A GUIDANCE NOTE on Alternative Rites of Passage and Cultural Practices for Adolescents and Young People in East and Southern Africa - A UNFPA ESARO Programmatic Guidance Note
United Nations Population Fund
Delivering a world where
every pregnancy is wanted
every childbirth is safe and
every young person’s
potential is fulfilled

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ASRHR  Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
CSE    Comprehensive Sexuality Education
CSO    Civil Society Organization
ESA    East and Southern Africa
FGM    Female Genital Mutilation
HIV    Human Immunodeficiency Virus
LME    Labia Minora Elongation
OECD   Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
SBCC   Social and Behaviour Change Communication
SRHR   Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
STIs   Sexually Transmitted Infections
SYP    Safeguard Young People Programme
UN     United Nations
UNFPA  United Nations Population Fund
WHO    World Health Organization

DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMINOLOGY

Alangizi The guardians of cultural traditions, such as chiefs, headpersons, and others, such as the initiators during chinamwali, in Zambia.
Chinamwali Female initiation practices observed by the Chewa people in Zambia and Malawi (and Mozambique, although not discussed in this document). Also called Chisungu.
Chisungu Female initiation practices observed in ESA; also called Chinamwali.
Cindakula The second of two adolescent female rites of passage, which takes place after menses and msondo in some parts of eastern Malawi.
Eswatini Country formerly known as Swaziland.
Female Unless otherwise specified, someone who was assigned female at birth and who also identifies as female (cisgender).
### Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

As defined by the WHO,\(^1\) “all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons.”

### Fisi

Term translating to “hyena” in English; can be used to describe the adolescent sexual cleansing ritual in Malawi and/or the adult man who is paid to have sex with young girls who have completed the ritual. A *fisi* may also be hired to be part of other rites throughout a life cycle, all of which involve that person (always male) having sex with a girl or woman.\(^2\)

### Intonjane

Xhosa rite of passage for girls practiced in the Eastern Cape of South Africa.

### Jando

Circumcision performed on a penis.

### Kudonza

The practice of pulling on the labia minora during adolescence in an effort to elongate them (labia minora elongation).

### Kwendziswa

The practice of marrying an underage girl to an older man.

### LME

Labia Minora Elongation, a practice of pulling the labia minora to elongate them, also known as *malepe* or *kudonza*.

### Lebollo la banna

Initiation ceremonies for boys in Lesotho.

### Lebollo la basadi

Initiation ceremonies for girls in Lesotho.

### Male

Unless otherwise specified, someone who was assigned male at birth and who also identifies as male (cisgender).

### Malepe

Labia that have been elongated through LME.

### Menarche

Used to describe the first menstrual period.

### Msondo

In some parts of eastern Malawi, the first of two female adolescent initiation rites, which takes place before menarche and *cindakula*, and is designed to break the hymen by inserting a boiled egg into the vagina.

### Ngaliba

Male initiation official at boys’ *Jando* initiation.

### Olufuko

Adolescent initiation rite for girls in Namibia.

### Spermarche

Refers to when sperm production and nocturnal emissions begin.

### Traditional circumcision

Circumcision performed on a penis in a non-clinical setting by a traditional provider who has no formal medical training.

### Ulwaluko

Xhosa adolescent male rite of passage.

### Virginity testing

The practice of determining whether a hymen is intact, and consequently attributing or removing virginity status; does not consider other ways of hymenal perforation.

### Vukhomba

The adolescent initiation rite for girls in Botswana.

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\(^1\) The close in age defense, also called the Romeo and Juliet clause, is built into statutory rape laws. These laws address situations in which two individuals who are close in age of which one or both are not yet of age, engage in consensual sexual relations. The age difference allowed by the Romeo and Juliet clause varies by state, though it is generally not more than five years.

INTRODUCTION

There are currently 1.2 billion adolescents in the world between the ages of 15 and 19. Adolescence is a period of great growth and development. It is also a time when life experiences can have a significant and lasting impact on a young person’s future, both positive and negative.

Adolescence, which typically refers to the developmental period when youth begin to transition from childhood to adulthood, is simultaneously a biological construct that marks the experience of puberty, and a social construct representing the ways in which cultures around the world respond to young people during this time. During adolescence, young people are learning how to be in community with others in ways that are more mature than what they have been experiencing in earlier childhood. They are learning to strengthen friendships in preparation for more mature relationships. They are learning about culture, gender and family and what will be expected of them in adulthood.

Adolescence is also a time of great vulnerability. Human rights violations, particularly sexuality-related abuses, are still far too prevalent. Gender-based violence, child marriage and sexually-based adolescent initiation practices threaten the health and development of far too many young people worldwide. In partnership with young people, and with national and international organizations, UNFPA assists countries to identify and implement policies and programmes to secure the health, development and human rights of young people.

UNFPA-ESARO remains strongly committed to supporting the positive development of young people in East and Southern Africa (ESA), as reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that were adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015. Young people make up the largest and fastest growing proportion of the general population in the 21 countries that make up ESA. Approximately 32 per cent of the 521 million people who live in ESA are between the ages of 10 and 24. Unless otherwise specified, this document uses the World Health Organization’s definition of adolescence as youth between the ages of 10 and 19.

An impediment to this supportive work is the impact that some of the adolescent rites of passage have on young people in communities throughout ESA. Although the intention behind many rites of passage is to educate young people about their cultures, as well as their roles and responsibilities in adulthood, a number of practices directly contradict several SDGs. Some contradict agreed-upon statements acknowledging and supporting human rights and adolescent rights. Some rites of passage impede young people’s access to education; contradict the region’s shared commitment to gender equality and equal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights; and threaten the collective goal of promoting overall health and well-being for adolescents. When one SDG is impacted, others are as well. Girls who become pregnant as teenagers are less likely to complete their education; with less education, they are less likely to secure a self-sustaining job; without a well-paying job, they become dependent upon a marriage and can become susceptible to being trapped in an unhealthy and even abusive relationship. When boys are told they can only be a certain type of man in order to prove their masculinity, they often behave in ways that perpetuate toxic masculinity and gender inequality.

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PURPOSE OF THE GUIDANCE DOCUMENT

This guidance note describes the dominant adolescent rites of passage and initiation ceremonies in four countries in the Southern African region - Malawi, Eswatini, South Africa and Zambia. UNFPA-ESARO chose to focus on these four countries because they are implementing countries of the Safeguard Young People Programme (SYP). SYP was developed in 2013 to scale up comprehensive interventions in ESA for young people ages 10 to 24 to protect themselves from STIs (including HIV), early and unintended pregnancy, unsafe abortion, early marriage, gender-based violence and harmful cultural practices, while promoting gender-equitable norms. These countries, therefore, as part of their participation in SYP, have already begun to acknowledge some of the negative physical, social, emotional and psychological impacts of certain adolescent initiation practices and have undertaken a review of their rites of passage. In some cases, they have begun implementing programmatic and policy changes.

UNFPA-ESARO’s goal in this guidance document is to raise additional awareness about those practices that are limiting young people’s potential and, in some cases, harming them physically, socially and emotionally. It provides guidance as to how countries and communities can work in partnership to honour and maintain cultural traditions and values while protecting young people’s health and well-being.

