

# IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY BY LAWS IN ADDRESSING HARMFUL TRADITIONAL PRACTICES

## Background:

Nigeria is a country with diverse ethnic groups, each with its own rich traditions and customs. While many of these cultural practices strengthen social cohesion, some have proven to be harmful, particularly to women, girls and vulnerable groups. Harmful traditional practices in Nigeria include **Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), Child Marriage, Widow Inheritance, Forced and Early Marriages, Harmful Widowhood Rites, Preferences for Male Children**, amongst others. These practices persist due to deep-rooted beliefs, religious influences, economic factors, and societal pressure to conform.

Despite the existence of **National Laws**, such as the **Violence Against Person prohibition (VAPP) Act, Child Rights Act**, and various national laws- implementation has been weak in many rural communities. One of the key challenges is that these laws are often seen as imposed by the government, many communities continue these practices in secret or ignore the laws entirely due to lack of enforcement mechanisms and resistance from local leaders.

To address and fill this gap, **Community by-laws** have emerged as an effective tool for combating Harmful Traditional Practices, especially in Nigeria. These by-laws are locally developed rules that align with national laws but are tailored to the specific needs and cultural realities of each community. They are often formulated through research with traditional rulers, religious leaders, women's groups, youth organizations, and elders in the community.

## **Importance of Community By-Laws in Addressing Harmful Traditional Practices**

Community by-laws play a crucial role in combating harmful traditional practices in Nigeria especially, by ensuring that cultural norms align with human rights, legal standards, and modern societal values. Below are some of the key benefits of community by-laws in addressing Harmful Traditional Practices (HTPs):

1. **Enhancing Legal Framework at Grassroots Level:** While Nigeria has national laws such as the VAPP Act and Child Rights Act, their enforcement is often weak at the community level due to lack of awareness or resistance or resistance from traditional institutions. Community by-laws help to bridge this gap by making these laws more acceptable and enforceable at the local level.
2. **Promoting Community Ownership and Acceptance:** One of the major reasons why HTPs still persist is that many communities see national laws as foreign or imposed. However, when communities are involved in creating their own by-laws, they take ownership of the change.
3. **Changing Social Norms and Attitudes:** HTPs, such as FGM, child marriage, and widow ritual are often seen as normal within certain cultures. Community by-laws help to redefine what is acceptable by gradually shifting social norms. For example, when a community formally bans mutilating female genitals through a by-law, parents and elders begin to see as a crime even if they are one considered a tradition.
4. **Strengthening Local Governance and Accountability:** Community by-laws encourage collective responsibility by making traditional rulers and other stakeholders accountable for enforcing the rules.

## **Conclusion**

Community by-laws are a powerful tool in the fight against harmful traditional practices, especially in Nigeria. They enhance legal enforcement, promote community ownership and most especially, strengthen local governance.

For these by-laws to be most effective, they need widespread community engagement, proper enforcement mechanisms, and collaboration between local leaders and the government.

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