

**Forum:** Human Rights Committee

**Issue:** Defining the line between culture and human rights violations

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**Position:** Deputy Chair

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## Introduction

For many centuries, tradition and culture have been significant qualities of a nation that determined the way they lived and interacted. The collective form of notions, human conduct and manners of a group or a society is simply referred as culture and the transmission of culture through various generations, while strongly establishing itself, is referred as a tradition. As tradition and culture take a long time to establish, they need a significant amount of time to disappear, or at least decrease their effect and influence on people. That is why, even though the establishment of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1946 was a major success towards ensuring the well-being of humans, it also caused controversies among many nations who had adopted themselves to customs that contradicted with the newly established Human Rights.

As such nations failed to detach from their already existing culture and traditions, they continued to pursue these kinds of practices which lead to violations of human rights. Unfortunately, this is still an issue in many countries that lack the necessary social and economic development as well as strong legislations regarding human rights. For many years, in many countries, customs that violate human rights have seen to be common and every-day practices. In such cases, the effect and dominance of culture prevents citizens from processing their rights, as their customs are not suitable for such a new and large concept. In other words, in some cases, culture becomes a blinding factor that prevents the sustainable implementation of human rights, endangering the lives and well-being of many individuals.

The violations of human rights that occur due to cultural customs and traditions can only be prevented by defining a line between culture and human rights violations. As this line is not easy

to define and requires utmost attention and new methods of approaching to this problem, political innovation is the most promising base for all the solution alternatives. These violations occur due to the outdated traditions that cannot be adapted to today; thus, the solutions should be towards adapting such traditions to today's world. This can only be achieved with innovation, especially political innovation, which is of great importance while tackling this issue.

## Definition of Key Terms

**Culture:** The collective set of norms and traditions of a particular country, group or region that takes many years to develop and has a great influence on the way people live and interact with each other.

**Human Rights:** Universal rights that are for every individual. These rights are in effect during the life of an individual until death. They are determined by taking into consideration the shared needs and constituted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. To exemplify, right to an education, privacy and freedom of expression are all human rights.

**Female Infanticide:** Killing the baby girls right after they are born due to many reasons, primarily a preference for sons.

**Polygamy:** Having multiple spouses at the same time.

**Taboo:** Prohibitions of certain actions or substances. Taboos do not only limit and prohibit harmful substances or actions, but can also limit other areas such as nutrition.

**Marital Infidelity:** Not acting noble to the institution of marriage. As individuals vow to be loyal to each other while marrying, when one participates in an act of cheating, it is referred to as marital infidelity.

