

## **The Danger of Harmful Traditional Practices: A Case Study on Liberia**

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**Abstract** Harmful traditional practices of the body, ranging from genital to other sacred parts, remains prevalent in many African settings, referencing cultural beliefs of her forefathers ancestral obligations.

Liberia, has a youthful population, where 90% carry the scar of harmful bodily practices, particularly female genital cutting in diverse cultural ways and ethnic approaches for many reasons. Girls are unknowingly forced into this ancestral act without any information about the health-related complications associated with these practices.

Our society remains gullible and there are no laws that punish or prohibit these inhumane practices. In the commission of these rituals, most victims--as young as four years--die or are infected with communicable diseases caused by the use of different kinds of sharp objects to carry out the practice.

The girl child suffers devastating odds, as she is subjected to pain and agony and poor indigenous healing methods. The tradition of genital cutting threatens the health of our mothers, sisters, aunts, nieces, and children.

Fraternal greetings from your colleagues of one of Liberia's leading rights advocacy institutions, Child Rights Foundation-Children Welfare Foundation International (CRF-CWFI).

As we continue an imperative or, if you like, a bossy campaign to restore dignity, erase the pains, and stop the perpetual sufferings of our girl child to these harmful practices, we have gathered to share thoughts on the case of my dear country (Liberia), a signatory to many international instruments, protocols, and conventions that seek to promote, strengthen, and protect their fundamental rights.

Today, we are humble for this unique opportunity to flag "Liberia" in a different but distinct way, when the pains and agony of our daughters, wives, nieces, aunties, and others remain unprotected at the realm of daylight abuse with their abusers going with impunity. Let me inform you that, as we sit here in this forum, Liberia observes its independence.

Liberia is a tiny yet oldest West African state. It turned one hundred sixty-seven years old today, gaining independence in July 1847. It has fifteen counties and sixteen indigenous tribes and a total population of approximately 3.5 million people. The country's future is slipping back into a fragile state...dark cloud surfacing or raising its ugly head, desperation and bleak scars on the faces of my fellow countrymen as a result of "bad governance" and its associated tenets. The nation is indeed bleeding in its entirety.

Please join me let's observe a moment of silence for the victims of female genital mutilation/female genital cutting (FGM/FGC) and those vices eating the fabric and hunting the future of our people. A 12-year old girl, Tawah, of the Kissi tribe spoke whisperingly in my ears, I still hear her speak slowly in my ears "we're dying of ritual discontent...are we to show of light amid what we're undergoing?" with tears rolling down her cheeks. Fellow campaigners, where are we on this, as the case of that little girl and those under hostage as they whispered in our ears for redemption?

Fellow compatriots in this "United Front", please permit me to request of you to reason together and act on "Liberia Today" under the theme: "The danger of harmful traditional practices: a case study on Liberia." Harmful traditional practices of the bodies, ranging from genital to others sacred parts, remain prevalent and/or widespread in many African settings, referencing cultural beliefs of its forefathers or forebears purposely to uphold "ancestral obligations".

Knowingly, FGM/FGC are the acts of extracting one of the sensitive parts of the female sexual organ - the clitoris. When removed, it deprives the female of sexual comfort and exposes her to multiple complications.

Until the advent of the dreadful 15 years of a nightmare that badly devastated the essential fabric of our land, the people of Liberia had been living peacefully together, guided by their respective traditions and cultural norms. Naturally, traditional practices are fundamental driving forces of any society as far as life patterns are concerned. It has to do with belief systems of any given people that guide their social lives.

Tradition is a way of life that binds a given people together for one common goal and objective provided its implications are bordered on growth and development. Like in any human domain, the law of Liberia provides a shield for traditional practices of the people. The law more so, provides that the residents and citizens can freely associate, collaborate, and integrate so long as they do so in a peaceful manner and not infringe on the rights of others.

