What are Harmful Practices?

Harmful practices reflect the values and beliefs held by members of a community that have been there for generations, some of which are beneficial to all members, while others are harmful. These harmful practices include honour based abuse, early/forced marriages, female genital mutilation, breast ironing, preventing women from controlling their own fertility, dowry payments, son preference, bride-price and more.

Harmful practices reflect an underlying discrimination against women, and are therefore closely linked to other forms of violence against women, such as domestic abuse, which still affects a majority of female victims (UN, 2009-CA REF). The links and distinctions between harmful practices can be unclear, but they remain intrinsically linked through the theme of female human rights violation. Harmful practices are often long-standing and rooted in social, cultural, or religious norms, and may therefore be viewed as a very meaningful aspect of personal, cultural, or religious identity (UN, 2009-CA REF; UN, 2009). Although harmful practices primarily target women as victims, women may also be complicit in their perpetration (UN, 2009-CA REF; UN, 2009).

Not all traditional/cultural practices are harmful, many can be positive, which may promote social cohesion within the community, working together to support the vulnerable or those in need. Many families performing such harmful practices do not wish any harm to their children, but believe that harmful practices are a part of their parenting duties and that FGM for example, gives them a better future and importantly allows them to be accepted within the community they belong into.

Who's affected?

Both males and females can be at risk of harmful practices, but these harmful practices as stated above, have deep-rooted gender inequalities where women and girls are mostly affected. It is also a social understanding of what it means to be a women or a girl in controlling their sexuality and freedom for life and choices.

What needs to be done to tackle such Harmful Practices?

It is very difficult to try and challenge beliefs and practices which are deeply embedded within

cultures, but neither culture, traditions nor religion should be used to justify the practice of cultural traditions that are harming the individual. These practices are an abuse and against human rights. As professionals, we need to work together to:

1. Ensure protection for those who are victims or under threat of any harmful practices
2. Deliver engagement and educational programmes within communities to raise awareness and challenge attitudes
3. Respond to the 'one chance rule' at all-times to ensure safeguarding and protection
4. Be sensitive to culture, but at the same time not be blinded by cultural acceptance
5. Remember that this is everybody's business agenda, that can happen anytime and anywhere