WHO IS THIS GUIDANCE DOCUMENT FOR?

This document is directed towards a range of stakeholders who are either working with youth or who are interested in the welfare and positive development of adolescents and youth in East and Southern Africa. The primary audiences are non-governmental and civil society organizations working with young people in the four priority countries, including traditional, community and religious leaders, as well as policymakers. Because of the many similarities in practices in this region (see below), this guidance note can be used by professionals, key stakeholders and community members throughout ESA.

Selected total results in numbers as at December 2018

- 5,033 youth network members, with a target of 5,000 in Phase 2, were trained in advocacy for SRHR and youth development.
- 26,894 teachers trained in CSE, with Phase 2 having a target of 20,000.
- 10.5 million young people reached with various SBCC/CSE programmes against targets of 3 million and 6 million for Phase 1 and Phase 2 respectively.
- 7,297 pre-service and in-service providers trained in adolescent/youth friendly health services delivery. The target over the two phases was 5,000.
- 4,159,596 adolescents and young people reached with SRH and HIV services against a total target of 3.5 million over the two phases.
- 1,765 health service delivery points offering standard package of adolescent/youth friendly health services against targets of 350 and 750 for Phase 1 and Phase 2 respectively.
UNFPA-ESARO recognizes that young people have rights, and as such, need to be informed of these rights, and benefit from the protections afforded by them.

The most fundamental right of an adolescent is to be able to grow from adolescence into adulthood in ways that support them in fulfilling their greatest potential. Adolescent rights are key to ensuring young people have opportunities that will enable them to continue to strengthen their countries’ culture and economy. They are the most important investment any country can make. Yet adolescents face many risks as they navigate their lives - unemployment and economic exclusion, unintended pregnancies, high maternal deaths, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and gender-based violence.

In particular, UNFPA-ESARO remains committed to the principle that adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights (ASRHR) are core to adolescents’ ability to achieve their full potential. Having the right to choose whether or when or how one’s body should be altered through circumcision or other practices; whether or when to enter into a sexual relationship; whether, when and to whom to get married, and whether and when to become parents provides the bodily and social autonomy that are the cornerstones of strong community members. Strong communities create strong countries. It stands to reason, therefore, that organizations working in ESA should support the overall physical, psychological and emotional health and well-being of a group that represents the future population and leadership of the area. Currently, however, ASRHR in ESA are limited by some of the adolescent rites of passage being practised in the region.

GUIDING PRINCIPLE: ADOLESCENT RIGHTS

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PROGRAMMING PRINCIPLES

Recommendations for the programming principles for this guidance document are informed by the UNFPA strategic plan 2018-2021:

to “achieve universal access to sexual and reproductive health, realize reproductive rights, and reduce maternal mortality to...improve the lives of women, adolescents and youth, enabled by population dynamics, human rights and gender equality”.

They are also informed by the key principles of the 2030 Agenda, including:

(a) the protection and promotion of human rights;
(b) the prioritization of leaving no one behind and reaching the furthest behind first;
(c) strengthening cooperation and complementarity among development, humanitarian action and sustaining peace;
(d) reducing risks and vulnerabilities and building resilience;
(e) ensuring gender-responsive approaches at all levels of programming; and
(f) a commitment to improving accountability, transparency and efficiency.

Any changes to programmes, policies and practices need to be done at the country, state and local levels. These principles can be used to inform those practices.


KEY OBJECTIVES

The key objectives of this guidance note are:
• To increase community awareness of the negative impacts of many of the adolescent initiation practices in ESA;
• To support country, state and local offices and organizations in assessing which practices support the rights and well-being of adolescents, and which perpetuate gender inequality;
• To support country, state and local offices and organizations in identifying alternatives to these rites, as well as individual practices that should be discontinued;
• To ensure that any changes to adolescent initiation practices are enacted within the legal, political, social, economic and cultural contexts of each country.

This guidance note acknowledges the sensitivities that accompany analysing and proposing alternatives to cultural practices in any country or community. The categorization of various initiation rites or aspects of these rites as having negative impacts is based on the current and available research relating to how the youth experience them. This note summarizes the most commonly documented practices but does not cover the full extent of practices, nor the ways in which individual communities have been making adjustments according to local custom.
Adolescent rites of passage exist in and are valued by virtually every community in every African country. These rites, which can differ from community to community and country to country, are designed to mark the transition from childhood to adulthood. This is most commonly done by offering a ceremony, ritual or other experience that is intended to either prepare young people for the roles and responsibilities of adulthood or simply officially declare that the young person is now an adult. These rites of passage are valued deeply by the cultures observing them and are key to passing down cultural, social, and sometimes religious teachings and traditions – including about gender, relationships and sexuality.

Most societies use biological markers such as menarche and spermarche to signal readiness to participate in adolescent initiation rites of passage. In these situations, completion of initiation ceremonies is also considered an indicator of readiness for marriage, regardless of the initiate’s age. Adolescent initiation rites in the ESA region share similar traits, particularly in the southern and western parts as follows:

- Adolescents receive strong pressure to go through initiation rites, and there can be serious social consequences for those who do not.
- Adolescent initiates are separated by gender, based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Gender role-stereotypical expectations are emphasized and reinforced.
- Initiates are secluded from the rest of the community in single-gender groups.8,9,10

- Heterosexuality is expected, particularly for boys.
- Lessons about sex and sexuality are an important part of most of the rituals, including lessons about how to please a partner11 within the context of marriage (although the latter depends on gender). Since it is generally considered taboo to speak about sexuality, the ceremonies create a space in which sexuality can be spoken about freely.12,13 At the same time, the extent of the lessons is limited and the accuracy of what is shared is inconsistent.
- Boys are circumcised, but not all girls undergo FGM. Male circumcision is emphasized in part because of cultural values, and partly as a component of a country’s HIV reduction strategy. Infliction of pain is more characteristic of ceremonies for boys, as is the pressure to endure the pain without crying or complaint as a means of displaying masculinity.14,15 Boys who are circumcised medically in hospitals may not be considered “real men” because they did not learn to tolerate pain.16 Men who undergo circumcision are seen as being dominant over women and uncircumcised men.17 Some girls are subjected to virginity testing, which can include a physical examination to determine whether the girl’s hymen is intact, or intense questioning every month during menses.18,19
- Shaving of the head, arms, legs, genitals, regardless of gender, is common but not universal.20
- Either a single adult or group of adults is charged with the initiation ceremony and their specific roles

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8 Ibid.
12 Kangwa, “Reclaiming the values of indigenous female initiation rites as a strategy for HIV prevention” (see footnote 9).
13 Warna, “Girls’ innocence and futures stolen” (see footnote 2).
14 Siweya, Sodi, & Douglas, “The notion of manhood embedment” (see footnote 10).
In Namibia, girls’ adolescent initiation rites, *Olufuko*, are connected with a festival, which has received outside scrutiny over the years and been criticized because of the enactment of adolescent girls as brides. In 2014, former president Hifikepunye Pohamba opened the festival by emphasizing that the desire to re-enact cultural traditions and the country’s history should not interfere with the girls’ futures. Specifically, he emphasized that the girls should a) complete their education; b) should not consider participating in the adolescent initiation rites as encouragement to engage in shared sexual behaviours; and c) that adolescents should not mistake the adult-like enactments of the initiation to result in the initiates participating in more adult-like behaviours.