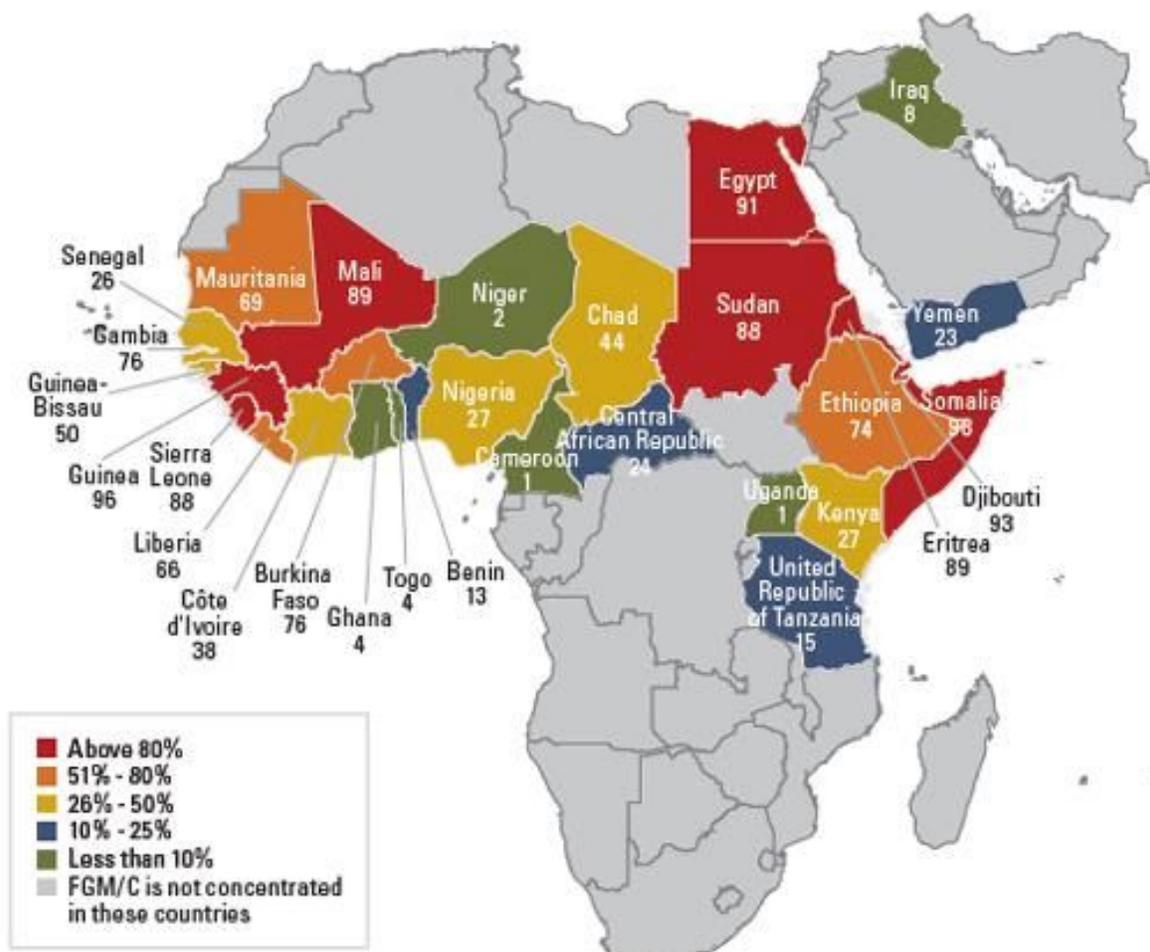
**Bodily Autonomy:** It is a fundamental human right that states every person has the right to make decisions about his body by himself without any control or outer influence.

## General Overview

### Culture and Women's Rights

Female genital mutilation is an operation in which female genital organs are removed or damaged. This practice is a major part of many cultures all around the globe and currently continues to be observed, mostly in African states. It is carried out by women during ceremonies, aiming to celebrate the coming of age of a girl.

Due to the lack of medical supplies and assistance in regions in which this practice usually takes place, neither the locations where female genital mutilation is performed, nor the instruments used are sterile. Moreover, as this operation is carried out by traditional birth attendants who are medically untrained, vital mistakes such as deep cuts may occur, resulting in deaths. That is why the most evident consequences of female genital mutilation are infection, as well as HIV and AIDS.



Picture 1: Map showing Africa with the percentages of women undergoing Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in countries where it is a common practice.

There are many damaging beliefs underlying the practice of female genital mutilation is carried out. Such beliefs can be listed as:

- To control the sexuality and sexual desires of women.
- To ensure the virginity of women before marriage, as it is believed to be a very important value and an important factor that men look for while selecting their wives. Women believe that they have to go through this operation if they wish to marry. Therefore, most of the times, they enter these operations willingly with the hope of cleansing themselves.
- In Mali, it is believed that if a certain part of female genital organ, which is removed with female genital mutilation, touches the baby during delivery, the baby would die.
- To improve the femininity of women. According to some cultures, the parts that are removed with this operation are the source of male attributes in a female body and that it should be removed for a female to reach her highest potential.
- To be accepted by society.

All of the aforementioned reasons' stem from traditional values that are found in a specific region. Female genital mutilation is a practice that violates human rights, specifically the right of "enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health," while putting many lives at risk.

Another violation of human rights is son preference, which is one of the oldest discriminatory practice that violates human rights. In some cultures, male superiority is very evident and having a female child is seen to be a disgrace. The most significant reasons of this belief are as follows:

- In many cultures, family lineage is considered to be very important. As in almost all of the countries, save for a few exceptions, the female takes her husband's surname after marriage. Thus, families are prompted to wish for sons instead of daughters to ensure the continuity of their family lineage. This even leads to polygamy, with the aim of ensuring the birth of a son.
- In some parts of Asia and Africa, the parents are buried by their sons and those who do not have sons are not buried with a proper ceremony, preventing them from happiness after death according to their culture.
- The dominance of men in almost every field, especially religion. As religion is a significant part of these cultures, religious leaders being male is also a reason for families to wish for a son.

