

CIVILIAN SECURITY, DEMOCRACY, AND HUMAN RIGHTS



OVERCOMING HARMFUL CULTURAL NORMS

Cultural norms, practices, and traditions play an important role in defining a country or society. Unfortunately, some cultural norms are at times used or distorted to justify practices or crimes, including modern slavery, that exploit and harm others. A 14-year-old girl may be advertised for sex, an 11-year-old boy may be hired as a domestic worker, or a young transgender woman may be subjected to trafficking in a popular sex tourism destination. Such customs may also create significant challenges that impede efforts to combat sex and labor trafficking.

Harmful cultural norms drive inequality, poverty, and discrimination. Depending on the particular country or region, these norms can be used to support, hide, or attempt to justify human trafficking and other criminal schemes, undermining laws designed to protect children and adults. Acquiescence to corruption and lack of transparency can also facilitate human trafficking and make it difficult to detect and combat.

Cultural norms that perpetuate inequality and a cycle of violence against women are closely linked with sex and labor trafficking in all regions of the world, from North America to South Asia and the Pacific. Other practices common to many regions of the world can harm children, migrants, and domestic workers and help facilitate forced child labor or exploitation of migrant workers. Examples include minorities forced to beg and steal throughout Europe, children compelled through debt bondage and other means to work in hazardous conditions in South American and African mines, or workers exploited aboard fishing vessels at sea in East Asia. In addition to increasing the vulnerability of individuals, harmful cultural norms like these can hinder a government's efforts to prevent human trafficking and create an environment in which the crime either remains hidden or is socially accepted—or even facilitated—and, therefore, more difficult to address by law enforcement.

Steadily increasing efforts to combat human trafficking around the globe challenge certain cultural norms. The Palermo Protocol, which has been accepted by 167 States parties and does not allow for any cultural variations, requires the criminalization of all forms of trafficking in persons, as do newly enacted domestic anti-trafficking laws. Likewise, public awareness campaigns and other prevention efforts can also push some traditions to change. In the Middle East, small robots have replaced young boys as jockeys in the sport of camel racing, and in East Asia and the Pacific, some governments have begun to strengthen their responses to child sex tourism by increasing public awareness that it is a crime and denying entry to known foreign sex offenders. African societies are beginning to recognize child domestic servitude as a crime and an injustice to children who instead deserve an education and a supportive environment in which to live. Efforts to prosecute, protect, and prevent human trafficking should continue to hasten the decline of harmful practices that had been defended as culturally justified and thus used to embolden those willing to enslave others.



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