Approximately 1 in 4 boys are circumcised by traditional providers in their community; others may be circumcised medically by a provider as part of the country’s male circumcision policy on HIV prevention, which emphasizes neonatal circumcision in addition to circumcision at other ages.

In Lesotho, the main practice for initiating adolescent boys is *Lebollo la banna*. Boys receive extensive instruction on tribal songs and customs, as well as in sexuality, and experience circumcision. They are, as in other communities, isolated for anywhere from a few weeks to a few months. School is prioritized more for boys than for girls, and so *Lebollo la banna* tends to take place during school breaks. Girls’ initiation is called *Lebollo la basadi*, and features lessons from family members as well as attending an initiation school. Although *Lebollo la basadi* translates in English to “circumcision of women,” girls are not circumcised in Lesotho. They are encouraged to participate in labia pulling or LME, discussed later.

In Botswana, boys’ initiation focuses on circumcision, while girls are sent to initiation schools. As in other countries, rites of passage for boys in Botswana are carried out in secret, and the social pressure to participate has historically been strong. Traditionally, a man who never experienced initiation or circumcision is considered a boy, regardless of his age. *Vukhomba*, the rite of passage for girls, is traditionally found in northern South Africa (especially the Limpopo province), as well as in neighbouring Botswana and Zimbabwe.

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21 J. Kangwa, “Reclaiming the values of indigenous female initiation rites as a strategy for HIV prevention” (see footnote 9).
22 Sotewu, “A visual narrative reflecting on upbringing of Xhosa girls with special reference to ‘intonjane’” (see footnote 11).
24 Sotewu, “A visual narrative reflecting on upbringing of Xhosa girls with special reference to ‘intonjane’” (see footnote 11).
ADOLESCENT RITES OF PASSAGE IN MALAWI, ESWATINI, SOUTH AFRICA AND ZAMBIA

In the four priority countries, Malawi, Eswatini, Zambia and South Africa, youth are a significant part of the population. Of the 17.6 million people currently living in Malawi, approximately half are under the age of 18. More than 46 per cent of the Malawian population is aged 15 or younger. Eighty-five per cent of the population live in rural areas where they practise a range of initiation ceremonies.

Eswatini has a total population of 1.4 million. Youth comprise more than half of the total population of Eswatini, 37 per cent of whom are ages 14 and younger. Eswatini has the highest prevalence of HIV in the world, which has resulted in more than 70 per cent of adolescents between the ages of 15-17 to be orphaned or categorized as “vulnerable.”

As of 2018, the estimated total population for Zambia is 18 million, 44 per cent of whom are under the age of 15. The median age of the population is 16.8 years.

Of the 58 million people living in South Africa, approximately 18.5 per cent (roughly 10.3 million) are aged 10-19. All four priority countries discussed in this document have a near equal gender balance of male and female populations.

Eswatini

The most commonly documented initiation rites still being practised are lisango and liguma, during which younger men sit with older men, and younger girls with older women, to receive wisdom and advice. Lisango and liguma are designed to reinforce gender roles, responsibilities and status between boys and girls. Girls are expected to remain abstinent until marriage, although once they reach age 18, they are allowed to engage in non-intercourse shared sexual behaviours. Boys and young men are taught what it means to be a responsible leader, and girls and young women are taught to be more submissive and to be a good wife and daughter-in-law. In the past, Eswatini’s male initiation rites included circumcision; in recent years, circumcision has been connected to HIV prevention and transmission reduction efforts.

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33 UNFPA, “State of World Population 2019” (see footnote 25).
34 Ibid.
36 Mavundla et al., “Youth and public policy in Swaziland.”
38 Mavundla et al. “Youth and public policy in Swaziland” (see footnote 30).
Malawi

Rites of passage for girls

Most of the adolescent rites discussed in the available literature focus on the largest ethnic groups: Chewa, Lomwe and the Yao, and therefore cannot be generalized to the entire Malawian population. Initiations tend to be concentrated in the south\(^\text{42,43}\) and in rural communities.\(^\text{44}\)

The most commonly documented practice for girls in Malawi, Chinamwari, includes teaching girls about menstruation, “good morals,” HIV and AIDS and gender roles, as well as labia minora elongation and virginity testing.\(^\text{45}\) Another important part of ethnic Chinamwari is teaching girls how to perform during sex to please their future husbands.\(^\text{36,41}\)

Chinamwari generally lasts anywhere from one week to several weeks. Some of the lessons taught to female initiates include:

- They should not have sex before marriage to avoid pregnancy. Doing so could bring shame on their families, and, if a pregnancy occurs, could put their health at risk both during the pregnancy and during childbirth.
- They should avoid associating with girls who have not yet undergone an initiation rite.
- They should not eat eggs as this could affect their fertility in the future.
- They should avoid entering their parents’ bedroom.\(^\text{48}\)

Some girls do not go to an initiation camp, but instead are sent to an aunt or other adult female relative for instruction on how to be an adult woman.\(^\text{49,50}\)

During the initiation, the songs that accompany the sex-stimulating dances are filled with sexual innuendos and explicit language. The girls dance naked and anyone who pays a small fee is allowed to touch the breasts of any girl.\(^\text{51}\) Historically, adolescent girls who have completed initiation are to have sex with an older man (a fisi or “hyena”) to demonstrate what they learned.\(^\text{52}\) The fisi is paid to have (usually unprotected) vaginal sex with initiates to determine whether they have learned all they need to learn.\(^\text{53,54}\) After her sexual experience with the fisi, a girl is considered to be an adult. Although Malawi outlawed the fisi practice in 2013, many girls still report being told they need to have unprotected sex with a fisi at the end of their initiation experiences.\(^\text{36}\)

Initiation rites in the eastern and southern regions of Malawi are usually done before (msondo) and after (chindakula) menarche. Msondo involves inserting a boiled egg into the vagina to break the hymen. Chindakula includes teaching girls how to move their bodies sexually in order to please their future husbands.\(^\text{37}\)

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\(^{48}\) Malawi, HRC Cultural practices and their impact on the enjoyment of human rights (see footnote 48).

\(^{49}\) Ahmed, “Confronting a sexual rite of passage in Malawi” (see footnote 42).

\(^{50}\) Ahmed, “Confronting a sexual rite of passage in Malawi” (see footnote 47).

\(^{51}\) Malawi, HRC Cultural practices and their impact on the enjoyment of human rights (see footnote 48).

\(^{52}\) Ahmed, “Confronting a sexual rite of passage in Malawi” (see footnote 42).

\(^{53}\) Malawi, HRC Cultural practices and their impact on the enjoyment of human rights (see footnote 48).


\(^{56}\) Hauchard, “In Malawi, the horrors of a sexual initiation camp for young Girls” (footnote 23).

