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.

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