

HIGHLIGHTS

# AGAINST MY WILL

**DEFYING** THE PRACTICES  
THAT HARM WOMEN AND  
GIRLS AND UNDERMINE  
EQUALITY

WOMEN

to nis am

Mbola te hianatra

da se

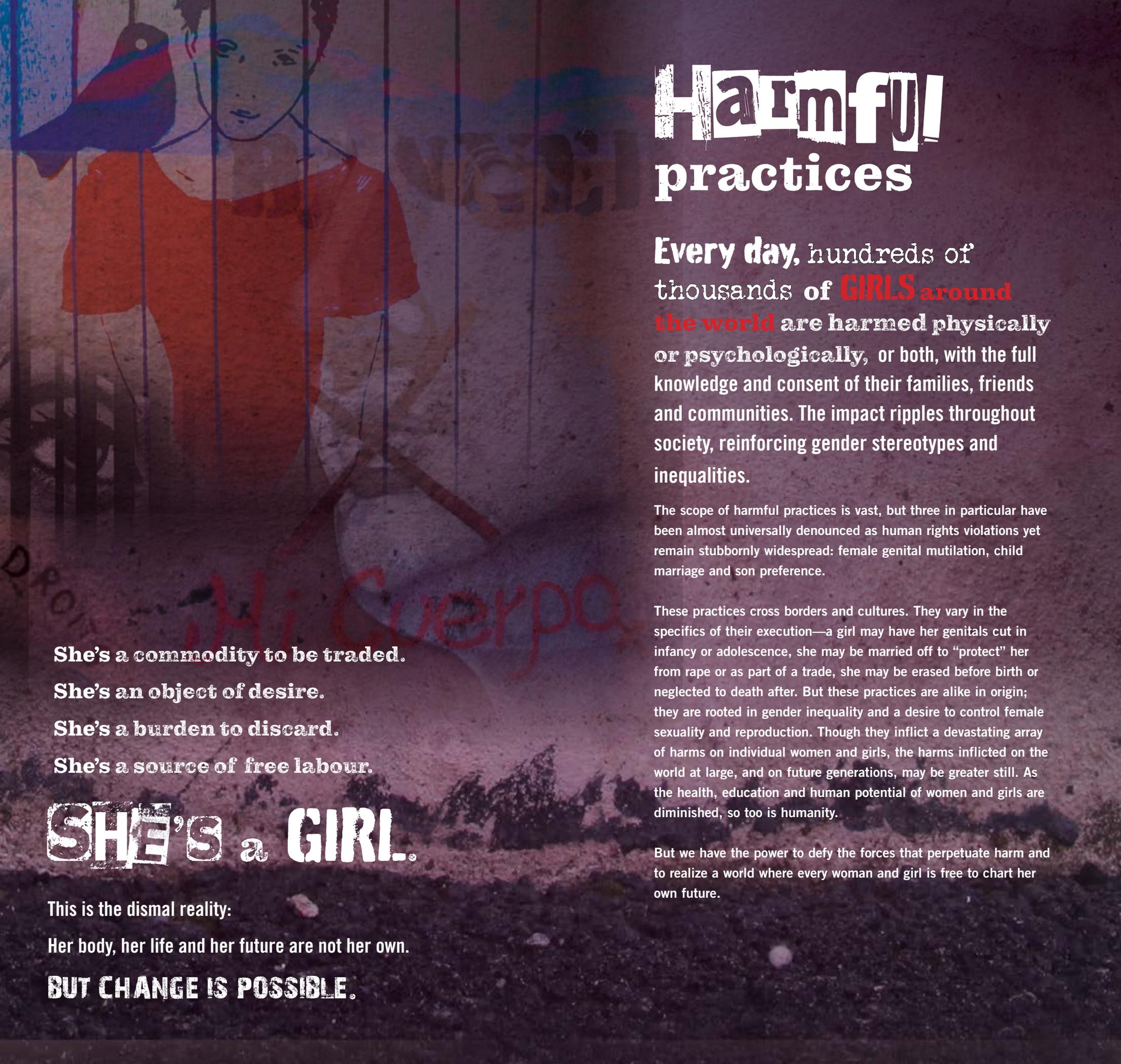
da m

lay nangahy no tady non  
hely menahikana anay, mianakavy iso

any trano, sabin'ny mianakavy  
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STATE OF WORLD POPULATION 2020



# Harmful practices

**Every day**, hundreds of thousands of **GIRLS** around the world are harmed physically or psychologically, or both, with the full knowledge and consent of their families, friends and communities. The impact ripples throughout society, reinforcing gender stereotypes and inequalities.

The scope of harmful practices is vast, but three in particular have been almost universally denounced as human rights violations yet remain stubbornly widespread: female genital mutilation, child marriage and son preference.

These practices cross borders and cultures. They vary in the specifics of their execution—a girl may have her genitals cut in infancy or adolescence, she may be married off to “protect” her from rape or as part of a trade, she may be erased before birth or neglected to death after. But these practices are alike in origin; they are rooted in gender inequality and a desire to control female sexuality and reproduction. Though they inflict a devastating array of harms on individual women and girls, the harms inflicted on the world at large, and on future generations, may be greater still. As the health, education and human potential of women and girls are diminished, so too is humanity.

But we have the power to defy the forces that perpetuate harm and to realize a world where every woman and girl is free to chart her own future.

**She's a commodity to be traded.**

**She's an object of desire.**

**She's a burden to discard.**

**She's a source of free labour.**

**SHE'S a GIRL.**

This is the dismal reality:

Her body, her life and her future are not her own.