Rites of passage for boys

Malawi is generally considered to be a non-circumcising country, although traditional circumcision has a long history in specific ethnic groups, such as the Yao. Historically, Yao boys have been circumcised in isolation, and when they return to the community are seen as men. More recently, circumcision has been emphasized to reduce HIV and other STIs.

The circumcision practice differs from one locality to another; in some areas, the frenulum is cut; in other areas, all of the foreskin is removed using a knife. In other areas, the initiation ceremony leader, or Ngoliba, uses his fingernails to remove the foreskin. Unlike surgical circumcision, neither these nor other community-based circumcisions are designed, nor have they been documented, to reduce the risk of HIV transmission. The initiation lasts for an average of four weeks or longer, in part to let the circumcision sores heal. Language used during the initiation rite is sexually explicit, as the initiation content focuses on sex and sexuality. The morning after the ceremony, the graduate initiates are shaved and bathed in the river, after which they are treated to a celebratory feast and given new names as a symbolic change of status as adults who are to be respected by the society. Boys are encouraged to have sex at the conclusion of the initiation since they are considered men.

The initiation ceremony includes learning basic information about girls, such as when they should not have sex with a woman (during her period, or after she has given birth or terminated a pregnancy), and the boys are taught more general life lessons, such as not to fear dead bodies and to start attending funerals, to respect their elders, and to take care of the sick and the aged.

South Africa

Rites of passage for girls

Intonjane is a practice among the Xhosa people that begins with menarche. As with other rites of passage, girls are secluded from their communities; during this time they learn about their bodies, hygiene, menstruation and more. At the end, there is an elaborate celebration with dancing, singing and offering of gifts to the initiates’ ancestors. Initiation ceremonies are often done at “initiation schools,” and young people say they often feel pressured to attend in order to show their respect for the traditional authority.

Rites of passage for boys

Adolescent initiation rites of passage for boys take place in initiation schools. Some schools are run by trained leaders, and some are bogus and maintained by individuals seeking to make money off of unsuspecting parents. Over the years, there has been documentation of several hundred boys who have been injured or have died because of the unsanitary, unsafe conditions in which traditional circumcision was performed. Ulwaluko, traditional circumcision and initiation into manhood, requires boys to demonstrate their knowledge and skills.
strength, toughness, and willingness to take risks. The emphasis on these stereotypically masculine traits is designed to set young men up for the expectation of protecting their family and being contributing members of their community. There is a corresponding push to reject all things feminine.\textsuperscript{72} Circumcision is an important part of the initiation process so the boys can officially transition from childhood to manhood.\textsuperscript{73} Circumcised men in South Africa are expected to take on greater social responsibility in their communities, acting as negotiators in family disputes, weighing decisions more carefully and cooperating with elders.\textsuperscript{74,75,76} They are given gifts at the conclusion of initiation/circumcision from the circumcision camps to represent that they are now men who are capable of receiving property independently, without any involvement from parents.\textsuperscript{77,78}

\section*{Zambia}

\subsection*{Rites of passage for girls}

Zambia, like Malawi, has a significant population of Chewa people, and so the adolescent female rite of passage ceremony for girls is also Chinese or Chisungu. Wali is the girls’ puberty ritual, which is designed to “turn girls into women.”\textsuperscript{79,80} A focus in Zambia among the Chewa is related to the power of menstrual blood, which is considered sacred. While a girl menstruates, her parents are to abstain from sex. Once menses is completed, girls receive instruction about how to manage menstruation and participate in rituals involving stories, dancing and songs.\textsuperscript{81} Menstrual blood is believed to be connected to witchcraft and there is a perception that coming into contact with it could lead to infertility, hence it is handled very cautiously. The initiate is also taught that sexual intercourse should not take place during menstruation and that a menstruating woman should neither cook for others nor put salt on her food.\textsuperscript{82}

The initiation is designed to teach the girls about the essential roles of women and to formally introduce the girls to adult life and reproduction. There are lessons on portraying good behaviour towards parents, neighbours and elderly people. There are also teachings that portray negative role models not to be emulated by women. The lessons are delivered through song, dance and the handing down of sacred marriage emblems.\textsuperscript{83}

Initiates are taught by adult alangizi how to have sex by showing them how they should move during sexual activity. After the three-month period, they are sent to an older man in the community to demonstrate what they learned. If they were not sufficiently well trained in the eyes of the tester, they have to return for additional training.\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{70} Nkosi, “Agenda: Empowering women for gender equity, No. 75” (see footnote 15).

\textsuperscript{71} Banwari, “Dangerous to mix” (see footnote 17).

\textsuperscript{72} Siweya, Sodi, & Douglas, “The notion of manhood embedment” (see footnote 10).

\textsuperscript{73} Malisha, “Rites of passage to adulthood” (see footnote 68).


\textsuperscript{76} Siweya, Sodi, & Douglas, “The notion of manhood embedment” (see footnote 10).

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{78} Vincent, “Boys will be boys”.


\textsuperscript{82} Kangwa, “Reclaiming the values of indigenous female initiation rites as a strategy for HIV prevention” (see footnote 9).

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.

Among the Bemba people, LME, or expanding the labia through pulling and other methods, is thought to both increase sexual pleasure and to help open up the vagina, which in turn is believed to facilitate future childbirth.\(^{85}\) Some girls organize secret “pulling parties” to assist their friends in this process, which is, according to the women interviewed in the existing research, often rough and painful.\(^{86,87}\) Some girls participate in a form of genital cutting (not FGM), in which they make razor cuts around their genitalia and apply umuthi, a root that creates a pigment to dye the scars made by the cuts. Part of the Chisungu initiation includes inspecting the initiates’ vulvas to see whether they have practised LME.\(^{88}\)

**Rites of passage for boys**

While girls are initiated individually in their village, boys are initiated in groups in the bush. While girls tend to be pampered, boys are challenged to prove their strength and masculinity through more “harsh” activities.\(^{89}\) As in other African countries, the male rite of passage in Zambia is connected specifically to circumcision.

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88 Kangwa, “Reclaiming the values of indigenous female initiation rites as a strategy for HIV prevention” (see footnote 9).
89 Martinez Perez et al, “Labia minora elongation and its implications on the health of women” (see footnote 87).
IMPACTS OF ADOLESCENT INITIATION RITUALS

It is tempting to hone in on altering practices exclusively within the context of HIV and AIDS, due to the disproportionately high incidence in these countries; and indeed, numerous NGOs cite this as a motivation for concern and rationale for proposed changes. At the same time, proposing, for example, that sexual initiation rites can continue as long as a male partner wears a condom, ignores the social and emotional impact on a girl of being forced to have sex with an older man she does not know.

For this reason, it is important to note that adolescent initiation rites have physical, psychological, emotional and social impacts on the initiates. Puberty is a time of significant physical growth; what an adolescent experiences physically can affect their development process. Social and emotional impacts are related to self-esteem, and self-esteem is related to positive sexual decision-making and health outcomes. Socially and emotionally, the positive impacts of adolescent initiation rites help to shape young people’s identities, and give them social standing in their communities. Some girls say they enjoy going through the rites of passage and feel empowered by being regarded as women and by learning about sex and sexuality. At the same time, other girls say participating in rituals that require them to dance partially or fully naked in front of others, or that simply reveal they have reached menarche, make them feel self-conscious and embarrassed.

