

XVII Gernika International Conference on Culture and Peace
Presentation on a theme:
“Local participation and global development in Peace Building”
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Culture and tradition ensure social cohesion reinforcing strong group and individual identity and a sense of security that this provides. Coping mechanisms to survive and live in a given physical environment necessitates for groups to develop and observe norms of behavior and code of conducts. Norms are rigorously preserved and practiced with myths believes and other such justifications advanced.

While this reality is valid and universal for human survival, tradition and culture have also been a source of conflict and many times of wars. Ethnocentrism and intolerance, racism and rejection have caused devastating wars and genocides. No culture remains static. It evolves and changes as a result of peaceful reencounters, commerce or violent occupation as has been witnessed. The challenge remains to be how to build a culture of peace that recognizes and accepts the inevitability of change and that uses transformation for a harmonious development of human kind and the environment.

Building Gender Equality for the Promotion and Preservation of Peace

In all cultural contexts norms of behavior are constructed and maintained to attribute lower status to women for easy exploitation and subjugation. Throughout human history women have suffered from traditionally condoned forms of violence.

Several studies including those undertaken by the United Nations Special Rapporteurs have presented compelling evidences of discrimination and violence against women throughout their life cycle.

The traditionally maintained socializing process of boys and girls is designed to instill a feeling of superiority to boys with a warrior like value while girls are groomed to be docile and accept suffering and oppression in silence.

The internalized values of aggressiveness feed and maintain the patriarchal system that has been the cause of conflicts the consequences of which women are obliged to bare.

Violence affects women across their life cycle.

The missing girl child

Millions of female fetuses are aborted before they are born after sex detection in countries and among societies where the value of a male child is high. Girls receive less food and care with their education not given priority. Growing up a girl assumes multiple chores many times at the risk of her wellbeing and life. In many countries in Africa girls are forced to marry at an early age for the benefit of their family. Abduction of girls is accepted among some societies as a tradition. Girls are also given away to religious institutions to serve as slaves. The forms of violence against women are multiple.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is a practice that involves the total or partial removal of the female genital organ in varying degrees. This practice affects over 100 million women and girls in at least 28 African countries, and among immigrants in Europe, Canada, USA, Australia, New Zealand, other countries where practicing communities have settled.

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AC Programs

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Initiation rites

- Less sexuality and loyalty to the husband
- Benefits of excisers

The main reasons are ignorance, the economic vulnerability of women and lack of government policy.

Challenging violence

Challenging long held beliefs in order to bring about positive change of attitudes requires a process of education and social mobilization at all levels. Empowering communities to decide and embrace positive and constructive values and principles requires the implementation of carefully tailored programs of intervention

My organization the **Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices (IAC)** applies a multi-pronged approach in order to dialogue and convince the different stakeholders as well as the public at large in its work to eradicate harmful traditional practice

Reasons advanced

- Virginity family honor
- Aesthetic reasons
- Initiation rites
- Religious misconceptions
- Economic - bride Price;
- Social integration;
- Less sexuality and loyalty to the husband
- Benefits of excisers

The main reasons are ignorance, the economic vulnerability of women and lack of government policy.

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Education, dialogue, information and sensitization at all levels are important actions to stimulate social change.

IAC Programs

- IAC organizes a series of symposia for **religious leaders** in order to clarify the position of Islam and the Christian religion with regards to the female person in particular the integrity of her body.
- **Excisers** are influential within their societies because of their special skill in the operation as well as the information they provide with authority. The knowledge they possess appeals especially to mothers since it is transmitted through generations. IAC realizes the potential of converted excisers to bring about positive change of attitudes. It continues to implement Alternative Employment Opportunities (AEO) to those convinced and willing to engage in the anti-FGM campaign, after information and education specially targeted to sensitize them.
- **Youth** are important target group both as potential or actual victims as well as future parents. IAC organizes fora and special training for youth. Since they are open minded they are quick to understand the risk of HTPs and are willing to campaign.
- Information and training is provided to **women** in order for them to realize the harmful effects of practices such as FGM, early marriage, nutritional taboos, etc. and to valorize their body. This is implemented in

a form of training of trainers to maximize outreach. Such programs have been implemented in almost all the countries where IAC works.

- **Men** are also involved in the training information campaigns.

Evaluation of such programs demonstrates the gradual change of attitudes taking place. In order to free women from violence there is need to build synergy between policy and action. As the principle duty bearers governments have to put the recommendations, resolutions, conventions, and declarations related to respect for the human rights of women into concrete actions. There are sufficient instruments both international and regional which protect women from violence upholding the indivisibility, inalienability, universality of human rights principles. These need to be translated action.

Experiences show that change is possible given the human capacity to receive information, reflect, recognize, and adapt. Tradition is by no means static. It can be dynamic provided the right intervention is applied in a sustained manner using appropriate entry points.

Conclusion

Gender equality is an essential element to build and maintain peace. The equal participation of women in decision making whether in the agenda for development or in peace making is indispensable in order for countries and nations to live in peace. Empowered women can certainly make valuable contribution to accelerate development, eradicate poverty and build lasting peace.