As a result of son preference, female children began their lives with a huge disadvantage. They are not provided education, health services and even nutrition at the same quality with their male coevals.

With technological advancements, learning the child's gender before birth has become available. As a result, in cultures in which son preference is a custom, the abortion rate of female babies has increased. In severe cases, another consequence of this custom may be female infanticide, which can basically be defined as killing a female baby following her birth. Even if female babies are not killed, they are raised in the most difficult conditions possible and left with the burden of taking care of their siblings, doing chores and working from a very young age.

In such cultures, when the girls are just teenagers, they are forced to marry men who are much older than they are, which is basically called child marriage. The reason behind this is usually the dowry, which is the money paid by the husband to the girl's family as a result of their marriage. This kind of exchange between the husband and the family of the girl makes the families see their female children as sources of money and profit. Child marriage also causes a plethora of significant health problems, as the girls are forced to have sexual intercourse with older men when they are neither physically nor mentally ready to do so. In some of the most primitive cultures, there is even a notion which suggests that having sex with female children is a cure for AIDS.



Picture 2: Percentages of 20-24-year-old girls getting married before 18 according to continents.



Picture 3: A young girl who is being taken to marry a man without her will.

Women also experience nutritional taboos all around the world as a result of certain cultures. They are deprived from quality nutrition since their birth and do not get to consume high-protein foods such as eggs, meat or fish. In most of these cultures, there are specific taboos for pregnant women which sometimes prevent them from obtaining the necessary nutrients. These taboos damage the well-being of both the mother and the unborn child. Moreover, in these cultures, delivering the baby later than expected or experiencing difficult labor is seen to be a sign of marital infidelity. These unexpected and uncontrollable problems that occur while giving birth are portrayed as the mother's fault. This kind of burden, along with the pressure from society damages the psychological health of the mother and makes it even harder for her to deliver the baby.

Another discriminatory practice that violates women's rights in a specific region is a practice called "Zur-Zur". To simply explain, it is a practice in which the genitals of a female is deeply cut and then allowed to bleed with the aim of preparing the women to the pain of labor and can result in the infection of the birth canal or death of the individual due to excessive bleeding (United Nations).

Acid violence is another form of violation of human rights, especially in South Asian countries. Acid violence is defined as throwing acid on individuals and is a common punishment used on girls and women when they do not act in accordance with their country's culture. For example, if a woman refuses a marriage proposal or commits marital infidelity, she might experience acid violence as so-called punishment. Not only does the acid violence physically damage the individual, but it also leaves a vivid mark on that person's body which later becomes the source of discrimination and psychological abuse towards that person. Acid throwing is often regarded in comparison to stoning. While stoning is seen as the ultimate capital punishment for women, especially in African countries, acid throwing is considered to be less severe. For the same reasons that acid throwing occurs, women are at risk of stoning as well, depending on the severity of the situation. What happens with stoning is that women are buried with only their heads above the ground and then the members of that community throw stones at the women's heads until they are dead. This practice is only implemented on women, displaying the misogynistic approach of such cultures.