Clearly, there are some conflicting feelings among community members in all four priority countries on the value and impact of the rites of passage discussed in this document. For example, even with some of the reported physical discomfort that accompanied LME and labial pulling, the practice itself was generally seen as a positive tradition that connected to the girls’ cultural identity. Generally speaking, impacts and outcomes of adolescent rites of passage in ESA are more positive for boys than for girls, where the strong gender role components are designed to keep men strong and women subservient.

Some Zambian women who had undergone malepe said they felt they were more accepted by their partners, relatives, and their community at large. They reported a sense of pride in fulfilling cultural traditions and, as a result, being perceived as ready to take care of their husbands and homes. Related to this was the overall sense of happiness that came from having fulfilled cultural expectations, thereby preserving their country’s history and identity. From a gender rights perspective, this means girls are continuing to be socialized to put others – their future husbands, their families, and their communities – before themselves.
Adolescent initiation practices affect girls and boys differently. The physical risks most commonly acknowledged include:

- Forced and early sexual initiation
- Increased risk of exposure to HIV and other STIs
- Early pregnancies
- Physical harm

**Forced and Early Sexual Initiation**

Boys who participate in an initiation rite are more likely to report early initiation of shared sexual behaviours as opposed to those who had not.\(^{100,101,102}\) Early sexual onset is linked repeatedly in the literature worldwide to negative health outcomes, such as a greater number of sex partners and higher risk for STIs, including HIV, and unintended pregnancy.\(^{103,104,105,106,107,108}\) As discussed earlier, girls, including very young girls, are often required to have sex with a much older man as part of their initiations. In addition to the lack of consent and emotional trauma of this (discussed later), as a girl’s body is developing, she may be more susceptible to certain infections, such as the Human Papilloma Virus. Having an STI puts one at greater risk for contracting other STIs, including HIV.

**HIV Transmission**

Some rituals and traditional cultural practices can also contribute to the transmission of HIV.\(^{109,110}\) For example, a *fisi* does not wear a condom or any other barrier method because it is believed that semen cleanses the female initiate. Since a *fisi* is hand-picked for his moral standing, the community believes he cannot have HIV or any other STIs. The practice places both partners at risk of HIV infection and reinfection. It also models unhealthy gender roles by depriving girls of the right to negotiate and practise safer sex, and affirming that men can choose whether or when to do so.

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\(^{101}\) Munthali and Zulu, “The timing and role of initiation rites in preparing young people for adolescence and responsible sexual and reproductive behaviour in Malawi” (see footnote 47).

\(^{102}\) Pemba, “The changes in the conduct of Yao boys’ initiation ceremonies” (see footnote 63).


\(^{110}\) Munthali & Zulu, “The timing and role of initiation rites in preparing young people for adolescence and responsible sexual and reproductive behaviour in Malawi” (see footnote 47).
Early Pregnancies

Initiation rites involving sexual activity can lead to early pregnancies. Younger mothers tend to have more complicated pregnancies and deliveries, and are at higher risk for miscarriage, obstetric fistula, or even dying. Early pregnancy also carries higher risk for dropping out of school. Without an education, girls’ futures are limited. Young girls living in rural areas may be at higher risk if they are unable to access critical, ongoing medical care due to lack of infrastructure in those areas.

Physical Harm

The greatest concern with boys that has been documented repeatedly in the research is the negative health consequences and risk of infection or death from cultural circumcision. In addition, injuries and dehydration as a result of the initiation camp practices designed to “toughen” the boys have also been reported. For girls, the physical challenges accompanying labial pulling in Zambia include pain, itching, swelling, and difficulty urinating (especially without pain). These were often more pronounced when girls used pegs or herbal stems to clamp the labia as part of the stretching process.

Negative Social, Emotional and Psychological Impacts

Social Impact

As mentioned earlier, the pressure on young people and their families to participate in these initiation rites is significant. In some cases, when a young person chooses not to participate, the social consequences can be severe, including being isolated by fellow members of the community and not being deemed an adult, regardless of age.

Emotional/Psychological Impact

In any culture where people are judged on appearances, the expectation can lead to an obsessive focus on whether one is attractive or capable enough. This can, in turn, lead to a negative self-perception and issues relating to self-esteem and self-efficacy. The adolescent initiation process can contribute to this for adolescents of all genders.

Virginity testing can make girls feel that their families do not trust them. If a girl becomes pregnant, the dominant message is often that marriage should occur immediately and takes precedence over school. If the girl does not marry, she must face the stigma of being an unwed mother. It is also generally believed that returning to school will increase the chances of a girl getting pregnant again, further reducing her options for marriage. Unmarried mothers are stigmatized and lack social standing in many communities, which makes it difficult or impossible for them to return to school.

Girls who do not participate in LME experience fear and shame, which is directed at them by their peers and, in particular, by their future husbands. LME is intrinsically connected to femininity – if one does not have elongated labia, they are not considered feminine, and therefore desirable and worthy. While the fear of being judged may have social and emotional consequences, it can also negatively impact on physical health. Discomfort, fear of judgment and stigma can inhibit girls and women from seeking routine or even emergency gynaecological care.

Initiation rites often require young people to miss school, which can, in turn, put students behind and have an impact on their ability to graduate. This puts their financial futures at risk, as it is far more challenging to land a higher paying job without an education, especially for girls and women.

111 Ahmed, “Confronting a sexual rite of passage in Malawi” (see footnote 42).
113 Labous, “Zambian sex initiators lead revolution for young women” (see footnote 84).
114 Nkosi, “Agenda: Empowering women for gender equity, No. 75” (see footnote 15).
115 Banwari, “Dangerous to mix” (see footnote 17).
116 Kang’ethe, “The panacea and perfidy of cultural rites of circumcision in African countries” (see footnote 19).
118 Warria, ”Girls’ innocence and futures stolen” (see footnote 2).
119 Kamlongera, “What becomes of ‘her’?” (see footnote 57).
120 Malawi, HRC Cultural practices and their impact on the enjoyment of human rights (see footnote 48).
121 Padmanabhanunni et al, “Menstruation experiences of South African women belonging to the ama-Xhosa ethnic group” (see footnote 18).
122 Ekine et al, “Improving learning opportunities and outcomes for girls in Africa” (see footnote 44).
123 Martinez Perez et al, “Labia minora elongation and its implications on the health of women” (see footnote 87).
SEXUAL INITIATION PRACTICES AS HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

Sexual initiation rites are seen by some as hazardous to girls’ and women’s overall health and well-being, and a violation of girls’ and women’s rights to choose a sexual partner, and to say whether and when someone may touch their bodies.125,126,127 It also communicates to boys and men that they have the right to touch a girl or woman or to expect sex based on their own desires, rather than taking into consideration their partners/wives’ needs.

