



Faith, Gender & Sexuality: A toolkit

Resources for faith practitioners

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Culture, tradition and faith: Overview

Religion and culture can contribute positively to the lives of people across the world. This module examines how some **religious and cultural practices** enhance human life and how some are misused to deny rights.

- The notions that particular gender practices are 'timeless', part of our 'culture' or theologically ordained, are often cited as reasons to deny human rights that perpetuate gender inequality. However, **neither culture nor religious practices are static or homogenous**. Each religious practice has multiple variants on imagining the masculine and feminine and, the relationship between the two.
- Culture and tradition are open to **re-interpretation, reinvention or re-imagining**.
- There is an element of conflict between actual practice and theological positions. Particularly in the context of gender inequality and sexual diversity, **it is important to become aware of how religious and cultural practices are utilised** to perpetuate harmful norms and, strengthen patriarchy and men's control over women.
- People must be encouraged to **contextualise cultural beliefs and challenge harmful cultural practices**.

Definitions

Custom: A traditional and widely accepted way of behaving or doing something that is specific to a particular society, place, or time

Tradition: The transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation, or the fact of being passed on in this way.
Or: A long-established custom or belief that has been passed on from one generation to another.

Culture: There are many interpretations and definitions of what culture is. Some define 'culture' as that which distinguishes life in one group from life in another group, including language, beliefs, morality, norms, institutions, values, symbols, and physical objects, among other qualities.

Culture can be defined as the learned beliefs, values, rules, norms, symbols, and traditions that are common to a group of people. It is these shared qualities of a group that make them unique. Cultural practices are constantly changing and transmitted to others.

Tradition, culture and patriarchy

Religion and culture are not homogeneous ideas but emerge from social, political and economic contexts. They exist in specific historical time and geographies, and they are also constantly changing. One of the most important features of both religion and culture are that they are both linked to power and are described and defined by people in power (because of patriarchy, the people in power are often men).

Both religion and culture reflect patriarchies and are used to maintain patriarchal structures. Articulations of patriarchy vary in different cultures and religions, nevertheless, cultures and religions privilege 'masculinities' while subordinating 'femininities'. Additionally, cultures and religions rely on specific masculinities and femininities to reproduce themselves, which more often than not is accomplished through violence.

Traditional cultural practices and beliefs reflect the values and beliefs held by members of a community for periods often spanning generations. Some of these are beneficial to all members, while others have become harmful to a specific group, such as women or LGBTI people. Some examples of harmful traditional practices include female genital mutilation (FGM), early marriage, the various taboos or practices which prevent women from controlling their own fertility, nutritional taboos and traditional birth practices, son preference and its implications for the status of the girl child, female infanticide and early pregnancy. Many people are unaware that these forms of 'tradition' run against their basic human rights, and even if aware of human rights frameworks and policies, many people are not in a position to exercise them.

What can faith communities do?

Culture and tradition as tools for transformation

Culture, although constantly changing, is often presented as a reason to resist change and people regularly hide behind it to justify the subordinate role of women and/or the discrimination of sexual minorities. Within this context, it is vital that those people in faith communities, especially those who hold power, play a role in promoting equality, and challenging forms of discrimination against people who have less power because of patriarchy and harmful gender and sexuality norms. Culture must therefore be viewed not as an impediment, but as a means of engaging communities in sustainable change processes with regard to gender equality.

Shaping gender, culture, tradition and religion

In conventional settings, traditional and cultural norms and practices are imposed and driven from the top. Values are defined by the religious, traditional, political and economic elite and, sources of morality are taken from external codes and statutes said to be in the best interests of the subordinates.

This can be described as blind obedience to authority. It is received with resentment and resistance because it is imposed. In this scenario dos and don'ts are given but, no whys. This approach does not necessarily develop a moral character since compliance with regulations is often enforced by a process of sanctions and rewards. The unthinking and unquestioning nature of obedience makes it a potential tool for abuse since, even when authority deviates from the standards, they can't be challenged fostering a culture of dependence and ignorance.

Culture and tradition can also be shaped in a transformative way based on choice, inclusiveness and a quest for the common good. The transformative approach allows for informed, rational consent and compliance and gives reasons and consequences for choices. Moral character is developed and rigorous debate and sharing of information are necessary to reach consensus. Through this approach, practices that affirm the value of all community members can gain priority and alternatives can be created for those that do not where simply doing away with them is inappropriate.

What can religious and traditional leaders do? An example from Ethiopia

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church Faith Leader Toolkit offers the following suggestion, based on their in-country experience of working with faith leaders.

The NGO Council on Violence Against Children recommends that councils, heads and spiritual leaders, together with any child and women's protection authorities within them, should carry out a children's and women's rights-based review of practices linked to their religion which may directly or indirectly harm women and children and systematically support their prohibition and elimination. Any relevant religion-based law should be reviewed for its full compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and other human rights instruments.

International and regional religious and inter-faith bodies should place the issue of harmful practices, which have been linked to religion and affect children on their agendas, working at national, regional and international levels to identify and condemn all such practices and to support moves to prohibit and eliminate them.#

[Read more: EOTC Faith Leader Toolkit \[1\]](#)

Activities

These simple discussion based activities can be used with groups to explore gender norms and equality in marriage. They encourage participants to think about how they can build more inclusive communities.

Activity 1: Reimagining tradition and culture (60 minutes)

Using video clips from MenCare, this activity highlights the positive effects of challenging norms and stereotypes. Multimedia stories are used to provoke discussion on gender norms and stereotypes in the community.

[Download the pdf of this exercise \[2\]](#)

Activity 2: Equality in Marriage and the practice of lobola (75 minutes)

This activity involves an open discussion around marriage, lobola (a bride price or dowry) and women's rights within a marriage. Key information is provided in order to help the facilitator guide the discussion. The objective is to understand the purpose of marriage and clearly demonstrate the lobola does not equate to ownership of a woman or the right to abuse one's wife.

[Download the pdf of this exercise \[3\]](#)

Further reading

These resources provide a deeper understanding of how religion and culture can contribute positively to people's lives and how harmful practices and traditions can be challenged and reinterpreted.

Source URL: <http://spl.ids.ac.uk/sexuality-gender-faith/culture-tradition-and-faith-overview>

Links

[1] <http://www.religionsforpeace.org/sites/default/files/publications/EOTC%20Faith%20Leader%20Toolkit%20->

%20January%202013.pdf

[2] http://spl.ids.ac.uk/sites/spl.ids.ac.uk/files/module_5_activity_1.pdf#overlay-context=sexuality-gender-faith/sexuality-and-gender-diversity/activities

[3] http://spl.ids.ac.uk/sites/spl.ids.ac.uk/files/module_5_activity_2.pdf#overlay-context=sexuality-gender-faith/sexuality-and-gender-diversity/activities