## **Culture and LGBTQ Rights**

The LGBTQ community's rights has been a significant issue that has contradicted with many cultures all around the globe for over centuries. For instance, transgender individuals, who have a gender expression other than their assigned gender or biological sex, experience such violations frequently. The concept of transsexuality is not accepted by many states, groups and cultures due to the fact that it was regarded as abnormal. There are still countries who refuse to grant their vital rights to transgender individuals, most of important of them being legally recognizing them as transsexual individuals which would allow them to have hormone replacement therapy or even have the sexual reassignment surgery. These also include rights such as but not limited to employment, housing, access to health care, immigration, military, education and security. In addition, reports suggest that transgender people suffer from poverty, lack of health services, homelessness, violence and abuse which all lead to psychological damage and depression. LGBTQ conversion therapy is another aspect of violations of human rights. Due to the discrimination towards the LGBTQ in certain cultures, LGBTQ conversion therapies in which attempts are made at changing LGBTQ individuals' sexual orientation is growing more common. Conversion therapies are often lead by a religious leader who tries to change the sexual preference and gender expression of many individuals by portraying their mentioned qualities as sins. In some countries, LGBTQ people do not have the right to express their thoughts, speak up about their sexuality, hold meetings or pride parades in which they celebrate their authentic selves. These kinds of provisions and bans violate their right to assembly as well as freedom of speech. Moreover, the concept of "corrective rape" has become an issue over the past few decades. Corrective rape is to rape a woman who is known to be a lesbian, with the aim of turning her into a heterosexual. This kind of primitive ideology is used as a justification for the violation of the most fundamental human rights, and stems from a lack of acceptance towards LGBTQ people within certain cultures and religions. However, such practises are not only seen in underdeveloped regions, for instance:

- In Europe, Malta is the only country that made conversion therapies illegal in its legislation ('Gay Cure').
- Only 9 out of 50 states in USA passed the ban of conversion therapies ('Gay Cure').
- Almost all african states allow such therapies to occur ('Gay Cure').

These examples show that such incidents do not only occur in underdeveloped countries. From most developed to least, lack of legal stance towards issues such as conversion therapies are

present in many countries. This proves that culture is not only dominant in underdeveloped countries, but also in developed countries which can lead to human rights violations.

### **Culture and Children's Rights**

Children also face many challenges and human rights violations. For instance, especially in African countries such as but not limited to Benin and Jamaica, there are strong birth superstitions serious enough to lead to harmful practices such as abandoning children or infanticide. Such superstitions include giving birth to multiple children at the same time, the child being born in an unusual position, premature birth, etc. If such incidents occur, the child may be accused of being the product of witchcraft or the representation of evil, which puts them at risk of infanticide.

In addition, mostly in Africa, children are killed as sacrifices in religious rituals which are known as ritual killings. In such countries, the children are killed as it is believed that it would bring good fortune. Moreover, in some cultures, albino individuals are specifically the targets of such killings, due to the superstition that their organs have magical powers.

In some cultures, when intersex babies are born, carrying variations of both the male and female genitalia, a gender is assigned to the babies by the authorities rather than letting the babies pick their own gender and sexual identity after a certain age. As the authorities' decision is followed by a procedure in which the genitalia other than

the one assigned by the authorities is removed, this act of gender assignment is irreversible.

Therefore, it often has extensive physical and psychological damages on the individual in the future. This problem that intersex babies face is not only seen in Less Economically Developed Countries (LEDCs) as there are many struggles such individuals face in More Economically Developed Countries (MEDCs) too. In some countries, such as the United States of America (USA), intersex babies experience similar surgeries to the ones in some cultures, in which a sex is determined, according to the authorities, for them to grow up as normally as possible (1).



Picture 4: An under aged girl working.



## **Witchcraft**

Even though it seems outdated, witchcraft is still believed in and considered a sin in Sub-Saharan Africa. Being born under extreme conditions, being an orphan or an albino, having uncommon characteristics such as left-handedness are all reasons for a child to be accused of practicing witchcraft. As many popular religions also support the ban of witchcraft to some extent, it is easy for such accusations to flourish and serve as a reason for the individual to be executed. In some countries such as Saudi Arabia, there is even an Anti-Witchcraft Unit in the police force, dedicated only to investigating witchcraft and arresting those believed to be practicing it.