Practices that force girls to have sex with adult men violate those girls’ consent and self-determination, particularly in the context of power inequalities that restrict girls from being able to choose whether they want to participate in these rites. Considering the young age of initiates, some consider the practice of fisi and other sexual initiation rites to be statutory rape.128,129 The long-term emotional consequences of rape and sexual abuse are well-documented around the world.130,131,132 In addition, labial pulling is included in the World Health Organization’s definition of female genital mutilation.133

Not all rites of passage are human rights violations, and not all alternatives currently being proposed reinforce misogyny and gender inequality. In Eswatini, Kwakha Indvodza provides mentoring for boys and young men that discusses sexual rights and responsibilities, as well as gender equity. Their curriculum, Men of Tomorrow, emphasizes the importance of giving and receiving consent, and discusses equality and respect in relationships. In addition, they run a two-night, male-only, age-specific Lihawu Camp that, according to their website (https://www.kwakhaindvodza.com/lishawu-male-mentoring-camp), is “a fun three-day camp, encouraging boys to grow into respectful, responsible and health conscious future leaders in Swaziland. Lihawu Camp uses a combination of traditional Bantu rite of passage ceremony and modern participatory and youth-friendly approaches to promote the Swazi cultural heritage of Ubuntu, male responsibility and health service uptake.”

Further, Part I, Article 5 of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979) charges States Parties, in part:

To modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women.

There is not one adolescent rite of passage reviewed in this guidance document that does not reinforce gender role stereotypes in ESA. However, all four priority countries have ratified the Convention. Therefore, the practices that engender low self-esteem, physically harm the body of a young person of any gender, and/or reinforce harmful gender role stereotypes continue to violate the charge of the Convention.

125 Warria, “Girls’ innocence and futures stolen” (see footnote 2).
126 WLSA Malawi and SARDIC WIDSAA, “Beyond Inequalities 2005: Women in Malawi” (see footnote 93).
127 Malawi, HRC Cultural practices and their impact on the enjoyment of human rights (see footnote 48).
128 Kamlongera, “What becomes of ‘her’?” (see footnote 57).
THEORY OF CHANGE FOR ADOLESCENT INITIATION RITES

Making changes to adolescent initiation rites seems to happen most effectively at the community rather than the country level, although it is clear it needs to happen at both. To be successful in making changes that reflect individual cultural and community norms, it is recommended that community, state and country entities create their own theory of change as a road map to making and sustaining these changes. This road map should include the anticipated:

- Outcomes of the changes;
- Outputs that will result from making changes;
- Proposed Alternatives to ensure the cultural tradition and information is still passed along to the youth;
- Critical Assumptions about the individuals, organizations and policies involved in making changes;
- Risks that may accompany proposing or making changes.

The following table can be used to create individual theories of change. Organizations and individuals may wish to consider ideas from the UNFPA recommended actions for consideration (below). The example provided represents just one potential change and how the theory of change table can be used to inform action steps.

**Figure 1: SAMPLE THEORY OF CHANGE TABLE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OUTCOMES</th>
<th>OUTPUTS</th>
<th>PROPOSED ALTERNATIVES</th>
<th>CRITICAL ASSUMPTIONS</th>
<th>RISKS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eliminate all sexual</td>
<td>Initiates will not need to prove what they have learned by</td>
<td>Initiates will take an oral test</td>
<td>Community stakeholders agree this</td>
<td>Opposition to the proposed alternative, especially from a cultural or religious leader who</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>initiation components.</td>
<td>engaging in shared sexual behaviours.</td>
<td>in which they will describe what</td>
<td>this is a component that needs to be</td>
<td>carries much authority and respect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>they have learned as opposed</td>
<td>replaced.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>to demonstrating it physically.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Cultures and societies feel strongly about their identities as a group, and want to both teach their cultural values to the youth and keep their cultural traditions alive from generation to generation. Any kind of cultural shift is challenging, and questioning rules and traditions is often considered taboo. With this in mind, there are still numerous ways to uphold and respect cultural traditions while eliminating any harmful, social, emotional and physical practices. In some cases, the potential social, emotional and physical harm of the adolescent rites of passage described in this document are severe enough that they merit elimination. Other cultural traditions and practices may be continued, but with adjustments made to eliminate the social, emotional and/or physical damage that can accompany them.

There are 12 key recommendations:

- **Apply a rights-based lens to the revision or elimination of adolescent initiation rites.** Applying a rights-based framework means giving young people, especially girls, input into whether and to what extent they participate in various rites (See the section on Adolescent Rights earlier in this document).

- **Involve community leaders and initiation counsellors from the beginning and throughout implementation of any changes.** It is imperative that key stakeholders and powerbrokers in a community are part of any proposed changes so that they endorse and uphold the proposed changes. In addition, NGOs and CSOs can serve a valuable purpose by providing training and support to communities to sustain any changes moving forward.

- **Involve more women in decision-making processes.** Rites of passage have the most frequent and dramatic impact on girls and young women. Communities and countries will be unable to make meaningful changes in gender and power inequities unless they look at how gender stereotypes and gendered power imbalances are being reinforced through the initiation rites. Considering the male power dominance in these countries, it is likely that any practices that benefit male members of the community are likely to continue to be supported, or at the very least, are not as likely to be contradicted. If the majority of communities throughout the four ESA countries discussed in this document are led by men, it will be important to demonstrate how making changes to cultural rites of passage practices benefit people of all genders. Ensuring stronger female representation in programmatic and policy decisions will increase the likelihood that a gender equality lens is maintained.

- **Involve youth in decision-making processes.** It is strongly encouraged that youth be involved from the beginning in any programme or initiative that affects them. This includes the decision-making process relating to initiation rites.

- **Encourage partnership between communities and CSOs to ensure sexuality-related information is current and accurate, and supports gender equality.** This would include training health care professionals, community leaders and other adults who play key roles in the adolescent initiation processes throughout ESA.

- **Eliminate all sexual initiation components, regardless of initiation gender.** Youth professionals working in Zambia have been advocating for adjusting the practice of chinamwali to remove the sexuality-related content from the three-month ceremony and to instead focus on changes of puberty, menstruation, hygiene and general health. Sexual initiation rites have reportedly been discontinued in Yao communities in Malawi, but the age at which the remaining initiation rites are done has gone down significantly.

- **Eliminate or reduce the duration of the isolation component of adolescent initiation rites.** This would reduce the number of school days missed, save money for the communities and family members who may be required to pay for some or all of the ceremonies, and save on food and other resources.