In Liberia, there is a tradition of Christians, Moslems, African Traditional Religion, and all other religious beliefs under whose separate umbrellas people group themselves to serve their "Almighty Creator".

However, there are other traditional practices called Sande, Poro, Zoes & Bodios, and Gbon societies, to name but a few, that are being practiced in other parts of the country. Unless one becomes a member, it is difficult if not impossible to state exactly what each group does and for what reason. However, the Sande practice can be measured given its basic objective of FGM/FGC.

Under the Sande approach, girl children are said to undergo special trainings fashioned to guide them in their matrimonial lives. They also supposedly learn to be obedient as it relates to given societal norms. Undoubtedly, these positive aspects are definitely in line with the rules and regulations of civilization. Civilization is obviously in line with morality. Civilization calls for orderliness and obedience to the standards of society of which decency is required.

However, the FGM/FGC approach under the Sande culture is not scientific, and needs to be vehemently and/or outrightly rejected. Not only is it meaningless in the face of modern time, when bad traditional practices are being revised in several parts of Africa, if not the entire world, it suppresses the feeling and spirits of sex in those who had been initiated under the Sande culture. Already, the governments of the United States of America and the United Kingdom have passed ant-FGM/FGC bills that are laws today. The Sande has no scientific significance and value. It suffered the pinches of the odds, subjecting the girl child to pains and agony through poor indigenous healing methods of different kinds of sharp objects used in the ritual practice. Most of these victims died or get growingly infected with contentious communicable diseases.

With a youthful population after a decade long civil conflict, already 90% carry scars of these harmful bodily practices, particularly FGM/FGC in diverse cultural ways of ethnic approaches for many reasons, as well as visible bodily marks on the back, waist, breast, face, and arms. About 75% of these victims were unknowingly blindfolded, forced and gruesomely initiate into these aged-old ancestral acts of evil without slightly knowing the health and health-related complications going forward. Statistical indicators on Liberia basic accounts four years ago put the prevalence of FGM/FGC in victims between the ages of 15-49 at 58%, while it remains silent on the most vulnerable group, the children under the age of 15 years. Howbeit, the unofficial percentage of this categorized group stands at 32%.

FGM/FGC related complications vary, and include:

- i. Urinary tract infection (UTI) with infected womb, tetanus, and transmission of hepatitis or HIV;
- ii. Painful menstrual periods;
- iii. Pain during sexual intercourse and infertility;
- iv. Complicated pregnancy and very high risk of obstetrical problems, which are common with the extensive FGM/FGC procedures. A World Health Organization (WHO) research reveals that 10-20 babies die per every 1000 deliveries, or live births as a result of FGM/FGC;
- v. Based on severity of the performed FGM/FGM, the formation of scars and keloids can lead to structure obstruction and fistula formation of the urinary and genital tracts. Urinary tracts complications include damage to the urethra and bladder with infections; among other consequences that will be experienced.

A practicing Liberian physician, Dr. Torsou Y. Jallah, was quoted in one Liberia daily, FrontPage Africa newspaper, saying: *“I have seen many uncountable cases of FGC. I can recall in 2011 some children who underwent genital cutting were bleeding and rushed to our hospital by police officers, and were taken to the operating room and some stitching was done to stop the bleeding. If fresh tissue is cut and not sewed, the person bleeds, and if so aggressive, the patient could go into shock and die.”*

The girl child continues to undergo these painful paths of violence, and this will remain that way for a longer period in spite of the united campaign in highlighting the sufferings of these bizarre and ridiculous practices that have taken hold of our country this century,

now without any government sanction or perhaps red-flagging, to enact relevant laws to stop this grave societal madness; safeguarding their lives and correspondingly prosecuting perpetrators. This aged-old traditional practice brings pains and makes the livelihood of the girl child very uncomfortable.

