



Girls' innocence and futures stolen: The cultural practice of sexual cleansing in Malawi

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ABSTRACT

Violence and abuse against children worldwide has become a growing concern. The traditional practice of old men having sex with young girls, as practised in rural and isolated areas in Malawi, is a human rights violation and impacts on the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals. The “sexual cleansing” practice is considered a rite of passage and it is performed by a paid sex worker referred to as a “hyena”. It is challenging to present actual statistics as the ritual is sometimes practiced in secret. What is certain, however, is that the rights of the girl child, which are fundamental to their growth and development are violated. This paper aims to explore this harmful cultural practice and provide recommendations on cultural-based interventions.

Findings emanating from the literature review indicate that children undergoing this sexual cleansing ritual belong to an already vulnerable Malawian population of the “rural girl child” requiring care and protection, as the *fisi* ritual is abusive in nature and has adverse consequences. In conclusion, governments and child protection advocates working in remote areas in Malawi face challenges brought about by poverty and culture(s), subsequently impeding realization of children's rights. In addition, renewed progressive practice approaches are required for rigorous exploration of the best pragmatic pathways when intervening with complex moral and cultural-based child protection challenges.

1. Introduction

In Africa, there are many cultures and ways of life and these can be sources and forces of liberation and/or oppression in children's lives. Cultural rights are deeply upheld and strongly protected in the different countries' Constitutions and other legislative and policy documents. The rituals of social transition are practiced by various African ethnic groups and they mark an event in a person's life. Cleansing rituals usually involve a sexual act. Through penetration, the semen is believed to purify the girl/woman (Day & Maleche, 2011). On the other hand, initiation ceremonies are formal-informal gatherings where young people are taught about generation-held attitudes, beliefs and behaviours adhered to in adulthood (Skinner, Underwood, Schwandt, & Magombo, 2013). Young people who do not attend these ceremonies and rituals risk being socially isolated in the community, as the ceremonies and rituals are considered a symbol of becoming an adult as well as learning process.

The beginning of childhood, when and how a child transitions into adulthood varies among different cultures and in different countries. However, it should be noted that this may increase children's vulnerability if the transitions are not in the best interests of the child's development. Although in certain regions there are remarkable evident

differences, several international conventions define children as people under the age of eighteen. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), adolescents are people between ages 10 and 19, and 70% of the adolescent population live in developing countries. The focus of this paper will be girls in Malawi between the ages of 9–16 who are mostly affected by the sexual cleansing rite of passage. This initiation is incomplete if the sexual cleansing ritual is not performed. This rite of passage, which gives unjust right to oppression, though culture-based and reinforced, is a harmful practice that violates girls. Although traditional cultural practices and sexual rituals occupy a significant space and place within ethnic groups in Africa, they also play a big role in disempowering girls and women. In this paper, I argue that people's socio-cultural contexts play a key role in the development, negotiation and re-negotiation of their lives and identities as supported by the work of Uwah and Wright (2011).

Sexual cleansing has been linked to gender inequality and the sexual abuse of children. It is a women's rights violation and an impediment to achieving Sustainable Development Goal number 5. These inter-linked perspectives are crucial to the recognition, identification and management of girl victims who under-go sexual cleansing as a rite into adulthood. Sexual cleansing has been researched in relation to levirate marriage and HIV/AIDS (Malungo, 2001), the renegotiating of cultural

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practices (Banda & Kunkeyani, 2015), the transmission of HIV/AIDS (Peters, Kambewa, & Walker, 2010; Skinner et al., 2013; Tembo & Phiri, 1993) and widow cleansing (Lomba, 2014; Mugambe, 2006). The African Union Commission paper by Meyer and Pain (2012) on harmful traditional practices in Africa overlooked and failed to mention the sexual cleansing of girls as one of the harmful practices.

This paper gives a brief background on Malawi. The author then attempts to describe sexual cleansing as part of an initiation ritual. The next discussion focuses on why the practice continues to exist as well as the consequences associated with it. Finally, implications for social work practice are presented.

2. Background on Malawi

Malawi is a landlocked country in south-eastern Africa and is surrounded by Mozambique, Zambia and Tanzania. Malawi has been plagued by a myriad of problems and it has been observed that considerable efforts are being undertaken to overcome under-development, entrenched corruption and the spread of HIV/AIDS. Malawi is ranked as the 18th least developed country in the world according to the UNDP (2016). Eighty five per cent of the population live in rural areas and they practise a wide variety of cultural traditions including sexual cleansing of young girls. Malawi has 13.9 million people and poverty is widespread, with 74% of the population living on less than the international poverty line of \$1.25 per day. 50% of new infections are reported in young people between the ages of 15–17 (UNAIDS, 2017). The adult HIV prevalence rate in 2007 was 11.9% (UNICEF, 2008) and this has not reduced much (at 9.2%) despite the efforts of the government and international donor agencies (UNAIDS, 2017).