## **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 5, 10 and 16**

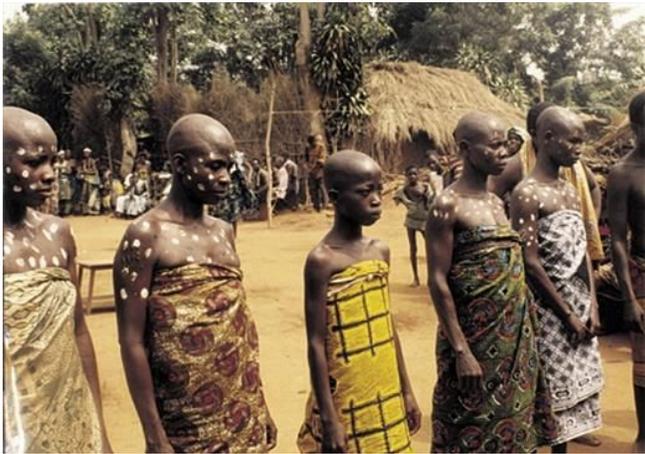
Sustainable Development Goals, also known as SDGs, are the 17 goals set by UNDP in 2015 in order to overcome the most significant struggles our world is facing nowadays. They hold essential importance for global improvement and diminishing the difficulties humanity has been experiencing for decades, if not centuries. It represents a step forward, establishing the picture of a better future for the world. In order for these goals to serve their purpose properly, every country has to take them into consideration and do their best to complete that goal in the given time limit. Defining a line between culture and human rights violations is an issue that intersects with some the sustainable development goals, specifically goals 5, 10 and 16:

- Sustainable development goal 5 aims at gender equality which is what the countries should aim to achieve while tackling the issues regarding women's rights violations of cultural practices such as female genital mutilation and son preference. Furthermore, target 5.3 specifically aims for the elimination of female genital mutilation.
- Sustainable development goal 10 aims to reduce inequalities among the different groups. While this SDG is also relevant to women's rights violations, this also includes other minority groups such as the LGBTQ community and disabled individuals and therefore the problems that are aimed to be solved by this goal is correspondent to the problems LGBTQ people face due to cultural norms.
- Sustainable development goal 16 is the goal that promotes peace, justice and strong institutions. As the just implementation of human rights through strong institutions would promote peace more than anything, this sustainable development goal is directly involved in the issue. There are many steps forward made by various countries towards this SDG. For instance, India started The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act in 2006 as the

number of child marriage incidents were very high. According to this act, if a man who is more than 18 years old marries with a girl who is under 18 years old, he receives 2 years of imprisonment and/or a financial penalty of hundred thousand rubies. This punishment also applies to those who perform or approve these kinds of marriages. Even though every nation has its own legislation towards different practises, governments tend to ignore the violation of human rights as they are a part of that nation's culture which promotes corruption and allows further implication of such practises, resulting in more severe consequences. Such actions are associated with weak institutions and therefore by establishing strong institutions with this SDG, the false implications of such legislations can be prevented and/or the lacking set of policies regarding cultural practises that violate human rights can be established.



Picture 5: Logos of sustainable development goals 5, 10 and 16.



Picture 6: Women who are the victims of trokosi practice.

### Major Parties Involved and Their Views

#### Ghana

Ghana is the only country in the world where a practice called *trokosi* is seen. In Ghana, it is believed that giving young girls to the service of local priests after a family member commits a crime is an effective form of apology to God. Girls experience sexual, physical and mental abuse while serving these 'local priests,' being tormented for a crime that they did not even commit. They are obliged to follow any and all

instructions they receive. This tradition can be viewed as a form of slavery, as well as child labor. Moreover, HIV/AIDS cases are very common amongst the victims of this practise as the religious leader who rape those girls have multiple sexual partners (Yaw). Trokosi practice is not recognized as a crime in Ghana, in fact, it is believed that it is a right and just judicial system for crimes such as murder.

### **Tunisia**

Based on a report prepared by the Human Rights Watch, in many countries, including Tunisia, homosexual people are neither accepted by society nor the government. In Tunisia, homosexuality is a legal crime punished by incarceration. With the aim of discovering and uncovering such individuals, Tunisian police units enter the houses of many citizens without a search warrant and thoroughly search the premises, even going through people's phones, reading their messages and looking at their search history with the aim of finding proof of homosexuality. If such proof is found, these individuals are taken to clinics where they are sexually harassed and observed regarding their sexuality. These kinds of actions are definite violations of human rights, primarily being the right of privacy and also bodily autonomy. The search that is conducted by authorities have no legitimate nor legal grounds, as evidenced by the lack of a search warrant.

### **Malawi**

In many countries, Malawi being one of them, LGBTQ representation is highly suppressed. LGBTQ individuals receive death threats, as well as psychological and physical abuse every day. Furthermore, they are denied any rights to defend themselves. For instance, according to an interview conducted by Human Rights' Watch with a homosexual man in Malawi, LGBTQ individuals do not receive any help from local police forces when they are physical abused, and police forces side with the assaulters. The same man indicated that he could not receive any service from local hospitals because of the fact that authorities thought he looked like a homosexual individual. These kinds of extreme discrimination are obvious in many countries where culture has a strong influence on lives.

### **Human Rights Watch**

The Human Rights Watch is a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) established in 1978, with the aim of protecting human rights and providing



Picture 7: Logo of Human Rights Watch.

objective data regarding this cause. Since its establishment, Human Rights Watch has been known for its effective advocacy of human rights by raising awareness, preparing reports, travelling all around the world and observing the conditions in which people live. With the improved information system of Human Rights Watch, countries can determine ways of approaching this issue depending on the reports prepared by this organization, which are unbiased and credible.

### **Ethiopia**

In Ethiopia, it is believed that if children cry a lot or cannot be breastfed, it is due to the 'dirty' blood running in their veins, which must be removed for the babies' well-being. This gives rise to a practice called blood-letting, in which small cuts to various parts of an infant's body is opened with the aim of bleeding the 'dirty-blood' out of their circulatory system. This dangerous practise can result in deaths or serious physical damage.

### **Nigeria**

In Nigeria, there is a traditional practice called "Efidan", also known as scarification, which is to cut multiple parts of the body with knives or sharp objects. Such cuts are seen as natural accessories to both women and men. When a child reaches adolescence, they experience efidan. With this practice, girls aim to improve their feminine allure and boys are trying to show how responsible they are to become grown-ups. The biggest problem with this tradition is that it is neither carried out in a sterile environment, nor with hygienic tools, thus increasing the chances of HIV/AIDS. In addition, as this practice is conducted by members of the society who do not have medical knowledge, in some cases, the individual dies due to excessive bleeding as the cuts are opened deeper than they should.



Picture 8: A woman who has experienced efidan (scarification).

### **Afghanistan**

In Afghanistan, the bacha bazi is an old tradition which is one of the most brutal examples of sexual slavery. Orphans or young boys from poor families are taken to work for the opulent men of the society, where they are treated as slaves. With the aim of turning these young boys into their entertainment, they teach them how to dance. After their training is done, these boys are

used to entertain groups of men during which they receive sexual abuse and harassment which makes this a vivid example of sexual slavery and a clear violation of human rights.

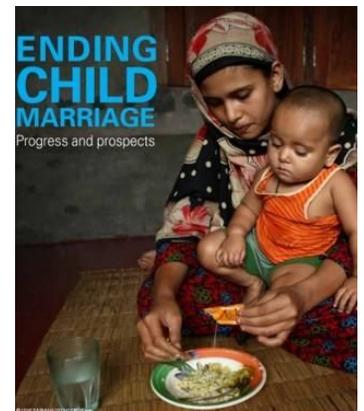
## **UN Involvement**

### **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)**

As the United Nations' specialized agency which deals with culture-related issues, UNESCO holds great importance in this issue. According to UNESCO, cultural rights of an individual are essential and should be protected, unless those cultural rights violate another human right. With this vision in mind, UNESCO can assist countries on how to implement the measures to be found with its advanced knowledge and surveillance system in terms of culture.

### **World Health Organization (WHO)**

WHO is the leading United Nations (UN) agency that focuses specifically on health, which is why it plays a significant role on all agenda items concerning health issues. It gathers all of the information about health necessities. It also leads researches aimed to improve countries' health standards. Given that many human rights violations through cultural practices harm individuals' health and well-being, assistance by WHO is vital while defining a line between culture and human rights violations since WHO has the proper knowledge and funds to assist countries while taking the necessary measures. In other words, it will act as a binding power between countries for them to work collaboratively as well as efficiently.



Picture 9: UNICEF's campaign poster for the eradication of child marriage.