A Liberian female broadcaster, herself a victim of the practice, voiced at a book launch: “Breaking my heart daily is the practice of female genital mutilation, otherwise known as FGM, a term that I have labeled personally as the crippling disease, inflicted by human beings in Africa and in my native land Liberia”. In reflection, and for the sole purpose of this unique gathering, the victim herself from Bong County narrated the meaningless life of two scenarios about a girl from Bong and another from Nimba. It read thus:

“Kou is the name of a very beautiful girl born in the eastern mountainous region of Saclepea in Nimba County. Going to college and earning a degree was the biggest dream Kou has been nurturing since birth, following interactions with her peers and women on how important education was for a woman who must survive life’s challenges. That beautiful dream was short-lived when Kou was subjected to FGM which shattered her life forever, and then was married off to a man old enough to be her father, who forbids her to go to school. She complained but her mother who should be helping her reminds her that the very reason she was sent “into the Sande bush” was to prepare her physically for this moment so that she learns to respect her husband, serve him and to never question his decisions about her. Kou has no feeling when her husband sleeps with her and when asked, said it was more of a “duty” to perform than pleasure, something she has never had the luxury to experience.

Yanga hails from the central region of Bong County, where I was born. FGM was done to her at the age of 7 and since then, she turned into a different person. Yanga suffered extremely during delivery, her vaginal walls were ruptured, and left oozing with feces and urine daily. Reports from the midwives state that Yanga suffered enormous tearing, and bled profusely before doctors tried to help. When the bleeding ceased, urine and feces gushed out, leaving behind a terrible stench, worsened by her isolation. If not for the intervention of the Liberia Fistula Project, Yanga would have remained isolated and sick. She has not had a stable relationship because men think that she is strange and not a perfect woman”.

The analogy of this tale revealed, that unlike Kou and Yanga who are still alive gracefully, 11-year-old Gbolue did not survive from the blade in Lofa County in northern Liberia. Several times, she fainted from the infliction of the sharp pain of the raging blade (rusty and unsterilized) leading her to her early demise in agony. The story told to everyone was that she (Gbolue) probably had a “secret sin” that she did not confess, which led to her death, and not the FGM. Yah also died under the blade in Nimba County. The confused father was angry but couldn’t ask what caused her death, as doing so would be questioning the traditional practice handed down by the ancestors. He doesn’t want to be seen as one man opposing what the majority believe is cultural and right. So he suffers silently.

In a few parts of Liberia, the Sande culture is being gradually edged away since modern civilization is gradually making its way into the hinterland. It has to do with schoolings

and other doctrines that have positive impacts on the lives of the people. Remember that out of fifteen counties in Liberia, ten practice FGM/FGC with active passion.

In Nimba County recently, anti-FGM/FGC campaigners and the Sande women clashed when the former threatened to take legal steps against those who are still bent on such cruel practices. Interestingly, the latter, too, threatened to fight back against anyone who tends to destroy what they called “the foundation and belief of our forefathers”.

Regrettably, a frustrated Sande girl remarked: “This culture has no significance in the face of modern time or its role in our body. I regret that I was forced to join. It’s just a waste of time; my children will not join it...”

Liberia remains lagging behind today simply because traditional practices that are counterproductive to growth and development are still being practiced. Most young girls have been traumatized and stigmatized because of this inhumane act. FGM/FGC is totally evil and demeaning, another form of cultural violence because women and girls whose clitorises are cut-off are being deprived of their sexual right/satisfaction as stated above. It is bad, wicked, and inhumane to women and girls. It makes them vulnerable to diseases and virus.

But in contrast, Mama Tormah, executive director for culture and female affairs at the Ministry of Internal Affairs and head of all female zones in Liberia is quoted in the March 2012 FrontPage Africa newspaper publication as saying “girls should at least be the age of consent of 18, old enough to reason well and fully understand what they are going into when they enter the bush”. She continued: “People should join the Sande of their own free will, but underage children – no one should carry them anywhere”. This is however, contrary to the happenings behind the scene.

