



Developing excellence
in response to FGM and
other harmful practices

Understanding Harmful Practices and Other Forms of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)

Accompanying Guidance to the Integrated Harmful
Practices and VAWG Model

Understanding Harmful Practices within the Wider VAWG System

Pyramid models of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) and related frameworks often foreground more ‘mainstreamed’ forms of VAWG, particularly domestic and sexual abuse, while harmful practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM), forced marriage, and ‘honour’-based abuse, are treated as conceptually separate issues or types of VAWG. This can contribute to the siloing and ‘othering’ of harmful practices within policy and practice, despite evidence that they share common root causes and underlying drivers¹.

This separation also risks overlooking the ways in which forms of VAWG often co-exist, resulting in poly-victimisation. For instance, the intersections between FGM and intimate partner violence, sexual abuse and early forced marriage, and ‘honour’-based abuse and coercive control are well documented. As such, this oversimplifies the relationship between harmful practices and VAWG. It also reinforces inaccurate culturally bounded explanations, for example, that ‘honour’-based abuse is culturally specific, whilst domestic abuse is more ‘universal’².

Whilst it’s important to recognise contextual and cultural specificities, and there are some clear distinctions between different types of VAWG, including harmful practices, this degree of conceptual separation can limit integrated approaches to VAWG prevention and response. This can also affect professionals’ responses to victims/survivors because it reinforces a fragmented understanding of VAWG, creating barriers to identification, holistic support and protection.

Harmful practices should be understood as part of the wider VAWG system rather than as completely distinct or isolated forms of harm.

¹ Bafouni, N., Almond, L., Ridley, K. and Qassim, A. (2024). ‘Honor’ and its upholders: Perpetrator types in ‘honor’-based abuse. *Journal of Forensic Psychology Research and Practice*, 35(5)

² Bafouni, N., Almond, L., Ridley, K. and Qassim, A. (2024). ‘Honor’ and its upholders: Perpetrator types in ‘honor’-based abuse. *Journal of Forensic Psychology Research and Practice*, 35(5)

Integrated Harmful Practices and VAWG Model

The Integrated Model positions harmful practices within the wider VAWG system, highlighting the interconnected conditions that produce and sustain VAWG. The model:

- **Integrates harmful practices across all levels of the VAWG system:** This includes gender inequality and patriarchy; harmful norms, beliefs and attitudes; and abusive acts and behaviours. The model recognises the shared root causes, drivers, and intersections with other forms of VAWG.
- **Highlights the role of social norms:** Harmful practices and other forms of VAWG can persist even where individuals do not actively support them. For example, FGM, forced marriage, and ‘honour’-based abuse may be maintained through social expectations, fear of stigma, reputational pressures, and conformity to gendered norms³.
- **Emphasises the role of institutional and societal influences:** Institutions, professionals and wider society can either challenge or reinforce conditions that sustain harmful practices and other forms of VAWG. Failures to identify and respond to risk, cultural relativism, accessibility barriers, minimisation of abuse, and tolerance of misogyny can weaken protection and enable harm. Conversely, effective safeguarding, early intervention, and gender-informed practice can disrupt these cycles and support prevention.
- **Demonstrates digital and media influences:** Digital technologies and dynamics shape and reinforce forms of VAWG. Technology facilitated VAWG can strengthen harmful gender norms⁴, attitudes and behaviours, and lead to both online and offline forms of VAWG.
- **Recognises women’s multiple positions within the system:** Women may occupy multiple positions within this system, including as victims/survivors and, at times, as perpetrators through patriarchal conformity, community pressure, or beliefs linked to protection or ‘honour’⁵⁶. This reflects how harmful norms can become internalised and reproduced where compliance is tied to survival and perceived ‘safeguarding’.
- **Demonstrates reinforcing cycles of violence:** VAWG is not only an outcome of gender inequality and patriarchy but also reinforces it over time. Experiences and threats of violence can limit women’s and girls’ autonomy, participation, and decision-making, sustaining the conditions in which VAWG continues to occur.

³ UNICEF (2021) *UNICEF 2021 Annual Report to the U.S Department of State. Eliminating Female Genital Mutilation*. New York: UNICEF; Mackie, G. and LeJeune, J. (2009) *Social Dynamics of Abandonment of Harmful Practices: A New Look at the Theory*. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

⁴ UN Women (2024) *Technology-facilitated gender-based violence: shared research agenda*; UN Women (2025) *Global trends to prevent and respond to technology-facilitated violence against women and girls*.

⁵ Daigle, M., Michalko, J. and Fouad, L. (2025) *Victims, perpetrators or agents of change? Gender norms and protection*. HPG Scoping Paper. London: ODI Global.

⁶ Bafouni, N., Almond, L., Ridley, K. and Qassim, A. (2024). ‘Honor’ and its upholders: Perpetrator types in ‘honor’-based abuse. *Journal of Forensic Psychology Research and Practice*, 35(5)

A Gender Transformative Approach

The integrated model shows that harmful practices and other types of VAWG are not caused by individual behaviour alone. Instead, they are produced and driven by gender inequality and patriarchal structures; harmful gender norms, beliefs, and attitudes; and shaped, reinforced, and amplified by institutional and societal influences. Acts of VAWG both result from and reinforce these systems over time by limiting women's and girls' safety, autonomy, and participation.

By bringing these levels together, the model can help professionals move beyond responding to individual incidents and consider the wider conditions that produce and sustain harmful practices and other forms of VAWG, and how these intersect. This understanding can support early identification, safeguarding, prevention, and service development by helping professionals recognise how gender inequality, patriarchal structures, harmful gender norms, institutional responses, and digital technologies are interconnected in this system.

Gender Transformative Approach

A Gender Transformative Approach is designed to support practitioners to go beyond responding to individual incidents of harm and instead address the underlying beliefs, norms, and power inequalities that allow harmful practices and other forms of VAWG to exist in the first place. It can help understand how gender roles are created, taught, and enforced, and how these shape the lives, choices, and opportunities of girls and women.⁷

This approach asks you to move beyond providing information or encouraging behaviour change at the surface level; it requires you to actively question and challenging harmful gender norms, such as beliefs that girls are worth less than boys, that their behaviour must be tightly controlled, or that 'honour', shame, and obedience should determine their life chances. By naming and challenging these assumptions, practitioners can help shift what is seen as socially acceptable or 'normal'.

Key elements of the Gender Transformative Approach include:

- Addressing the root causes of harmful practices and other forms of VAWG, namely gender inequality, not just the symptoms of violence
- Transforming harmful gender norms, beliefs, and attitudes
- Strengthening women's and girl's rights, safety, and participation
- Engaging men and boys in challenging harmful gender norms, attitudes, and behaviours
- Working across individuals, community, institutional, and structural levels

⁷ UNFPA (2023) *Gender Transformative Approaches to Achieve Gender Equality and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights*