

Critical Reflection Essay  
Student's Name  
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### Introduction

In the world, today, the place and role of women in the society has been defined by the male species thanks to our chauvinistic forefathers who saw nothing in women but an object for self-gratification. The perception of females as the weaker sex is however changing thanks to the emergence of global feminism. Even as advancements have been made to streamline gender equality, some of the harmful traditional cultural practices that demean women are still carried out. This paper will discuss a few of those practices that take place around the world and the role of feminism in addressing those challenges.

### Harmful Cultural Practices

Female genital mutilation is a widespread practice in some parts of the globe, especially Africa, that involves the excision of part or all the female genitalia, as part a rite of passage. Statistics shows that close to 140 million women around the world are subjected to this practice. 3 million ladies in Africa undergo FGM annually. Despite its popularity, the practice creates numerous health hazards and has no any known health benefits. In areas where it is practiced such as Kenya among the Abagusii community, the procedure is carried out by traditional practitioners using sharp objects without any anesthesia. After the procedure, the 'circumcised' woman loses a lot of blood, experiences difficulty in passing urine and during childbirth, sexual and menstruation problems, bladder infections among others. FGM is associated with customs based on controlling a woman's sexuality and lack of undergoing the procedure in communities that practice it may lead to social exclusion for the young girl. The treatment of women as men's property is closely related to FGM. There are economic benefits to having a daughter who has undergone the practice married. In addition to the physical and emotional impacts on the girl child, the practice is an outright act of gender discrimination and denies women a chance to reach their maximum potential.

Forced and child marriages comprise another form of dangerous cultural perpetrated against women. Such marriages trap women into relationships that deny young girls and women enjoyment of fundamental human rights. Although forced and arranged marriages can be slightly differentiated, they are similar to the extent that free will and consent of the partners, especially the girl, is denied. The International Centre for Research for Research and women estimated that in 2003 more than 51 million girls under the age of 18 had been subjected to this practice. Some of the major reasons fronted by proponents of early marriages include protection of the family name, reduction of financial strain on poor households, to settle debts, strengthening of the family caste and fear of sexual activity before marriage. Being married at an early age interrupts the girl's education, results in isolation by peers and limits the possibility of economic independence for the rest of her life.

Another form of harmful cultural practice being perpetrated on women is virginity tests. It involves the examination of a lady's genitals to establish her sexual chastity. The most common form of testing is the establishment of whether the hymen is still intact. Virginity tests are widely practiced in large conservative parts Asia, Africa and even some countries in Europe such as Turkey. Some of the methods used to verify include using a thread to determine the existence of the hymen, using a white sheet on which the newlyweds must consummate the marriage, physical examination: using hymen 'testers', firm breasts and tightness of the muscles behind the knees. Women who 'fail' the tests are beaten, humiliated and treated with scorn among their communities. In Egypt, virginity tests were reported to have been used as a tool for intimidation against female protestors.

Son preference is another harmful traditional practice that promotes gender inequality. The practice is prevalent in many religions and classes, especially in Asia and Africa. This practice is continued for a variety of reasons including continuity of the family lineage and belief that the boy child will take care of the parents during old age. A study conducted in Bangladesh in 2006 among 850 families reported that 93% of them preferred a son and considered girls a 'problem'. In the countries in which son preference is practiced it is exercised in various forms including: socialization in a manner that infuses superiority among boys preference in educating the boy child, outright restriction of girls from higher levels of education, female infanticide and sex-selective abortions of female fetuses.

### **The Role of Feminists in Addressing Harmful Cultural Practices Affecting Women Globally**

Feminists seek to understand the issues that women face across the world with the hope that they would one day convince the world that there is a need for change. Feminists seek to contribute to the process of empowering women to enable them advocate for their liberties and participate in the development of public or private decision-making. They argue that their ultimate aim is to bring about positive change that will promote gender equality. Some of the reasons why harmful cultural practices is a concern for feminists are that it is a potential risk for women everywhere and the laws put in place are weak and rarely enforced. Moreover, innocent children and adolescents are often the victims of such inhuman acts. Consequently, the physical, psychological and emotional traumas are devastating. Although most people believe that such rituals never occur, the truth is that they occur in various continents including Africa, Asia, America and Europe in different forms.

The steps taken by Feminist Movements to address the issues outlined above are four folds. These include the use of legislative means, advocacy and activist groups, the involvement of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and the social media as will be subsequently discussed.

Numerous conventions and treaties have been ratified by various States globally to make harmful cultural practices illegal. Examples of such laws include the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women among many others. Despite the fact that many countries have adopted these laws by incorporating them in their Constitutions the process of implementation is still a major concern that needs to be addressed. One of the reasons why this strategy has failed is because of the limited access to justice for women due to corruption and intimidation just to mention but a few.

Activism and the involvement of NGOs such as UNICEF, UNIFEM, and USAID have also contributed significantly to the empowerment of women. The use of the social media has even made things easier for feminists. Currently, women no longer wait for the starting of a revolutionary wave of a campaign to address their issues. This change has occurred because such processes require huge sums of money and are tedious and time-consuming as well. Today, women from all corners of the globe converge on social forums such as Twitter and Facebook to shun all forms of violence against women.

Nonetheless, these problems affect every woman directly or indirectly. Every woman's effort in fighting harmful cultural practices is, therefore, necessary. The fact that one does not face it in their daily lives does not mean that they don't also face the risk of being victims.

### **Conclusion**

The above discussion has given a feminist perspective of some of the harmful cultural practices that have been used to sideline women in all societies globally. Some of these practices are not only contrary to human rights but are also demeaning to the stature of women. Some of

these practices discussed include female genital mutilation, forced and early marriages, virginity tests, and son preference. The role of feminism in addressing some of these practices include pushing for gender sensitive legislation, formation of advocacy groups that advocate for the rights of women, utilization of the media to bring these issues to light and engaging in activism to assert the position of women.