134 Pemba, “The changes in the conduct of Yao boys’ initiation ceremonies” (see footnote 63).
136 Kamlongera, “What becomes of ‘her’?” (see footnote 57).
137 Emily Mkamanga, Suffering in Silence - Malawi women’s 30 year dance with Dr Banda, (Dudu Nsomba Publications, Scotland, 2000).
138 Labous, “Zambian sex initiators lead revolution for young women” (see footnote 94).
139 Pemba, “The changes in the conduct of Yao boys’ initiation ceremonies” (see footnote 63).
• **Increase the age of initiation ceremonies (or divide them into two or more stages).** Some traditional leaders are dividing girls’ initiation rituals into two age-specific camps: one includes a more basic ceremony for teenage girls, and the other offers more sexuality-related information for older girls who are closer to marrying age. In doing this, younger children receive more basic information and older teenagers who are closer to marriage receive more explicit information. CSOs in Zambia have begun doing this in order to reduce the chances of early sexual activity, pregnancy, STI or HIV transmission or child marriage. Some community leaders in Malawi have begun dividing the initiation ceremony for girls into two, with local organizations partnering with initiation counsellors and traditional leaders to make the initiation ceremonies more age- and developmentally appropriate. Some communities in Zambia have also proposed dividing up the male initiation rite, so that the sociocultural aspects (lessons, songs, etc.) are done in the community, and then the boys are sent to a hospital for circumcision under sanitary conditions. After that, they are returned to the community to complete the ritual.

• **Ensure traditional male circumcision is performed by a medical professional, either alone or in collaboration with an initiation counsellor.** There have been some positive changes to how male circumcision rites are conducted in the focus countries. Increased efforts have been made to use sterile equipment, incorporate multiple cutting tools and surgical wipes, and wear gloves. Traditional male circumcision would also be made safer if a trained medical professional performed the actual circumcision, alongside a community leader who would still play an important role in the rite.

• **Reduce stigmas surrounding talking about sex and sexuality.** In many communities, initiation rites are the only time when it is deemed acceptable to discuss sex and sexuality. Communities should encourage ongoing dialogue about sexuality, gender and relationships between adults and youth, especially parents and their children.

• **Increase funding/financing to CSOs working to support alternative practices.** Increasing the number of social and other community workers means reaching more communities, and building additional community understanding about the harmful nature of some elements of the rites of passage. With additional funding, CSOs would also be able to encourage and support community members to review, contribute to, and comment on, any proposed changes.

• **Create accountability measures for sustaining change.** Cultural rights are deeply upheld and strongly protected in each country’s constitution or other legislative provisions. However, such provisions are not always implemented. Some of the reasons provided for not adhering to existing policies and legislation include prioritizing cultural tradition over legislation; a lack of accountability measures to ensure progressive policies are being practised and the lack of consequences where they are not; and a lack of training and support for local leaders on how to implement changes to traditional rites of passage. Without any accountability structures or incentives to discontinue harmful practices, it is unlikely anything will change.

Any proposed alteration to - or recommendations for change or elimination of - a custom, requires clear rationale for why changes are being proposed and what the potential impact of those changes will be.

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141 Pemba, “The changes in the conduct of Yao boys’ initiation ceremonies” (see footnote 63).
142 Ibid.
143 Kamlongera, “What becomes of ‘her’?” (see footnote 57).
145 Warna, “Girls’ innocence and futures stolen” (see footnote 2).
146 Kang’ethe, “The panacea and perfidy of cultural rites of circumcision in African countries” (see footnote 19).
EDUCATING CHILDREN FOR ADULTHOOD: IMPROVING CSE TO SUPPORT ADOLESCENT INITIATION RITES

One of the most positive impacts of any of the adolescent rites of passage that have been documented, is their educational component. The initiation rites have potential to play a valuable role in promoting sexuality education and gender equity, and have already been useful in some countries’ HIV prevention strategies.\(^{147}\)

At the same time, however, a number of challenges with the educational components of initiation rites have been identified in the literature:

- The information being taught varies from community to community and is not necessarily accurate or up-to-date. Sexuality-related information is constantly changing. As a result, information, particularly that which pertains to sexual health and the prevention and treatment of HIV and other STIs, also changes. Myths and misinformation are pervasive, which can lead to negative health outcomes (for example, the myth that having malepe protects women and their partners from STIs and HIV).\(^{148}\) People are incorrectly taught that semen is a cleansing fluid, which perpetuates the myth that unprotected sex between an older man and a young girl who has gone through initiation will “purify” her.\(^{149}\)
- The adults providing the sexuality information have often not received any training, and instead teach from their own biases rather than from facts.
- The information taught often reinforces harmful gender role stereotypes. It is clear that initiation practices are gendered, with the explicit goal of setting gender norms and keeping those norms in place. Even those rites of passage that do not include early sexual initiation reinforce gender role stereotypes that encourage girls to be passive – to learn to prioritize their future male partners’ sexual pleasure and overall needs over their own. While every person has the right to express themselves freely in relationships, the rites that limit girls to playing only certain roles in society, directly contradict a rights-based approach to gender equality.
- There is no acknowledgement of LGBTQI+ youth. It is well-documented in the literature that the existing rites of passage assume young people are all cisgender and heterosexual, or that they should be. Statistically speaking, this is impossible – and as a result, the needs of young people who identify as LGBTQI+ are being ignored. This can have harmful effects on LGBTQI+ adolescents’ emotional well-being and places them at increased risk for early pregnancy and HIV and other STIs.
- The information being taught makes gendered assumptions. The teachings provided during initiation rites are intended to perpetuate a dominant position for men and a subordinate position for women, both in marriage and in the community.

Marriage is a strong cultural tradition in all four priority countries discussed in this document. Although there are many pregnancies and births that happen outside of the context of marriage, the dominant cultural values and traditions emphasize childbirth within marriage. Yet, at the same time, the cultural practices that put younger people at risk of becoming pregnant, or causing pregnancy, continue.

\(^{147}\) Kangwa, “Reclaiming the values of indigenous female initiation rites as a strategy for HIV prevention” (see footnote 9).

\(^{148}\) Martinez Perez et al, “Labia minora elongation and its implications on the health of women: A systematic review” (see footnote 87).

USING POLICY TO EFFECT CHANGE

There are sufficient policies in existence in ESA that can serve as support for making changes to adolescent initiation rites. All four priority countries have either ratified or adopted policies relating to youth rights and gender equality. All four are signatories to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). It is clear that the three guiding principles of the UNCRC – i.e. the right to life, survival and development, the right to participate, and the best interests of the girl child - are infringed upon by the so-called sexual cleansing of girls. In addition, the African Youth Charter states, in part, that “State Parties shall take the following steps to promote and protect the morals and traditional values recognized by the community, [including to] eliminate all traditional practices that undermine the physical integrity and dignity of women.”

At the country level, all four priority countries also have laws designed to protect adolescents from harmful cultural practices:

The Eswatini Child Welfare and Protection Act provides that a child has the right to be protected from any type of “torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment,” including “any cultural practice which dehumanizes or is injurious to the physical, psychological, emotional and mental well-being of a child.”

In Malawi, “A child may not be subjected to a social or customary practice that is harmful to the health or general development of the child or be forced into marriage or be forced to be betrothed. Also, no person may commit, engage in, subject another person to, or encourage the commission of any harmful practice.”

The challenge with this statute is, of course, that what is considered “harmful” is subjective, particularly when referring to non-physical harms.

South Africa mandates that “no child may be subjected to social, cultural and religious practices that are harmful to his or her well-being.” Not only is FGM illegal in South Africa, but the law also says that male circumcisions “may only be performed with the consent of the child after counselling.” South Africa has also made virginity testing illegal.