**BUT CHANGE IS POSSIBLE.**

# FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION

Cut, SCRAPED, SEITCHED

Female genital mutilation, FGM, is the partial or total removal of the female external genitalia or other injury to female genital organs for non-medical reasons.

**It takes place in every region of the world, affecting 200 million women and girls alive today.**

It violates women's and girls' rights to health, to bodily integrity, to be free from discrimination and cruel or degrading treatment. It can even kill her.

Yet it persists, grounded in the misguided belief that it improves fertility, enhances sexual pleasure for men, suppresses female sexuality, complies with religious demands or results in acceptance by the community. It is performed to uphold a girl's purity, honour and cleanliness, to make her more marriageable.

# CHILD MARRIAGE

PROMISED, GIVEN, TRADED, SOLD

When a girl is married, her schooling usually ends. Childbearing begins. She is made more vulnerable to pregnancy-related death, and to domestic violence. Doors to the future slam shut.

Child marriages are almost universally banned, yet they happen 33,000 times a day, every day, all around the world.

**An estimated 650 million girls and women alive today were married as children.**

Parents justify marrying girls early as a way to secure their economic futures, or they may regard daughters as an economic commodity and a way of settling familial debts or disputes. Some parents believe early marriage will safeguard their daughters from sexual violence, allocating responsibility for their daughter's safety to her husband and his family. The fact that her husband may be a source of sexual violence is seldom considered. Families increasingly resort to child marriage in times of crisis and displacement.

But the basis of this tradition is usually the desire to preserve a girl's virginity for her husband, regarding her body as an object for his possession and use.

# SON PREFERENCE

UNWANTED, NEGLECTED, ERASED

When boys are more highly valued than girls, pressure to have a son can be intense. Couples may go to great lengths to avoid giving birth to a girl (gender-biased sex selection), or they may fail to care for the health and well-being of a daughter they already have in favour of their son (postnatal sex selection).

Son preference is not new, but the trend towards smaller families is. Most women today have three children or fewer; fewer children means fewer chances to have a son. About a quarter of all parents with two girls may resort to gender-biased sex selection to avoid the birth of a third girl.

**Today, it is estimated that more than 140 million females are missing as a consequence of son preference.**

The practice can result in coerced or forced abortions for pregnant women; abandonment or exclusion of women who give birth to girls; and poorer nutrition, inadequate education and fewer inoculations for girls.

In some countries, rampant son preference has distorted the sex-ratio balance of entire populations, leaving men without partners and exacerbating gender-based violence.

## OPPOSITION IS BUILDING

The international community overwhelmingly agrees these harmful practices cannot be tolerated. Decades of international treaties and other instruments have called for governments, communities and individuals to end them.

And the tide is turning, with more and more individuals learning about the harms caused by these practices. In the last two decades, in countries with high FGM prevalence, the proportion of girls and women who want the practice to stop has doubled. Evidence from around the world shows that when girls are given the power to make an informed choice about marriage, they marry later. Globally, messages about human rights, girls' empowerment and gender equality are convincing parents to keep their daughters in school.

But this progress is not enough. Because of population growth, the number of girls subjected to harm is actually growing. And the most effective solutions to these harmful practices—raising the value of girls and securing gender equality—are also the most elusive.

## THE PATH FORWARD

There are clear steps that countries and communities can take to end harmful practices. Laws banning harmful practices are one important measure, but they are just a starting point.

Engaging the most-affected communities can help prevent harmful practices from continuing in the shadows. National action plans can bring together communities, local and religious leaders, and service providers, ensuring broad support and buy-in.

And there must be efforts to change minds. Programmes to change social norms can and are effective in eliminating harmful practices, but they must not focus narrowly on just these practices. Rather, they should address the broader issues at play, including the subordinate position of women and girls, their human rights, and how to elevate their status and access to opportunities.

Governments have a key responsibility: Countries can empower national women's institutions, implement governance mechanisms such as women's ministries and gender focal points, and work towards removing discriminatory legislation. Public health, education and other institutions also have a role to play.

But there is no "magic bullet". We need to accelerate our efforts, increase our investments and redouble our commitments. We cannot stop until the rights, choices and bodies of all girls are fully their own.

# COVID-19 PANDEMIC HEIGHTENS RISKS

The State of World Population Report 2020 was developed during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today, as the report is released, there is little data about how the ongoing pandemic is affecting the exercise of harmful practices around the world. But there are some certainties: First, programmes designed to end child marriage and FGM are facing serious delays in implementation. Second, pandemic-related economic disruptions are increasing the vulnerability of girls to negative coping mechanisms, including these harmful practices.

Already, UNFPA is receiving initial reports of increases in FGM and child marriage in some communities. While these accounts are provisional, they support an analysis conducted by UNFPA, Avenir Health, Johns Hopkins University (USA) and Victoria University (Australia) in April 2020, which estimated the potential consequences of pandemic-related disruptions on both of these harmful practices.

If the pandemic causes a two-year delay in FGM prevention programmes, researchers projected that 2 million FGM cases could occur over the next decade that would otherwise have been averted.

If the pandemic causes a one-year average delay in interventions to end child marriage, considered a conservative estimate, some 7.4 million more child marriages are projected to occur over the next decade that otherwise could have been averted. In addition, the pandemic-caused economic downturn is projected to result in an estimated 5.6 million additional child marriages taking place between 2020 and 2030. The total effect of the COVID-19 pandemic is therefore projected to result in 13 million additional child marriages.



ENSURING RIGHTS AND CHOICES FOR ALL

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