Based on Durkheim's theory of collective representation, one can explain the behaviours and traditional practices of a majority of the population living in the rural areas in Malawi. According to Skinner et al. (2013), participation in initiation ceremonies in Malawi varies by region and ethnicity. Tembo and Phiri (1993) state that the *fisi* cultural practice is performed among the Chichewa-, Mang'anja- and Sena-speaking people in different forms and on different occasions. In the southern region of Malawi, it is reported that more than 57% of girls (75% of Yao and 60% of Lomwe girls) between the age 12 and 19 have undergone initiation. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this could actually be higher in other parts of the country. The lack of children's participation in actions involving them can further be supported by Durkheim's theory of lack of individual initiative and freedom in children's process of socialization.

In Malawi, there is a preference not to discuss seemingly embarrassing topics, but rather pretend that the actual situation does not exist or deny knowing about it. According to Kamlongera (2007, p.83), "it is safe to assume that the lack of data on the precise happenings within the act is a sign that the tradition is a sensitive subject among Malawians" and a subtle socio-cultural movement to oppress girls and women. This was true when I informally inquired from some Malawians in Johannesburg and Cape Town about the practice. Sexual practices carried out during initiation are generally rarely spoken about or openly discussed outside of the ceremonies, and this is what Kamlongera (2007) referred to as keeping silent about an uncomfortable situation. The role of culture becomes pertinent in the creation and maintenance of individual and collective identities. Within these elements of gender socialization, these young girl initiates are seemingly victimized "in the shadows" and there is a conspiracy of silence between the initiates and the initiators to safeguard the initiation tradition. These relationships of knowledge and power that permeate through generations mean that cases are not reported, practices are not well understood, and public policy making and scaling of interventions is difficult as there is no reliable data on prevalence (Banda & Agyapong, 2016; Leary, 2016).

3. Human rights and traditional cultural practices

There is a complex relationship between culture and human rights. Every person has a right to culture according to Article 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Article 15 of the International Convention on Economic and Social Rights (CESR). The right to a cultural identity influences the right to self-determination as outlined in Article 1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Therefore, people, under international law, have a right to their unique and meaningful traditional practices. This right is somewhat limited, though, as signatory countries are expected to promote and protect all human (and children's) rights regardless of cultural systems.

In Africa, the Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Women in Africa ("Women's Protocol") has provided a crucial platform for the promotion and protection of the sexual and reproductive rights of women, including girls. The African Children's Charter contains provisions prohibiting harmful cultural practices, and it further contains specific clauses that can be invoked directly and indirectly to advance the sexual health rights of adolescents especially girls. The African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACE) is tasked with ensuring the full realization of children's rights. The ACE's resolutions and comments should reflect the lived experiences of the girl-child in Africa and should address issues such as coercive sex during initiation rites, early marriage and FGM (Durojaye, 2013). The SADC ministers of gender took cognizance that gender is a dynamic, fluid and evolving area and they reluctantly agreed to the binding timeframes and periodic reviews the SADC Gender and Development Protocol. Chapter 6 of the 2017 Gender Barometer specifically addresses sexual and reproductive rights and health rights, and this should be actively translated into practice.

The Malawi Ministry of Gender, Youth and Community Services developed a 2015–2019 National Plan of Action for Vulnerable Children to improve the overall protection of children. However, the action plan is silent on children's vulnerability caused by their participation in some cultural activities such as the sexual cleansing ritual.

4. Sexual cleansing, hegemonic masculinity and semantics

Language matters and words matter. According to Leary (2016, p. 109), "precise language can help convey the particular gravity of harms against children and the seriousness with which the society addressed such crimes". The practice of sexual cleansing in Malawi takes on the name *fisi* (hyena) culture. A hyena is an animal that has the following characteristics ascribed to it: (i) it can adapt to any habitat; (ii) known to take advantage of other animal's kills i.e. they are sneaky scavengers; (iii) good hunters (iv) they eat every part of the animal and nothing is wasted (v) timid but show bold behaviours and (vi) they have filthy habits. In many communities, hyenas are looked down upon and negative roles ascribed to it due to its sneaky and mucky habits. However, the reason why the ritual is referred to as *fisi* is not clear and could be subject to further investigation in future. What most authors agree on is that the *fisi* ritual is exploitative and not empowering to the girls who undergo it and their rights are not protected and their dignity is not respected.

The different *fisi* rituals (which might not be exhaustive) are outlined below. All the rituals that are sex-related are performed by a man:

- i) The *fisi* is identified, by a couple or their relatives, to help them get children by impregnating the woman. This is seen a cultural role and the man cannot make any claims to the child or children he has fathered.
- ii) After the birth of a baby, the infant's mother, irrespective of her marital status, has unprotected sexual intercourse with a *fisi*, believing that it will cleanse the baby and influence his or her healthy development.

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