In Zambia, anyone “who conducts or causes to be conducted a harmful cultural practice on a child commits a felony.” Harmful cultural practice is construed to include sexual cleansing, FGM or an initiation ceremony that results in injury, the transmission of an infectious or life-threatening disease or loss of life to a child, but does not include circumcision of a male child.

Policy change that comes at the country level still needs to trickle down to the local communities, and so any change needs to have accountability measures attached to it. For example, even though Eswatini’s Child Welfare and Protection Act was intended to end marriage between older men and young girls, the country’s traditional leaders claim that they have not received any instructions to stop the practice.

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155 Ibid.
156 Ibid.
157 Ibid.
158 Ibid.
Monitoring, evaluation, research and learning (MERL) are core components of planning, programming and implementation by UNFPA Country Offices, governments and civil society organizations. Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) frameworks include the indicators necessary to measure the outputs, outcomes and impacts identified within an initiative's theory of change. This begins with identifying the target behaviours or practices that a community wishes to change, and setting SMART goals for the process. SMART is an acronym to help determine whether goals set for implementing a programme, or making changes to a community practice, are realistic. Using SMART goals sets a community and agency up for success.

For example, setting a goal of “improving the overall health and well-being of adolescents in our community” may sound like an admirable goal, but it is far too general to be measured. It may be attainable, but because the language is vague, it also raises opportunities for inconsistency in measurement. Instead, a community may wish to have a goal statement such as, “Improving the overall health and well-being of adolescents in our community by eliminating any sexual initiation practices within twelve months.” This is much more specific; it is measurable (have the practices been eliminated?) and it is attainable, especially if leaders and other key stakeholders are involved in the decision-making and implementation process from the beginning. The goal is relevant, because it homes in on a community that has sexual initiation practices as part of adolescent puberty rites, and timely, in that it has a timeframe of 12 months.

This is only an example; time frames may be longer or shorter – and what needs to be adjusted within an adolescent initiation practice may differ from community to community. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the time frame should include assessment and accountability to ensure that a change is not only made but sustained into the future.

It is also recommended that baseline data be collected so that the outcomes and outputs are easily measurable. For measuring outcomes and outputs, it is important to ask the following questions:

- What will be different as a result of achieving these outputs?
- What is the time frame for achieving these outputs?
- At what point(s) in our efforts will we assess our progress and make adjustments as necessary?
- What accountability measures will we put into place? How will we partner with stakeholders to ensure practices meet agreed-upon criteria?

It is recommended that communities and agencies include a Sustainability Plan process in making any changes to initiation rites. This will help to ensure the consistent and ongoing implementation of the changes, and that the needs of young people continue to be prioritized. Some questions that need to be answered include:

- Will funding be required to maintain these changes? If so, how much? From whom/where will this funding come?
- Do we need a written policy to codify the changes to the adolescent initiation rites? If so, who needs to be involved in supporting and developing this policy statement? Is this policy consistent with local, state and country laws?
- What measures will be put in place to reassess the impacts of any changes made to rites of passage in a community?
- How will we manage communities or individuals who do not adhere to revised practices or policies?

Specifically, SMART goals are:

**Specific.** This means identifying who is going to benefit from your programme or implementation, what the implementation will consist of, where and when it will take place, and so on.

**Measurable.** What metrics will you be putting into place to determine whether your efforts have been successful? If this will be taking place over an extended period of time, what milestones will you set for measuring impact?

**Attainable.** It is important for organizations and communities to set themselves up for success. To that end, any interventions should be realistic for the community or area in which they are being implemented.

**Relevant.** The intended impacts of an intervention should be valued by, and centred in, the realities of a particular community.

**Timely.** Setting a time boundary helps set communities and agencies up for successful implementation. It also supports realistic measurement of outcomes.
CONCLUSION

For decades there have been calls worldwide for greater gender equity and equality. Countries such as Eswatini, Malawi, South Africa and Zambia have all ratified at least one such call, namely the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. This means there is already a shared commitment to ensuring that any practices that perpetuate violence against women be identified and eradicated. Practices that cause harm to boys and young men, as well as discrimination or violence against LGBTQI+ individuals, must also be discontinued.

It is important to note that not every rite of passage has negative impacts on youth. A number of organizations are supporting gender equality through their programmes. Country leaders are recognizing the importance of focusing on the health and well-being of young people as the foundations for ensuring and maintaining the health and well-being of a community.

The more individuals in different countries are connected with each other to share and learn about what is being done in similar countries, the greater the potential for eliminating those practices that are clearly harmful to the young people involved.

UNFPA firmly believes that “adolescents have the right to be educated and empowered to make choices and protect themselves” (2019). Far too many cultural rites of passage violate adolescents’ rights in countries throughout the continent, even as their intentions are firmly rooted in history and tradition. The core values – helping adolescents learn about their cultures and prepare for adulthood – are sound ones. At the same time, however, the physical, social, emotional and psychological harm caused by many of these practices requires serious review at the country and local levels. Good policies without direction and support for implementation are ineffective; instead, the movement toward change needs to be a collaboration between local spiritual, community and political leaders working in collaboration with country level legislators and right holders.
ANNEX: UNFPA HUMAN RIGHTS PRINCIPLES

Universality and Inalienability: Human rights are universal and inalienable. All people everywhere in the world are entitled to them. The universality of human rights is encompassed in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”

Indivisibility: Human rights are indivisible. Whether they relate to civil, cultural, economic, political or social issues, human rights are inherent to the dignity of every person. Consequently, all human rights have equal status, and cannot be positioned in a hierarchical order. Denial of one right invariably impedes enjoyment of other rights. Thus, the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living cannot be compromised at the expense of other rights, such as the right to health or the right to education.

Interdependence and Interrelatedness: Human rights are interdependent and interrelated. Each one contributes to the realization of a person’s human dignity through the satisfaction of his or her developmental, physical, psychological and spiritual needs. The fulfillment of one right often depends, wholly or in part, upon the fulfillment of others. For instance, fulfillment of the right to health may depend, in certain circumstances, on fulfillment of the right to development, to education or to information.

Equality and Non-discrimination: All individuals are equal as human beings and by virtue of the inherent dignity of each human person. No one, therefore, should suffer discrimination on the basis of race, colour, ethnicity, gender, age, language, sexual orientation, religion, political or other opinion, national, social or geographical origin, disability, property, birth or other status as established by human rights standards.

Participation and Inclusion: All people have the right to participate in and access information relating to the decision-making processes that affect their lives and well-being. Rights-based approaches require a high degree of participation by communities, civil society, minorities, women, young people, indigenous peoples and other identified groups.

Accountability and Rule of Law: States and other duty-bearers are answerable for the observance of human rights. In this regard, they have to comply with the legal norms and standards enshrined in international human rights instruments. Where they fail to do so, aggrieved rights-holders are entitled to institute proceedings for appropriate redress before a competent court or other adjudicator in accordance with the rules and procedures provided by law. Individuals, the media, civil society and the international community play important roles in holding governments accountable for their obligation to uphold human rights.
With the generous support of:

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