## **Conclusion**

By and large, the Sande culture does not bear any relevance as it relates to the pressing needs of the young women of Liberia. Young women need appropriate and compulsory education that will make them serviceable in their marriage lives and contribute to the development of their fatherland and motherland. It is only formal ‘western’ education and skills trainings that will make them competitors to men in the developing society, and not the so-called Sande approach. Gone are the days when such tradition had its cultural relevance. Here are the days where Liberia needs to grow in line with scientific practices.

As the fight continues, fellow campaigners have been forced to discontinue the advocacy to the odd nature of society and the growing perceptions of traditional leaders and their accomplices in the practice. Our remarks today are signaling increasing threats of discourse to mob justice, traditional and ritual consequences in silencing the voices of these rights campaigners.

I hope we can muster the courage of bitterness in our girl child, be allowed to return under clear indications to begin a reform of transforming the gruesome practices of this ‘troubling’ FGM/FGC to these suffering girls, restore their dignity and thus end their

pains. For this cause, we went into hiding for several days as we intensify our campaign quest against this inhumane practice.

Regrettably, two of my colleagues are not with us; and their continuous whereabouts remains unknown when we all went into hiding several days ago. I brave the storm to be here as we tirelessly champion this cause together under an abnormal condition. Let's keep them in our hearts as we go through this fight and hope they join us from their hideouts.

It can be recalled that gender rights activist and journalist, Mae Azango of the independent *FrontPage Africa* newspaper and New Narratives went into hiding and was condemned to death threats by traditionalists as she fearlessly conducted and took head-on a comprehensive insight of the practice, looking beyond the sacred curtains. The journalist in her report justified her reportage to the plight of her fellow Liberians regarding the post-health condition associated with the FGM/FGC.

A fortnight ago in Grand Cape Mount County in western Liberia, a man was severely flogged on orders of traditional authorities for speaking to “strangers” on sacred issues as well as a narrow escape from abduction of three teen girls of initiation in parts of Bong County. The threats associated with advocacy to abolish this global imperative FGM/FGC is getting more dangerous each day. You often get intimidated by comments such as:

- STOP! This is a national cause, this is our own and not one from the white man. They have their gay and lesbian practices, forbidden in our land. Let them go and stop that before preaching and demonizing to our culture left behind by our parents...
- This is a taboo not to be discussed openly in public.

But in a “United Front” we ought to prevail and overcome, as a chorus in the lyrics of the old American song stated thus: “We shall overcome, we shall overcome some day”.

In this manner, we are calling on the Government of Liberia (GoL) to enact legislation(s) prohibiting the practice of FGM/FGC and other bodily practices harmful to the human person, with violators or abusers arraigned before a court of competence jurisdiction to answer to their crimes. Similarly, as the posturing of “business as usual”, we are appealing to the international community, you our valued partners to seek a meeting of the mind and encourage our government to take a lead way in such a global imperative in stopping the continuous tears of the girl child.

The Government of Liberia appears weak and lacking the political will to act independently, as noticed by comments attributed to Vice President Joseph Nyumah Boakai as openly hailing the practice. Ambassador Boakai is from the Kissi tribe from Lofa County in northern Liberia, one of the heartbeat areas of the practice.

This is a murdering nightmare in the life of women who undergo this FGM/FGC ritual, dismembering a part of the body to suggest that they have become lame physically and psychologically for the rest of their lives if they survive the multiple complications associated with genital cutting. The pain goes on, on, and on. Untold tales of these can

be said year-in, year-out of how the inflictions are going. This ought to stop and to stop now.

We are in this business of advocacy since the last decade plus. Let us fight together to stop FGM/FGC, to give hope and prosperity to our girl children regardless of borders.

Permit me to say that this symposium is quite extraordinary to me, with a challenge in a new frontier for the people: intersex, foreskin, and male circumcision.

Please join me with your support amid the perception of our people. Thank you.

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