence and faced the undignified FGMs. This is partly attributed to lack of education, ignorance and societal norms that give little regard to the rights of women. Then few women who have received education have also not been able to help their fellow women folk since they are equally under the same oppressive and restrictive customary laws that reign in the HTPs. They accept the status quo which means to abide with the customary expectations. Empowering both the educated and uneducated, literate and illiterate women is a critical process towards reduction and elimination of HTPs. This is where literacy programs targeting boys and men, girls and women become paramount. The incorporation of information literacy programs as a lifelong learning and change process is inevitable.

It is the duty of all in Tana River to fight the HTPs. However, boys and men are central. This would give prominence to the deliberations of Vienna World Conference on Human Rights of 1993 which emphasized on the need for all states to boost the protection of women against the effects of HTPs that discriminate and oppress women. However, much remains to be done in the field of equality, taking into account the absence, in many countries, of real constitutional guarantees of fundamental human rights for all. The persistence of negative customary norms that conflict with and undermine implementation of both national legislation and international human rights standards must be addressed. Although such national legislation and international standards are vital in tackling the issue of harmful traditional practices, there is an urgent need for parallel programs that addresses the cultural environment from which these practices emerge, in order to eliminate the various justifications used to perpetuate them.

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