### **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)**

UNICEF, for many years, has been leading the way to eradicate children's human rights violations. As cultural practices towards children violate their basic human rights and deprive them from adequate developmental needs, UNICEF is a relevant UN body to the issue as it has been working specifically to decrease the rates of female genital mutilation, child marriage and other practices that violate children's rights.

### **Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)**

OHCHR is the principal human rights office of the United Nations, aiming to promote and support human rights all around the world. With many regional and local offices, OHCHR aims to comply with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and aims to eradicate any violations. OHCHR has been one of the most significant protectors of human rights, especially under extreme conditions. As the cultural practices that violate human rights is a threat to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and, most of the times, are examples of extreme violence, OHCHR is one of the most relevant UN offices to this issue.

## **Relevant UN Documents**

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights, December 10<sup>th</sup> 1948, (A/RES/3/217A)
- Preventing and eliminating child, early and forced marriage, April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2014, (A/HRC/26/22)
- Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development, June 29<sup>th</sup> 2016 , (A/HRC/32/L.31/Rev.1)
- Traditional or customary practices affecting the health of women and girls, December 12<sup>th</sup> 1997, (A/RES/52/99)

## **Treaties and Events**

### **The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)**

The UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979. As can be understood from its name, CEDAW aims to eradicate discrimination of women in any way, to make them equal citizens and also individuals in society. Therefore, it is a major step towards eradicating gender discrimination.

### **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**

Established in 1946, Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the principal UN document which highlights individuals' most fundamental rights. It is the base of all discussions on defining a line between culture and human rights violations, since the mentioned human rights are defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. While finding solutions, this document should always

be kept in mind as the goal of the line to be defined is to prevent any and all human rights violations, not only the ones concerning violence or physical abuse.

## **Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue**

The issue at hand has addressed in different forms for a long time as it is a very broad one. There have been many solutions proposed to separate problems such as child marriage and female genital mutilation. However, as the traditions of such practices are a major part of many cultures, the attempt of eradicating them resulted in a failure. The main reason as to why such attempts or solutions have failed is that their implementation was not adhered to as strongly as necessary. Many countries did not consider proposed solutions, as they contradicted with their national and cultural policies, which is why persuasion through education is a very important factor to be considered while tackling this issue. Furthermore, even though some nations adjusted their legislations according to the proposed solutions, the execution of such laws remained insufficient and overlooked by governments. For example, even though a nation would ban female genital mutilation, the government or the police forces would not act in a determined way as they are a part of that specific culture. The lack of connection between rural areas and governments is another factor that disturbed the progress towards solving this issue. Since a significant portion of the cultural practices explained in previous sections are seen in Less Economically Developed Countries (LEDCs), weak government connection with rural areas or local tribes leads to an increase in the value of culture and traditional practices.

## **Possible Solutions**

The first solution to this problem can be to form an organization or database who will investigate and gather necessary information regarding cultural practices that violate human rights and where they occur. With this gathered information, this organization can prepare reports at a regular basis so that Member States can prepare and propose new solution alternatives based on proven data. The unbiased nature of this data can be achieved by the support of United Nations or other relevant NGOs. The most important solution to this problem is education and raising awareness. However, as this solution has been proposed for many years and the problem has not been eradicated yet, the content and the way this education is given should be taken into consideration and more effective, diverse and accessible forms of education should

be found and promoted. Conventions with the participation of relevant NGOs and Member States is another effective solution to the problem. In such conventions, leaders of nations can be informed upon the negative outcomes of certain cultural practices in their country so that they can propose amendments and adjustments to their country's national legislations. Although proposing amendments and adjustments to the national legislations is a crucial solution, the way these legislations will be regulated and controlled should be decided upon as well, since due to the lack of commitment from governments, these legislations fail to be implemented. That's why, an organization with this objective can be formed by Member States and relevant NGOs to ensure the proper implementation of laws and to prevent culture from stepping in the way of eradicating human rights violations.

## Notes from the Chair

As this issue is very broad and general compared to a single cultural practice, delegates should not try to find a solution for every example of culture violating human rights. Instead, they should focus on more general solutions that can be implemented for a variety of cases. It can be a practical approach to tackle these problems after dividing them into groups just like I did in this report by dividing the overview into women, LGBTQ, children and witchcraft.

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